



OH-58A Kiowa #16873 from C Troop, 3rd Squadron, 17th Cavalry on 1 April 1970. US Army photo



F Troop, 9th Cavalry rearms with HEAT rockets and a few flechette rockets at Lai Khe during the Easter Offensive of 1972.
Ron Timberlake photo

SECTION VII - The Easter Offensive of 1972 to the War's End

Introduction by Mike Sloniker

Each year the VHPA directory committee selects a topic for the directory. An individual (or individuals) collects the history from the participants, tries to put it in order and on time for the annual October delivery. Ron Timberlake volunteered before the 1998 VHPA reunion. On May 5, 1999, when Ron died from injuries received in a motorcycle accident, he had III Corps, part of II Corps and part of I Corps complete. I took over the 1999 Directory history at that point. I put a note in the June 1999 VHPA newsletter, sent some email requests for information to some VHCMA members, and made some phone calls. The outpouring of information has been amazing. It came from emails, unit histories, audio tapes, video tapes of 8mm movies and newspaper clippings. There is a special reward for anyone that makes the attempt because he hears the warriors tell the story first hand. I knew this would be a time consuming undertaking and I now have an enormous amount of respect for what Mike Law has been doing for many years.

Background Information

Before March 30, 1972, GEN Creighton Abrams was under immense pressure to get the size of the American force remaining in Vietnam down and to turn the fighting totally over to the Vietnamese. 96,000 Americans were in Vietnam on that date. The ground fighting force consisted of two large brigades defending major airbases: The 196th Light Infantry Brigade based out of Danang in I Corps and the 3d Brigade (Separate) 1st Cavalry Division based at Bien Hoa in III Corps. In fact, they weren't called Corps then, but were called military regions. The First Regional Assistance Command (FRAC) was in Danang, headed by Army Major General Frederick Kroesen. The Second Regional Assistance Command, SRAC, was lead by John Paul Vann, a civilian and a principal in Neil Sheehan's book, *A Bright Shining Lie*. TRAC was commanded by Major General James Hollingsworth, a fiery individual who used the call sign Danger 79, a fallback to his previous Vietnam assignment as assistant division commander of the American 1st Infantry Division.

Dale Andrade's book, *Trial By Fire*, provides an excellent account of how the ground battles took place in all three regions during the Easter Offensive and thoroughly explains how the fighting forces of the North Vietnamese Army, the ARVN and US Forces were comprised and fought. While there is no better book written that explains the exploits and heroics of that period, Andrade fell short - he failed to get the aviation units correct in TRAC. He did not mention the exploits of the 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion which was awarded its second Presidential Unit Citation for operations around Loc Ninh, Bu Dop and An Loc. By carefully using the same source that Andrade credits in his book, I found the 1974 award of the PUC to the 229th, making it the only Army aviation I know of that has had two PUCs awarded in Vietnam. The first was for the Pleiku campaign in 1965, including the NOV 1965 battle in the Ia Drang, and the second was for the Easter Offensive. Andrade says there were TOW Cobras in the Easter Offensive - this, too, is incorrect. We had UH-1Cs with SS-11 systems and UH-1Bs with the TOW system. None of the books that will be cited will show the army, air force, and US Marine Corps aviation perspective as a single focal point. We do not have the space to provide the ground fight, nor is that our focus, so if that information is needed, read the books mentioned above. The overall purpose of this history is to record the courageous actions of all service and Air America helicopter units.

It is too bad previous authors did not tell you in their books about:

* Mike Brown and Marco Cordon's amazing flight from 4000' without a tailboom in a Cobra after an SA-7 hit.

* John Whitehead and his gunner Ray Waite's dramatic flight in an OH-6 with 9 total souls on board.

* The high number of immediate search and rescues (SAR) by the air cav troops in I Corps, especially the F/4 Cav night SAR that rescued USMC CH-53D survivors.

* Bill Reeder's story from his shootdown in a 361st AWC Cobra, his capture, his movement up to North Vietnam, to his return.

- * The courage of the Jolly Green crews who never hesitated to try.
- * The 13 day E&E of survivors of a 57th AHC shootdown.
- * The historical significance of so many flight crews awarded the Distinguished Service Cross (three in one Cav Troop, F/4 Cav, formerly D/3/4 Cav from the 25th Inf Div.)

My research to date reveals DSC's awarded to:

- CPT Ronald Radcliffe from F/4 CAV
- CPT Frederick D. Ledfors from F/4 CAV
- 1LT Wesley Walker from F/4 CAV
- 1LT James R. McQuade from F/8 CAV (posthumous)
- CPT John Whitehead from D/229 AVN

SGT Ray Waite from D/229 AVN

CW2 Ron Tusi from F/79 ARA (the only Cobra pilot in this list)

Except for Radcliffe, who was known for hovering over the top of NVA tanks and directing his gunner to drop hand grenades down the open hatches, all the rest were OH-6 aircrew conducting search and rescue missions. Radcliffe was also named Army Aviation Assn of America (AAAA) 1972 Aviator of the Year.

1LT James R. McQuade

On July 15, 1999, former Blue Ghost member Mike Austin sent me the following email concerning McQuade:

It came to my attention only today that one of our scout pilots killed in The Easter offensive, 1LT James McQuade, received a posthumous Distinguished Service Cross in 1975 for his actions on 11 June 1972. I discovered this after attending his mother Patricia's memorial service, invited by the family to convene at her home afterward for a private gathering. Patty and I had been friends for a dozen years or so after discovering Jimmy's name on the Washington State memorial and making contact with her to tell her I knew her son in Vietnam. Anyway, in the corner of the living room was a fine antique hutch with his picture and various memorabilia, including a string of medals mounted at the top. When I saw the DSC I asked Jim's brother if the citation was in the cabinet below, and sure enough it was. They loaned it to me to make photocopies for the rest of the family, so I wanted to take the opportunity to pass it on to you for inclusion into unit history. Note: The citation is listed under the events that occurred on 11-13 June, 1972, of this history.

Mike Austin noted "also present were three DFC's and a Purple Heart. Jimmy was a pilot's hero."

That DSC would have not have been awarded had it not been for the second efforts of Blue Ghost 6, MAJ Jack Kennedy. While a student in the 1973-74 Army Command and General Command Course at Ft Leavenworth KS, Kennedy learned from McQuade's mother that no awards had been received. Kennedy knew he had written McQuade up for the Medal of Honor, so he took immediate action that resulted in McQuade's mother finally being given the posthumous award for her son in 1975. For me, this is just one more example of: "If we don't take care of our own, who will?"

30 MAR 1972: Army Aviation Unit Withdrawals

Many aviation units were in the throes of standing down when the North Vietnamese attacked on 30 March 1972. Despite intelligence reports that showed significant enemy buildups across the DMZ, across the border in the vicinity of Dak To and in the Fish Hook of Cambodia, large numbers of aviation units stood down prior to March 30th. Within TRAC, formerly III Corps, the following are helicopter units already drawn down in the rush to get the total numbers reduce despite the growing enemy threat.

- 128th AHC - JAN 72
- 187th AHC - 14 FEB 72
- 334th AWC - 1 MAR 72
- 117th AHC - 26 MAR 72
- 213rd ASHC - 31 MAR 72
- 3/17th ACS - 30 APR 72

As a III Corps participant in the Easter Offensive, I can say wholeheartedly that we sure could have used the help. I have heard the same opinion from the units in II Corps (the 361st AWC and the 57th AHC). To show how few army aviation units remained, we need to review the aviation order of battle, starting on 30 March in each Corps.

Order of Battle Easter Offensive

30 MAR 72 - 25 JUN 72

I Corps-First Regional Assistance Command (FRAC)

48th AHC served 6 NOV 65-23 AUG 72

62nd Avn Co (see note below)

F/4th Cav (formerly D/3/4 Cav) served 10 FEB 71-26 FEB 73

F/8 Cav (formerly C/7/17 Cav) served 1 APR 68-26 FEB 73

D/17th Cav (formerly D/1/1 Cav) served 15 DEC 71-26 FEB 73

478th HHC served 15 SEP 65-12 OCT 72

The 62nd was reorganized in FEB 72 to a support type company. It had two flights of Hueys (21+ aircraft), one flight of 58s (10+ aircraft), one flight of CH-47s (6 from 178th ASHC's stand down). In June 72, the 120th Avn sent four CH-47's to be attached to the 62nd until AUG/SEP.

II Corps-Second Regional Assistance Command (SRAC)

57th AHC served 24 OCT 67-13 MAR 73

60th AHC served AUG 71-FEB 73

129th AHC served 21 OCT 65-6 MAR 73

361st AWC served 21 MAR 68-20 AUG 72

180th ASHC served 10 NOV 66-20 MAR 73

H/10th Cav (formerly C/7/17 Cav) served 30 APR 72-26 FEB 73

H/17th Cav (formerly B/7/17 Cav) served 30 APR 72-26 FEB 73

III Corps-Third Regional Assistance Command (TRAC)

120th AHC served 25 JUN 67-OCT 72 **

Det 1, 229th AHB served SEP 65-AUG 72

A/229th AHB served SEP 65-AUG 72

B/229th AHB served SEP 65-AUG 72

D/229th Cav served 30 JUN 71-AUG 72

362nd ASHC (formerly C/228 ASHB) served 30 JUN 71-AUG 72

F/9th Cav served 30 JUN 71-26 FEB 73

F/79th ARA served 30 JUN 71-22 AUG 72

** The 120th had Chinooks assigned, obviously under the same TO&E as the 62nd Avn Co.

IV Corps-Delta Regional Assistance Command (DRAC)

C/16th Cav (formerly D/1/4 Cav) served 20 MAR 70-26 FEB 73

Other units

Before and during the Easter Offensive, the US had aviation units working in Laos. The CH-54s of the 478th HHC were mentioned in the 1998 directory. This Air America story showed up from a request for information in the 98-99 VHPA newsletters. It was a reminder of the everyday difficulties a small few were enduring. This story about search and rescue (SAR) would become a continuing thread in the northern provinces of South Vietnam. It also begs the question of why the emphasis of getting the troops out of South Vietnam if all this activity was ongoing in Laos and heading for South Vietnam. The following is a personal account of an Air America SAR in Laos:

Air America - 18 MAR 1972 - Laos Rescue

By Ben A. Van Etten

There are certain dates in a lifetime of events that stay etched in your memory. I can vividly remember, for example, my wedding day, where I was the day that JFK was assassinated, and other events important to my family. Another time was 18 March 1972.

I was the pilot on an H-34D helicopter for Air America, Inc. It started as a routine flight from Udorn, Thailand to Pakse, Laos. My passengers were mainly flight crews dead-heading up country for a crew rotation. I was scheduled to remain six days in Pakse. "King" was the call sign of the air force airborne controller for search and rescue (SAR) missions in Laos. I was about ten minutes from landing for fuel in Savanakhet, Laos

when King broadcast a message for "any Air America helicopter in the Savanakhet area that might be available to help rescue a downed pilot." Normally the military took care of their own SAR's, but Air America made many rescues simply because we were in the area. Some times the air force was its own worst enemy because by the time birds were scrambled, briefed, cover provided, MIG cap provided, and authentication of the downed pilot (as if the enemy would stage a fake crash) were made, he'd probably be captured. On two other occasions I'd picked up a downed crew, moved them to a safe area, and finally the military would make their pick up. I responded that I could be available after refueling.

I was given a radio frequency to contact "Sandy One" once I was back in the air. He would be the on scene commander directing the rescue operation. The downed aircraft was an OV-10 forward air controller (FAC) out of Vietnam. It had been shot down by AA over Route 23 (part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail) about 40 miles east of Savanakhet. The crew was hiding on the east side of the "road," which was alive with massive AA activity, and a quick pickup could avert certain capture by the NVA. I contacted "Sandy One" shortly after takeoff and was advised to head east to Route Twenty Three and take up an orbit, but don't cross the road.

"Hotel 70", my call sign, "Rogers." Sandy One and Sandy Two were a flight of A1E Sky Raiders and normally escort ed the CH53 (Jolly Green Giant) rescue helicopters.

As I flew closer to the area I could hear Sandy One talking to the downed pilot over the UHF guard frequency. He was OK, but the NVA soldiers were starting to look for him.

I might add at this point that March is the height of the smoky season when the farmers in that part of the world slash and burn, clearing areas of the jungle for planting the next season's crops. Visibility on that day, because of the smoke, was down to about one mile with no ceiling.

I flew up to Route 23 and began an orbit when I called Sandy with my position. I also requested the coordinates of the downed airman, which he refused to pass. "Besides," he said, "the Jollies were on the way and would be making the pickup."

That was just fine with me and my crew. We didn't relish the idea of flying through 37mm AA, not to mention the 23mm and 12.7's that were reported in the area.

Finally, I heard the Jollies call Sandy with an ETA of fifteen minutes. Sandy replied with, "Continue inbound while I descend toward the target to get a visual on the downed pilot."

A few seconds later Sandy's wing man reported ground fire directed toward Sandy One. Sandy replied with, "Roger, I heard the shots, but didn't take any hits." Even though I was only a mile or so away from the pickup point, I had yet to see the Sandies because of the smoke. The next radio transmission was from one of the Jollies saying with a nervous sounding voice that he needed to RTB (return to base) because of a fluctuating gauge. Number Two came back with, "I'm right behind you."

I called Sandy again and requested the coordinates. He was going to make another pass over the area and would get back to me. Again Sandy Two broadcast, "You're receiving fire." Sandy One answered, "I've been hit and I'm on fire!" I interjected at that point to turn to 270 before bailing out. "Negative, I'm heading south and ejecting right now!" Obviously, I wanted him to head west toward us and bail out on the west side of Route 23. We hadn't had a visual on him yet. As he was making his last transmission I turned the UHF homing switch that showed his position from us as 080. I was orbiting at 3000 feet and nosed over to descend to treetop level, before crossing the road. The other two crew members (Captain B.J. Ruck, my co-pilot, and flight mechanic Jim Nakamoto) both agreed to go on with the rescue. There was no doubt that this one could definitely turn into a "rotten sandwich." We all needed to be on the same sheet of music.

Another Air America H34 crewed by Bill Johnson and Dave Ankerberg arrived as my backup and would remain in orbit west of the trail while I went in for the pickup.

We were low level with the wheels inches from the tree tops, heading 080, pulling lots of power, maintaining max air speed (above VNE, no

doubt). When we crossed Route 9, which seemed like a four-lane highway, we were exposed much longer than we'd anticipated.

It took about ten to fifteen seconds to cross! The "pucker factor" was also "red lined," but we never heard a shot! Back over the trees we breathed a bit easier.

Looking ahead through the smoke and haze we could see the fire and black smoke bellowing from Sandy's wreckage. I turned a few degrees left figuring that the plane probably flew on for a few seconds after the pilot ejected.

About that time Sandy One called on his survival radio that he could hear us and that we were headed straight for him. I spotted his orange parachute and noted with some dismay that he was hanging about fifty feet up in a tree! I settled to a low hover over him for a hoist pickup with the jungle penetrator. Jim operated the hoist as I hovered the aircraft. B.J. had his Uzi loaded and on his lap, watching out the left side as if the Uzi would do us much good against a squad of pissed off NVA soldiers with AK47s! Sandy Two was in a tight orbit over us. We felt good about that. Those A1E's packed a lot of firepower! The pilot was looking up at us with a big grin as Jim worked the hoist to lower the penetrator. I was thinking it was a bit early for celebration, we had a long ways to go.

This particular hoist only had one speed: slow. It seemed to take forever for it to get to him.

Meanwhile, we were expecting the bad guys to come running out of the jungle with guns ablazing. Under the triple canopy the ground appeared open. Jim came over the intercom and advised us that our grinning pilot couldn't reach the penetrator! Jim was trying to swing it to him, but because of the dense tree foliage, it wasn't happening. About that time we heard the first round explode above us! I'm not sure if "Charlie" was shooting at our cover A1E or was trying to lob an air burst at us. Anyway, times were a bit tense.

We retrieved the hoist while the pilot was able to rappel to the ground, unhook from his survival pack, and move to a more open area. We moved over him again, lowered the penetrator, he hooked up and we began the extraction. A second explosion was heard overhead. It sounded close! To add to our concerns, the 30 minute low fuel light had been illuminated for approximately 20 minutes. We finally got him into the aircraft and figured that we'd been hovering there for 34 minutes! Luck was with us, the bad guys were still a no show.

I gave King a call to let him know we had Sandy One on board and were heading out. King advised us not to re-cross in that area, but to head south and cross the road near the town of Saravan where it was safer. Unfortunately we were too low on fuel to go far. If we were going to run out of gas, the west side of the road was our best option. I advised King that we'd have to cross at the same area where we came in. I'd radioed to have a drum of fuel brought out. After crossing Route 23 (again without incident) we rendezvoused with the other chopper, landed in a field, and hand pumped 55 gallons of gas into what must have been only fumes left in the tank.

While we were refueling, we were all feeling pretty good about saving the downed pilot, but mainly we were glad to still be alive. Being the nice guy I am, I decided to have a little fun with the pilot. There was a rumor going around (with the Air Force) that Air America crews received a \$10,000 bonus when we recovered a downed airman. Not true. I got with the pilot and told him that we wouldn't be taking him directly back to his base (NKP, Thailand) and would be going on to Pakse. Of course at that point anything I said would have been fine with him. I further explained that he was worth ten grand to me and my crew and we hadn't been paid for our last rescue. So we wanted to make sure we turned him over to the right person to get credit for the bonus. He bought it all, hook, line and sinker.

Within an hour we landed at the Pakse Airport, turned the happy pilot over to his air force representative, and reported in to our "customer," Jim Butler. Jim (call sign Grey Fox) told us to assemble in the briefing room. We had a mission (exfil) in the Bolivans plateau. Another hot one to finish out the day, 18 March 1972.

THE BOLIVANS PLATEAU

By Ben A. Van Etten

Three helicopter crews were assembled in Jim Butler's briefing room. A battalion of Thai soldiers had been under daily attack by NVA artillery and had about thirty wounded soldiers to be picked up. They were located on the Bolivan plateau and were on the move to an area that would be safe enough for a helicopter pick-up. The LZ would be in a high open area about thirty miles east of Pakse.

I was going to be the flight leader in Hotel 70, with the other two H-34's to follow close behind. The third aircraft would remain high and become the SAR aircraft in case one of us was shot down. Piece of cake!

Then into the room came the "customer," a CIA case officer named Jim Lewis (call sign "Sword"). We all looked at each other with the same thought, Jim Lewis didn't have the greatest reputation for honesty. He'd tell a chopper crew whatever they wanted to hear so they'd attempt the mission. He was determined to win the Medal of Honor even if the chopper was shot down in the process.

The plan was Jim would ride in my bird, be dropped off at the pick-up zone, sort out the wounded while we orbited over head and call me in when they were ready. We'd land one at a time. If the first aircraft didn't receive any fire the second would land and pick-up more wounded. We'd continue making trips until all of the wounded were picked up or we started to receive fire.

On the Bolivans the enemy (NVA) had artillery and some light armor. The Lao and Thai soldiers were not as heavily armed. All they had was limited air support when the weather permitted and, of course, Air America.

The Pakse airport is on the Mekong River and during that period it was a relatively safe area. About fifteen miles east, where the high plateau of the Bolivans begin, was pretty much controlled by the enemy. The Royalists (Lao Army) had occupied most of the plateau (at least the populated areas) until late 1971. Gradually, the NVA had pushed the Royalists out and by March, 1972 the NVA controlled most of the Bolivans.

One of the real travesties associated with the communist take over of that part of Laos (or any where the commies moved in and occupied) was that developing the immense natural resources of the area would stop. The Bolivan plateau was a mountainous area about forty miles square ranging from two to five thousand feet in elevation. It contained some of the most fertile land in Laos. Anything would grow there and that could amount to about four crops a year. US AID had spent time with the farmers and introduced many hybrid crops which all did amazingly well. Even strawberries, a crop previously unknown to southeast asia, flourished in that area.

Because of the higher elevation, the rivers on the plateau were clear and cold. There was a waterfall on the eastern edge we called Niagara Falls. It was a beautiful setting and could have been developed into a world class resort. Wild game including tigers, wild boar, and elephants, abounded in the area. Obviously, nothing good will happen there until communism goes away. Keeping the locals underdeveloped and progress at a minimum is how they retained control.

After about fifteen minutes of flight time we were nearing the landing zone. We remained high and looked for the proper signal panel to appear on the pad. A white "O" was put out and I could see about thirty soldiers standing around the LZ. The fact that they were not hidden from view meant that there probably hadn't been any recent enemy contact. I dropped off Sword while the other two H-34's remained high overhead. The landing caused a great deal of brown dust which would definitely alert any enemy in the area that a chopper had landed.

In about five minutes Sword called that they were ready for the first aircraft - me. The litters with the wounded were lined up next to the pad where I landed again, creating a large cloud of dust. I kept the RPM up and the aircraft light on the struts, expecting incoming fire at any time. The wounded were being loaded when I heard the first explosion about three hundred meters behind us! I would wait about ten seconds before taking off, giving Sword a chance to get in the

aircraft. I figured that if a second round was fired, it still wouldn't hit us (hopefully).

There were several litters and walking wounded at the doorway when the seconded round hit right in the middle of the troops next to the aircraft! Five feet left and we would have been history. I was looking down from the right seat at the loading procedures when the round exploded. The concussion and noise from the impact were instantaneous, but the resulting mass of bodies being thrown in all directions seemed to happen in slow motion - just like in a "Spaghetti Western". I hoped that Sword had jumped aboard because we were out of there. We had a heavy load, and because of the high elevation, it seemed to take forever for the H-34 to gain airspeed. As we were climbing out another round went off under us. They were trying to shoot us out of the air! Jim was with us in the aircraft but he'd received a shrapnel wound. There was also a wounded soldier hanging on to the wheel strut! The back of his shirt was covered with blood and as we gained airspeed and altitude, I expected to watch his body drop hundreds of feet into the jungle. Too bad. Suddenly, the muscular arm of my flight mechanic, Jim Nakamoto, reached out the aircraft cargo door, grabbed the soldier's shirt, and yanked him inside! Another life saved, as we heard later, because the soldier survived from his wounds.

By the time we arrived back at Pakse the sun was setting. We inspected the aircraft for damage, but there were only a couple of small holes. No problem. The mission would be continued in the morning. This would give the Thais time to move to another location. Meanwhile, after a very eventful day to say the least, we were ready to suck down a few cool ones. As I mentioned before, 18 MAR 1972 is a day I'll always remember.

Back to Vietnam Noon 30 MAR 1972

The Easter Offensive, by COL G.H. Turley, USMC, Ret, provides a very clear account of the ground battles that started at noon on 30 MAR 1972 all along the DMZ. To the members of F/8 Cav, his account needed some refinement, which will be provided in this history. As you can see from the Order of Battle, there were no USMC helicopter units in the initial battles. In June 72, the LPH USS Tripoli would be stationed off shore and would participate in CA's and Log missions for the Vietnamese Marine Corps (VNMC).

In Turley's book, *The Easter Offensive*, he provides his version of the chaos and broken chain of command with which he, as a Saigon based USMC advisor to the VNMC visiting Danang at the end of March, had to operate. To his credit, as Firebase Alpha 2, formerly Con Thien, was beginning to fall, he made the decision to evacuate the US Marine ANGLICO team that had been directing naval gunfire into advancing tanks. Here is the F/8's account of that rescue:

F/8 Rescue at Alpha 2 (Con Thien) 1 APR 1972

Darrel Whitcomb, a retired USAF COL, was a Nail FAC in an OV-10 during this period. His book, *The Rescue of Bat 27*, gives a full and extremely detailed account of that time. He compiled this information while writing his book:

"A US Marine fire control team from the 1st ANGLICO had been sent to firebase A-2 to control naval gunfire from the ships out on the gunline. As the enemy troops surrounded the advanced position, the team leader, 1LT David Bruggeman, requested an emergency evacuation for himself and his four Marines. His request was relayed to the 3rd ARVN Division forward headquarters at Ai Tu. LTC Gerry Turley, USMC, was present when the call came in, but still only as a visitor, without any official position or authority. Unfortunately, when the decision needed to be made to commit helicopters to a rescue attempt, he was the senior ranking American present. All of the junior officers looked to him for a decision. It could not be deferred; lives were at stake. Consequently, he had to make the call. When informed that the F Troop, 8th Cavalry helicopters were refueled and on call at the Quang Tri Airfield, he told them to go. There was no way that he could abandon the marines up there.

"The rescue force would consist of one UH-1 Huey helicopter and two AH-1 Cobras for cover. MAJ Kennedy, the F Troop commander, just happened to be at the airfield when the call came in. He decided to fly the Huey, but he had only been in Vietnam for three weeks. Additionally, he had only recently converted from fixed wing aircraft to helicopters.

This meant in practical terms that he was one of the least experienced pilots in the unit, especially for a mission as dangerous as this. His copilot, 1LT Bob Sheridan politely pointed this out to him. That created a dilemma for Kennedy, because the only other pilot available was Warrant Officer Ben Nielsen, the detachment commander. Nielsen was a highly experienced Huey pilot. But, the day before, Kennedy had taken him off of aircraft commander status for flying too low and having a minor accident. Considering the gravity of the situation, he quickly countermanded that order and told Nielsen and Sheridan to go. Nielsen's call sign was Blueghost 30. The covering Cobras were Blueghost Red flown by CPT Tim Sprouse, the F Troop gun platoon leader, and Blueghost 26, flown by 1LT Chuck LaCelle. They scrambled for the evacuation.

"The plan was to approach the firebase from the southeast at low level. The Huey would go in and land while the Cobras provided suppressive fire around the firebase. As they approached the camp, the NVA forces detected their presence and began to throw up a withering ground fire. This was not going to be a simple rescue. Bruggeman and his team rallied to the LZ and began to destroy their equipment. One of the team members, CPL James Worth, was especially worried that the communications gear could be recovered and used by the advancing enemy, so he doused all of it with diesel fuel and ignited it with a thermite grenade. He kept one backpack radio for the team's use. As they feverishly worked to deny the enemy any useful equipment, artillery and mortar rounds began to fall all around them.

"Arriving at the firebase, the Cobras held back and engaged enemy moving around the site as the Huey darted in low for a pick up. Nielsen had to pop up to flare for landing on the helipad. To his horror, he saw that it was covered with dead in body bags. For expediency, he landed on top of them. The team scrambled out through the exploding rounds. In the process, 1LT Bruggeman was critically wounded and had to be carried. As the Huey touched down, the team scrambled onto the craft. But there were only four. CPL Worth was missing. As they were waiting for what seemed an eternity, Nielsen saw an NVA soldier kneel down 20 feet in front of him and aim his rifle directly at him. He could hear rounds hitting all over the aircraft. But for some reason, the soldier did not fire. He kept his bead on Nielsen, but never pulled the trigger. One of the Huey crewmembers frantically ran from bunker to bunker looking for Worth. They shouted for him repeatedly over the concussion of the shells, but he was not to be found. The choppers had to leave without him. The incoming artillery fire was just too heavy. To stay any longer would have needlessly risked the lives of all the others.

The damaged rescue force pulled off of A-2. The two gunships headed for Quang Tri Airfield. But Nielsen, in Blueghost 30, was concerned about Bruggeman. He had a US Navy medical corpsman on board who immediately began to give him aid, but he was critically wounded. Nielsen decided to take him to the big US hospital at Da Nang. Twice enroute, Bruggeman stopped breathing. The corpsman frantically fought to keep him alive. Concerned, Nielsen told Sheridan to take control of the helicopter and he offered to help as he could. But as they passed the Hai Van Pass, just a few miles north of Danang, Bruggeman died. The corpsman sobbed.

The two Cobras landed back at Quang Tri. The lead chopper, Blueghost Red, was badly damaged. Its tailrotor drive shaft had been hit by 12.7 mm shells and was 80% cut. That helicopter would not be going anywhere for a while.

CPT Sprouse changed to another aircraft, but as he was cranking his engine, the airfield came under a devastating NVA rocket attack. Sprouse was just about to lift off when one rocket hit next to his machine and sprayed it with shards of ripping metal. Considering the situation, he quickly decided to chance that it was flyable, lifted off and proceeded to Hue/Phu Bai. There he discovered that his craft had 23 holes in it from thumbnail to baseball size. He had taken hits in the engine, oil reservoir and tailrotor cable. He was badly shaken by the experience, but felt that the day had been one of the most rewarding of his tour. He had helped recover numerous individuals from possible capture from the advancing enemy forces."

The helicopter attempts to rescue Bat 21 Bravo

Mike Austin, from F/8 Cav, wrote the following tribute to a Blue Ghost who gave his all.

On April 2, 1972, near the DMZ of Vietnam, a U.S. Air Force forward air controller (FAC) pilot, using the call-sign Bilk 34, broadcast an urgent radio plea over the emergency only guard frequency that was routinely monitored by all military pilots. The request was for assistance in rescuing any survivors of an EB-66 radar surveillance aircraft that was just shot down.

The plane had been struck by a surface to air missile fired by the North Vietnamese Army near Cam Lo. A general alert warning the possibility of further SAM attacks in that vicinity was also issued on guard, noting the time in minutes after the hour at the end of the message. A single chute had been observed to open, followed by a desperate call for help, so at least one survivor was confirmed.

Flying his UH-1H Huey helicopter near Quang Tri to observe the three-day-old invasion by the NVA, army LT Byron Kulland answered the call as Blue Ghost 39, his official title while in the air. Byron was a short-timer slick pilot with F/8th Cav, 196th Light Infantry Brigade.

Copilot WO1 John Frink had only arrived in country a few weeks before but certainly understood the risk of such an impromptu rescue attempt in the midst of concentrated enemy forces. So did crew chief SP4 Ron Paschall and door gunner PFC Jose Astorga.

There had been little reconnaissance of the area since up to 45,000 NVA attacked March 30th from the west out of their sanctuaries in Laos and from across the Ben Hai River, only 12 miles north of them. This was nothing less than a desperate crusade by Hanoi to conquer the South once and for all, taking advantage of the US withdrawal that was nearly completed. As a general rule, only aviation units, along with a handful of marine and army ground advisors, were left to help the South Vietnamese military defend their country. By 1972, nearly all U.S. ground troops had gone home for good.

The situation changed almost hourly. No one was sure how far south or east the NVA had progressed. Certainly, they were in Cam Lo. To make matters worse, fighter jet air cover was unavailable from the air force. They would have to rely on a single Cobra helicopter gunship, or Snake, for protection on the quick snatch extraction.

It was also getting late, and the weather was closing in. Still, they decided to try anyway. After all, any one of them could be in similar straits at any time, given the uncertainty of the moment.

Without hesitation, Byron descended toward Ai Tu combat base (Quang Tri) to drop off the civilian news correspondent he had been hauling around. Then he departed northward at full power, heading toward the town of Dong Ha. Bilk would vector him to the survivor's last known position from there. CPT Mike Rosebeary followed closely behind in the Snake.

Kulland made a hard left turn and dropped to a scant fifty feet of altitude to hug the Cua Viet River as it twisted west from Dong Ha. The crew began to hunt for the airman evading the enemy somewhere below.

Immediately after crossing the river, ground fire raked both helicopters. Rosebeary's ship was shot up so badly the emergency panel lit up like a Christmas tree. As senior officer, he wisely ordered a retreat and headed for the coast, losing his engine along the way. Luckily, a Jolly Green Giant SAR chopper, sent up from Danang to assist in the rescue, was there in minutes to pick up the two man crew unhurt.

Back on the lone Huey, Kulland had tried to turn and escape with Rosebeary, but his ship began trailing heavy smoke from .51 caliber hits on the engine. Astorga's M60 machine gun jammed while attempting to suppress the fire. A round exploded against his chest protector or "chicken plate" as it was known at the time. Another shattered a leg, knocking him unconscious.

Then they crashed hard. Astorga woke in a daze to find crew chief Paschall pinned in the wreckage. Crawling to the front, he found the two pilots still strapped in their seats. Frink was conscious, but Kulland appeared to be dead.

Frink then threw two survival vests to Astorga and indicated they may have to leave the others behind if they couldn't get Paschall out quickly. Astorga helped Frink out of the aircraft and then crawled away with the

vests while Frink tried to get to Paschall. After dropping the vests a safe distance away, Astorga crawled back to the ship to try and help rescue Paschall.

Just then, the NVA rushed in firing madly at the ship. The Huey exploded, killing Frink and Paschall instantly. Weak from injury and loss of blood, the door gunner tried to crawl away again but was easily captured. He survived and was transported to Hanoi as one of America's last prisoners of war, coming home a few months later in the 1973 POW exchange.

That is how my friends and fellow soldiers met their fates on Easter Sunday 1972, while searching for a man known to them only as BAT 21 Bravo.

More sadly, theirs was only the first in a series of catastrophic episodes, killing many more pilots and crew, before the largest rescue mission in the history of the US Air Force ended successfully with a Navy SEAL floating BAT 21 Bravo down a river in darkness to freedom. Like others that would follow, Kulland's crew died doing the most noble thing warriors could be asked to do: risking their own lives so another might live.

In the long years since this tragedy occurred, seldom a day goes by that I do not think about it and draw some inspiration from the act. In large part, it was the memory of Blue Ghost 39's crew and that of six others we had to leave behind in a string of similar tragedies that eventually drove me back to Vietnam.

More on the Rescue of Bat 21

Another reminder of the sacrifice that he saw below him comes from Darrel Whitcomb, air force OV-10 Nail FAC, in his book, *The Rescue of Bat 21*. In it, he wrote:

The Flight of Jolly Green 67

Jolly Green 67 was an HH-53 long range rescue helicopter assigned to the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS) at Danang Airbase, South Vietnam. It was downed by enemy ground fire on 6 April 1972, while attempting to rescue two American airmen who had been shot down and were hiding behind enemy lines.

This was one of the key events in what would become the largest rescue operation of that war, the rescue of Bat 21. Bat 21 was an EB-66 electronic jamming and reconnaissance aircraft. On 2 April, it was hit and destroyed by a North Vietnamese surface to air missile as it and another EB-66, Bat 22, escorted three B-52s as they bombed advancing North Vietnamese units invading South Vietnam at the beginning of what has come to be known as the Easter Offensive.

Only one crewmember, Lt Col Icical Gene Hambleton was able to eject from his stricken aircraft. His personal call sign for the rescue operation was Bat 21 Bravo. Immediately, US Army helicopters tried to rescue Lt Col Hambleton. But the North Vietnamese guns drove them off and downed one UH-1 Huey, call sign Blueghost 39. Three of its crewmembers were killed and one was captured. The captured soldier was released by the North Vietnamese a year later. The bodies of the other three were eventually recovered and buried in Arlington National cemetery in April, 1994.

The next day, Jolly Greens from the 37th ARRS made two attempts to pick up Bat 21 Bravo. Both times, they were driven off with heavy damage to their aircraft. Additionally, an OV-10, call sign Nail 38, was hit and downed by an enemy missile. Its pilot Capt Bill Henderson, was captured. Its navigator, 1LT Mark Clark, call sign Nail 38 Bravo, was able to hide and await rescue like Lt Col Hambleton.

For two more days, rescue forces fought the weather and the enemy forces to try to rescue the two airmen. They could not get in. Instead, hundreds of airstrikes were put in to beat down the enemy gunners. But the 6th of April dawned bright and clear and after 42 more airstrikes were put in, a rescue force of four HH-53s and six escorting A-1 Sandy aircraft launched to make another attempt to recover the two evading Americans. They were assisted by several forward air controllers in O-2s and OV-10s and numerous other support aircraft. Jolly Green 67 was designated to make the rescue attempt. But as it came to a hover over Bat 21 Bravo, it was raked by heavy enemy fire. The escorting Sandy A-1s tried to engage the enemy guns, but they could not get them all.

They could see what the ground fire was doing to the helicopter, so several shouted for the crew to fly out of the area. The crew of Jolly Green 67 aborted the rescue attempt and tried to maneuver the stricken aircraft to safety, but the enemy fire continued and so damaged the craft that it crashed in a huge fireball a few kilometers south of the survivors. The fire was intense and lasted several days. There were never any indications of survivors.

The Sandy pilots were shocked by the turn of events. The other helicopters were ready to move into the area and make another attempt. But Sandy 01, the leader of the task force was not willing to risk another aircraft. He aborted the mission. It was just too dangerous.

The next day, another OV-10 supporting the rescue, call sign Covey 282, was shot down in the same area. The pilot, 1LT Bruce Walker, call sign Covey 282 Alpha, was on the ground and evading like the two earlier airmen. His crewman, US Marine 1LT Larry Potts, was never heard from. With this news, GEN Abrams, the overall US commander in Saigon, directed that there would be no more helicopter rescue efforts for the three downed flyers. Instead, a ground team was formed to attempt to infiltrate through enemy lines and pick them up. It was planned and directed by USMC LTC Andy Anderson, and lead by US Navy SEAL LT Tom Norris. From 10-12 April, the team operated through enemy lines and rescued 1LT Clark and LTC Hambleton. They also intended to rescue 1LT Walker, but on the 18th, he was discovered by Viet Cong troops and killed. The rescues were over. Later, LT Tom Norris would get the Medal of Honor for the mission.

This was the largest sustained rescue operation of the war. Over 800 airstrikes, to include B-52s, were put in as direct support. Numerous helicopters, A-1s and forward air controller aircraft were shot down or damaged. A total of eleven men were killed. But it was all done in the best traditions of the rescue forces. Their motto was and still is "That Others May Live." During the war, they rescued 3,883 downed US or allied airmen, sailors, marines and soldiers and made it possible for them to return home.

The 62d AHC

VHCMa member Tim Crilley, assigned to the 62d AHC, has provided the missing link to the FRAC history with the Official 11th Combat Aviation Group History. It is pretty sterile when read by itself, but it takes life when the events are recalled by the participants.

06 April 72 - F/4 reported two AH-1Gs and one OH-6 received ground to air fire (GAF) from unk en forces. F/4 engaged same resulting in 2 KBH (killed by helicopter). F/4 reports significant enemy fighting positions being constructed between FB Bastogne and Birmingham.

13 APR - F/4 aircraft engaged an est en co with unk results. One F/4 OH-6, one UH-1H and one AH-1G sustained damaged. 48th had two UH-1H and two AH-1Gs hit.

16 APR - F/4 engaged unk en sized force resulting in 5 KBHs.

01 MAY - F/4 Two OH-6s shot down in vic Quang Tri (QT) while on SAR msn. Both crews successfully extracted. During the rescue, F/4 guns accounted for 90 NVA KBH.

02 MAY - A UH-1H from 62d Avn Co (Corps) successfully rescued 5 USMC advisors from south of QT at YD 420450. Acft sustained major damage and recovered to Camp Evans.

02 MAY - elements of F/4 were responsible for the rescue of two AF pilots and one AF FAC. During the mission, one UH-1H destroyed by SA-7 killing all on board, another UH-1H was shot down, with the crew being successfully recovered.

The F-4 Cav UH-1H shot down was #70-15863 at YD370428. The crew were: AC CW2 Jesse William Clifton, Pilot WO1 Petrilla Joohn Joseph JR., CE SP4 Morgan Charles Vernon, Gunner SP4 Porterfield Dale Kyette. The passenger was Army CPT Berkson Joseph Mike.

Russ Miller, a Cobra Pilot in F/4th Cav, provides the following:

"On May 2nd while staging out of Camp Evans we were sent on a mission to extract some American advisors, downed FAC pilots and wounded RVN Marines north of Evans along the highway. We took two snakes and two slicks. CPT Dan Tyner was Cobra lead and CWO William Jessie was slick lead. I can't remember who was flying the other slick, it could have been WO Rose. We left the little birds at Evans. As I remember we started taking fire as soon as we arrived. We started normally - one Snake in

followed by the second. At this time we were still flying at 1500 feet. That would soon change! I remember Jessie calling pulling pitch and starting out of the PZ. I was inbound as he started to turn left. All of a sudden he exploded right beside me. I think I asked my front seat, "What the hell was that?" I continued my break to come around and cover Tyner and heard the second slick reporting taking fire and that he was going down. I couldn't talk to Tyner because he was in the Cobra with the 20mm and every time you fired it, you lost commo. He loved the damn thing! The second Huey was able to fly across the highway toward the beach before he put it down. Tyner and I continued covering fire for the downed crew. My front seat kept seeing the NVA coming out of a tree line toward the downed bird every time we turned, so we started making slow passes and firing one pair and just a few duper rounds on each pass. I still couldn't talk to Tyner so I went to guard and called for help. Luckily one of our little birds was goofing around at Evans. I think it was CPT Fred Ledfors. Well, he came to the rescue. When he arrived I was out of ammo, ideas and about 30 minutes into a 20-minute light. Because he came alone he had to shuttle the downed crew to the beach. Finally we got back to Evans and out of nowhere a general appeared and asked if we should go back for Jessie and Petrilla. One of the hardest and most painful decisions I ever made in my 27 years service was to tell that general no. Jessie, Petrilla and the others were not recovered until July." Sloniker notes: Many times in all three regions, the areas were just too hot to recover the fallen. In the case of Spengler and Windler on 5 APR 72 they were shot down. Details are in the TRAC portion. The remains were not recovered until 1988, with Spengler's remains being buried at Arlington National Cemetery on 29 AUG 89. I attended that ceremony and recall vividly the sensation of being forced to remember events that occurred 17 years prior.

13 MAY - CA into QT. F/8 credited with 32 NVA KBH in an engagement at YD 6812.

15 MAY - CA on FSB Bastogne.

20 MAY - Atk Heli Plt engaged two en armored personnel carriers and destroyed same with SS-11s.

24 MAY - 62d Avn Co CH-47, CH-47C #68-15854, on mission to FB Helen, YD 516219, was destroyed by 82mm fire. All five on board, KIA. While on C&C msn 48th AHC UH-1H was shot down by SA-7, killing the company commander, MAJ Kingman and the AC, LT Cline at YD563448, acft was UH-1H #68-15381.

11 June - Two OH-6s from F/8 were shot down and destroyed while attempting to recon an LZ for 1st ARVN DIV at YD YD565135. Personnel in the incident: Arnold E. Holm; Robin R. Yeakley, Wayne Bibbs (missing from one OH6A); James E. Hackett; James R. McQuade (missing from second OH6A). On June 11, 1972, CPT Arnold Holm, pilot, PFC Wayne Bibbs, gunner, and SP4 Robin Yeakley, passenger, were aboard an OH6A observation helicopter flying from Camp Eagle to the northern provinces of South Vietnam on a visual reconnaissance mission. On this day, Holm's aircraft was monitoring an ARVN team insertion. During the mission, Holm reported that he saw enemy living quarters, bunkers and numerous trails. On his second pass over a ridge, at about 25' altitude, the aircraft exploded and burned. It was reported that before the aircraft crashed that smoke and white phosphorous grenades began exploding. After the aircraft impacted with the ground, it exploded again. Other aircraft in the area received heavy anti-aircraft fire. No one was seen to exit the downed helicopter, nor were emergency radio beepers detected. In another OH6A (tail #67-16275), 1LT James R. McQuade, pilot, and SP4 James E. Hackett, gunner, tried to enter the area of the crashed OH6A, but encountered heavy fire and their aircraft was also shot down. McQuade's aircraft was hit, and the intensity of the resulting fire caused white phosphorous and smoke grenades carried aboard the aircraft to explode prior to hitting the ground. The aircraft continued to burn after impact and no crewmen left the ship before or after the crash. No ground search was made for survivors or remains of either aircraft because of hostile fire in the area.

McQuade received the Distinguished Service Cross posthumously. His citation reads:

The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress, July 25, 1963, has awarded the Distinguished Service

Cross (posthumously) to First Lieutenant James R. McQuade, United States Army, for extraordinary heroism in action.

First Lieutenant James R. McQuade, Infantry, Troop F, 8th Cavalry, 196th Infantry Brigade, distinguished himself by extraordinary heroism while serving in support of the 1st Army of the Republic of Vietnam Division in the Thua Thien Province, Republic of Vietnam, on 11 June 1972. Lieutenant McQuade was participating in a rescue mission of a downed helicopter crew in an extremely hostile area. Lieutenant McQuade, knowing that the downed aircraft had received intense automatic small and heavy antiaircraft fire, volunteered to go into the heavily infested enemy territory to search for possible survivors. Upon initial entry into the enemy held terrain, Lieutenant McQuade reported taking heavy automatic weapons fire from all sides. With complete disregard for his own safety, he continued flying towards the crash site. As he proceeded to the area of the downed aircraft, he reported taking further antiaircraft fire. At approximately 750 meters from the crash site and completely engulfed in hostile fire, Lieutenant McQuade reported taking numerous hits and, shortly thereafter, was hit with a missile of unknown type. His aircraft disintegrated in mid-air. Lieutenant McQuade's unselfish concern for the welfare of his fellow soldiers resulted in the loss of his own life. He was well aware of the risks involved but refused to give up the search in the face of the fanatical enemy resistance. Lieutenant McQuade's voluntary participation in a desperately dangerous mission demonstrated extraordinary heroism in the highest traditions of the United States Army and reflects great credit upon himself, his unit, and the United States Army.

(Signed 13 September 1974 by Verne L. Bowers, Major General USA, and Secretary of the Army Howard H. Collaway)

12 JUN - a third F/8 Cav OH-6 was shot down attempting to recon same LZ. The gunner was killed and the pilot rescued. Note: I have a transcript from the Sandy A-1 pilot that provided CAP for the HH-53 that did the SAR. Pilot was USAF 1LT Bryon Hukee who has A-1 Sky Raider website. He sought out and found the F/8 pilot in 1997. I found the pilot, whose name I have forgotten, at Ft Bragg who was a CW4 preparing to deploy to Bosnia in a mine laying UH-60. The following is the debrief almost exactly as Hukee made it. Some USAF terms may not be familiar to army flight crews, but the heroism is. Hukee wrote:

A successful rescue was made of Blue Ghost 10, a U.S. Army OH6 LOH pilot. The aircraft with 2 SOB (Souls on board) was downed by suspected small arms fire on the 280 degree radial for 19 nautical miles off of channel 69. This was within 3 kilometers of where two army helicopters had been downed by enemy ground fire the previous day with no survivors. Blue Ghost 10 was downed at approximately 0200Z. Sandy 07 & 08 (LT Hukee & CPT Bardahl) were scrambled at 0215Z [from Danang] but before getting airborne were told to return to the parking area and shut down. Queen [Danang GCI] advised that there were numerous army choppers in the area and that the Sandys and Jollys were not needed at this time. At 0330Z Sandy 07 & 08 and Jolly Green 65 & 21 were scrambled by Queen and told that although no radio contact had been made with the survivor, mirror flashes were observed from the crash site. We were airborne at 0345Z and contacted King [USAF SAR command and control C-130]. King advised that Covey 116 was the on scene commander at the time and that he was putting fast mover strikes in the area.

Covey 116 advised that known enemy locations were 300 meters north, 300 meters west, and 300 meters east of the survivor. Since no radio contact had been made, Covey 116 was not sure whether there was one or two survivors. Jolly Green 65 and 21 held feet wet east of channel 69 and Sandy 07 & 08 went straight to the SAR scene. Covey 116 showed Sandy 07 the survivor's position as soon as he arrived in the immediate area at 0415Z. On scene command was given to Sandy 07 at this time and Covey 116 RTB'd to channel 77 as he was running low on fuel. Sandy 07 made several low passes over the survivor with Sandy 08 watching for ground fire. Covey 15 now arrived on scene and he started putting in fast movers to the west and north. Each time Sandy 07 rolled in over the survivor, he got mirror flashes from him. The survivor was about 10 meters from the wreckage of his chopper. Sandy 08 and Covey 15 were shown the exact location of the survivor by Sandy 07. Due to the lack of [observed] ground fire received, Sandy 07 decided a pickup attempt would be made using Jolly Green 65 and 21 who were

holding feet wet east of channel 69. The plan was to have Covey 28 put in a flight of fast movers 500 meters north of the survivor during the pickup. Sandy 08 exited the area to bring the Jollys to a final holding point about 5 kilometers to the east of the survivor. Jolly 65 was told to proceed from the final holding point on a heading of 210 degrees as low and as fast as he could. At the command of execution, Sandy 07 dropped a "too far" M-47 [100 lb. smoke bomb] and headed out to join with Sandy 08 and Jolly 65. Sandy 07 and 08 put down parallel east-west smoke screens 25 meters south and 50 meters north of the survivor respectively. Sandy 07 and 08 delivered ordnance while the Jolly was in the hover and no ground fire was observed during the pickup which occurred at 0630Z. The survivor who was severely burned and lost his radio in the crash said the chopper rolled onto the other occupant after the crash. Sandy 07 and 08 escorted Jolly 65 with the survivor and Jolly 21 to channel 77 [Danang]. Sandy 07 & 08 landed at 0710Z. SIGNED, Hukee, Byron E., 1LT, USAF Sandy 07 and Bardahl, Eugene A., CPT, USAF 7 Sandy 08 27 JUN - D/17 Cav rescued FAC at YD 598115.

30 JUN - Elements of the 11th CAG support ARVN insertions vic YD4656 and YD4454.

In the afternoon a FAC was recovered by F/4 Cav. Pappy Jones was cited for that action:

The Distinguished Flying Cross is awarded to CW2 William H. Jones, For heroism while participating in aerial flight evidenced by voluntary actions above and beyond the call of duty: Chief Warrant Officer Jones distinguished himself by exceptionally valorous actions while serving as aircraft commander of a utility helicopter on a search and rescue mission in Military Region I. Chief Warrant Officer Jones began a search pattern with the other utility helicopter, flying low level at low air speeds around enemy positions and taking enemy ground to air fire. Chief Warrant Officer Jones saw the pilot hiding in a tree line and hovered over a rice paddy as close as possible to him. He held the aircraft at a low hover allowing one of the infantrymen aboard to leap into the waist deep water and help the pilot aboard.

Pappy recalled: "Enemy activity was reported by the Vietnamese Marines. On 30 June 1972 a mission came down from highers to do visual recon (VR) where the suspected NVA activity was to have taken place. Our standard team of LOHs, two Cobras and one Huey were dispatched to check it out. This was the Nap of the Earth tactic we developed and were using since the introduction of SA-7 heat seeking missiles by the NVA. I flew with the team that morning in one of the Snakes. The VR block was cold, the only NVA activity was in the minds of the very jittery South Vietnamese Forces. We returned to our base camp on Tan My island. (Old 101st recreation area, Eagle Beach, at the mouth of the Perfume river east of Hue).

My position in F Troop was Cobra and Huey SIP, Admin Officer and the Commander's Pilot. The troop commander at that time was MAJ Ed Larson. He was on R&R in Hawaii. The XO, CPT Jim Elder, was in command until the major returned.

CPT Elder found me in the Mess Hall and told me that we had to go to Danang for a staff meeting. I finished my lunch and went to preflight our slick. She was brand new, factory fresh and vibration free. She flew like a dream. We changed the armament a little, adding a .50 cal. mounted on the left that would make your nose bleed when SP5 Evans (crew chief) turned it on. We had triple 60s on the right. We'd had a mini on the right before but always had electrical problems so we were trying this more reliable set up. The mission to Danang went without incident and on the way back to Tan My I got a little hood time with a simulated GCA approach at Tan My. CPT Elder and I headed to the O Club, our day's work complete. Whoever was behind the bar sat two cold Buds in front of us and we were about to take our first sip when the Ops Sergeant ran in yelling "SAR." Elder looked at me and then at the other troops at the bar, they all had beer in their hands. He turned to me and said, "Let's me and you take it, Pappy."

The gunner and CE were still at the a/c doing their post flight when they saw us running back toward them. They untied the rotor blades and pulled them out to the 9 and 3 position. I jumped into the right seat (Elder liked to fly in the left seat while MAJ Larson liked the right. It didn't matter to me because I gave check rides from both positions) and began an abbreviated check list crank. Actually, I hit the master

switch, set the throttle and pulled the trigger. By the time I was ready to back out of the revetment I had a full load; the First Sergeant, the Field First Sergeant, LT Hogue, Blue Team Leader and a couple of his team. Elder set the radios and called King 26, the C-130 on station to coordinate the SAR, on guard for a situation report.

Covey 10, an OV-10 Fast FAC was also on station. He told us that Covey 11 had caught a heat seeker while directing fire at an NVA troop concentration. He said a good chute was seen and that he talked to 11 on his emergency radio. The enemy was close and were looking for him. Covey 10 told us he was circling overhead and that he had a tally on us. I told CPT Elder that it sounded like the place I had been with the team earlier that morning and that this should be a cake walk because that area was cold. Covey 10 gave me vectors to his location and then on to where he believed Covey 11 was hiding. One turn lead to another and the next thing I knew I was seventeen to twenty clicks behind enemy lines. It should be said at this point that in 1972, a FEBA was established at the Quang Tri provincial border, well south of the DMZ, by the NVA. At one point 10 vectored me around some bad guys with a left turn to the west into the setting sun. My gunner startled me when he started returning fire and I fussed at him because of the friendlies in the area. When I rolled wings level a single rain drop the size of a basketball hit the windshield right in front of my face. I almost swallowed my tongue. NVA were everywhere. They were all in fresh uniforms - no black pajamas on these boys and they hadn't bothered with all the camouflaging. The ones I saw had that "deer in the headlights" look because they were surprised to see us so close to them. Most didn't have time to shoot at us but there were seven launches of SA-7s and each one was called by Covey 10. I just closed my eyes anticipating the impact. Luckily, none of them were able to lock on. I remember thinking, "Maybe these commode seats really do work."

I was low and slow trying to find Covey 11 when I thought I heard a whisper on guard. There was so much chatter on all radios that I had to yell, "Everybody shut-up, I think I heard him." The radios went quiet and I heard a whispered, "Turn right!" I turned hard right and then heard another, "Turn right!" I turned hard right again and there he was, in my chin bubble. Hard on the right pedal and hard right-aft cyclic, I stood the helicopter on its tail, then on its nose and came to a hover just over a low tree line in a rice paddy-type depression. Covey 11 appeared out of the brush but he was having a hard time with his right leg. He had obviously been hurt during the bail-out or the landing. The Field First Sergeant who was a big man, jumped out, grabbed the lieutenant and literally threw him on board. I did a left pedal turn (I don't know why - it was the wrong way) pulled 50 lbs. of torque and came out in a right turn to the south east. All hell broke loose. Evans turned on the .50 and the gunner had the 60s clattering when I heard the First Sergeant scream. He was sitting in the jump seat behind Elder and me and he had taken a round through the abdomen. As far as I knew it was the first and only hit we took.

Suddenly in front of me I saw a Jolly Green and two Sandies. A small rush of pride went through me when I realized that we had beaten them. The lead Sandy said, "Centaur Six, you're taking heavy fire from this tree line, I'll get it," and he lit it up with napalm. At twelve o'clock I could see a lot of tracers but they were going the wrong way. They were firing away from us. Then I saw what they were shooting at: one of our teams! Someone had decided to launch regardless of the beer. Whoever it was probably saved my life because the NVA were paying more attention to them than they were to me. They were laying down a heavy stream of fire at the team. In a second all they would have to do is look up because they were looking at the bottom of my helicopter. I sat a little deeper in the seat behind the armor plating and a little lower behind the instrument panel.

I broke clear and was still flying, much to my surprise! Someone came up on guard and said, "Centaur Six, this is Gallant Man. I have a medical team standing by if you need assistance."

I thought it was one of the Jolly Greens. I knew they carried medics. I said, "Roger, I have two wounded, meet me at Twin Steeples." (remains of an old church close to the beach)

"Negative, negative, I am feet wet, I stay feet wet," Gallant Man said. "What are you? A boat?" I yelled.

"Affirmative, I'm DME"-

I cut him off and said, "Don't give me that shit. I'm an Army helicopter. I ain't got nothin' but a mag compass."

The Jolly Green said, "Centaur Six, he's eleven out, do you have fuel?" I told him that I did and he flew over the top of me and said, "Tag on and I'll lead you out."

Gallant Man was the helicopter carrier USS Okinawa. The air traffic controller gave me winds relative, which didn't mean much to me and I told him so. Finally he gave up on this dumb Army helicopter pilot and said, "Come around the back of the boat and land forward. You have a green deck."

The damn deck wasn't green, it was black, but I figured he meant I was cleared to land. I saw a ground guide in the chin bubble and I followed his direction to skids down.

A crew came out with a gurney for the First Sergeant but he couldn't lay down because of the pain. They pulled the pins on the jump seat and carried him in on that sitting up.

I began to shut down the a/c while everybody else unstrapped and got out. The ground handling people chained the bird to the deck.

Elder and I were taken to a room where the OV-10 pilot was being tended to and he shook our hands and said thanks. I told him, "Don't worry about it. Just buy me a drink sometime."

"What do you drink?" he asked.

"Scotch," I said.

(This exchange would come back to bite me in the butt later when MAJ Larson was back from R&R and I least expected it).

While we were talking with the air force lieutenant a man came in wearing surgical scrubs. He held up an object and asked, "Do you know what this is?"

I told him that I did. It was the jump door handle from a Huey. He said that he had taken it from the stomach of our man in the operating room and that the man was going to be all right.

A .51 cal. HE round had gone through the left hand jump door, taken off the handle and deposited it in the First Sergeant and exited him before exploding and tearing a hole in the right hand jump door. They turned out to be just two of the 84 bullet holes in the "Ole Man's" Huey. The bird had to be scrapped later. Tom Kennedy, our Maintenance Warrant (and a member of the VHPA) has never, even to this day, let me live it down. It was, after all, a new bird with less than 200 hours. It still had that new helicopter smell.

We spent the night on the Okinawa. The next morning before taking off, the captain of the ship held a small formation and awarded both CPT Elder and me with Night Carrier Qualifications. A set of gold Navy wings turned upside down on black leather with "Night Carrier Qual" and our names under them. He also gave me an audio tape of the entire mission from the first May Day call to skids down on the carrier deck. He also made note of the "F*#king Boat" comment saying something about the Navy only having ships. I accepted the tape with a red face.

The last I heard about the First Sergeant, he had survived and been reassigned to Ft. Carson.

Somewhere in this thing, I can't for the life of me remember where, Pete Barber (a VHPA life member) tagged on behind me and followed me in and out and all the way out to the ship. He couldn't get clearance to land because I had the deck. He returned to Tan My. Jack (Beetle) Bailey (another life member) tried to get behind Pete and me for additional support but was driven away by the heavy fire. I guess his spacing was off and he was far enough behind to be in the danger zone.

A couple of really dumb things on this mission have haunted me these many years later. One was pulling in the 50 lbs. of torque and rolling over to VNE. Up to that point the enemy had been doing exactly what they were taught, using the flip over sight and leading me, but I was flying too slow and all the fire was going in front of me. When I rolled over to get airspeed I flew right into it. Dumb!

Dumber was Pete Barber for following me. I saw Pete at the reunion in Orlando for the first time since 1972. I got to talk to him about the Covey 11 rescue mission. He told me that he could see a lot of tracers

going through my aircraft and that he had tried to cover me and at one point had even put himself between me and the gunner, but he never took a hit. Dumber!

07 JUL - F/4 killed two T-54s and 56 en KBH

07 JUL - 11th CAG participated in a combined air assault inserting a reinforced VN Marine Corps Bn with advisors at YD 3555 and YD 3553. This is what really happened, as discovered at the history table at the Nashville 99 reunion:

"By early July 1972, the DMZ was a line from the old 101st FSB Nancy northeast up to the coast. It was 16 KM southeast of Quang Tri. To fly past that point was to fly behind the lines of the NVA....and that effort was being planned using 20 CH-46s and 10 CH-53s from USS Tripoli, 10 miles offshore. The CH-53s were from HMM 165 MAG, 361 MAW. The ground fighting force was a Vietnamese Marine Corps (VNMC) reinforced infantry battalion. Prior to 11 July, the AF planned to prep the vicinity with B-52s. Following that prep, Navy gunfire from destroyers and cruisers were to prep the same area, and when the dust settled the AH-1Gs from F/79 ARA, Blue Max, who were deployed from III Corps to I Corps on 25 June, were to prep the LZ prior to the Marines' arrival. The AF reversed the decision for the B-52 prep for humanitarian reasons: the prep would destroy a Vietnamese cemetery that had numerous mounds and tombstones in it. Those tombstones turned out to be just the right type of hard cover needed by the NVA to hide behind as they poured murderous close-in small arms fire into the US Marine and Army helicopters that would appear on the 11th of July.

On the 7th the naval gunfire (NGF) prep must have been off target. George Kerr, Joker 52 from the 48th AHC guns recalled there were no holes in the LZ from the 5 inch naval guns which were usually left as souvenirs of their handiwork. The LZ had high winds as the attacking force arrived. I imagine it was quite a sight to see as the Marines flew their loads in V's of 3 for the thirty aircraft. Blue Max provided 6 Cobras to prep the LZ. This prep was soon to be seen as one that definitely was better with the B-52 and accurate firepower added into the mix. On the left flank, escorting were 4 Cobras from F-4 Cav, according to Russ Miller and Pappy Jones who were in the flight. On the right flank of this large fleet of USMC helos was George Kerr, flying Cobra 027, a 20mm ship (M-35 system) whose CE was PFC Michael Hill, 20 years old, from Cottonwood, AZ, who would lose his life on 13 JUL with less than two months left in country. Hill, a 67Y Cobra CE, had to fly as a gunner occasionally to qualify for his monthly flight pay. There was no VNAF participation in this flight nor any USMC AH-1G or AH-1Js from the Tripoli. There was neither FAC nor other fixed wing support of this attack. The LZ was in the open flat area just off hwy 555, referred to as triple nickel or in Bernard Fall's famous book, *Street Without Joy*, because of the heavy French fighting there in the early 1950's. One has to wonder if there may have been some North Vietnamese fathers and sons from the first fights against the south who were back here 20 years later hammering away in their attempt to push the ideology of North Vietnam on South Vietnam.

Miller, Jones and Kerr all recalled how the LZ was raked with small arms, .51 cal. and 23 MM all firing at aircraft flying in there at 50 feet off the deck. The 53s each had 50 VNMC pax and external slingloads. All were extremely impressed with the calm, cool, professionalism of the USMC pilots. Specific comments about how calm one 46 driver was as he announced he had to make an emergency landing because of the hydraulic fluid that was pouring into the cockpit. One other cool character was the HAC (helo acft commander) of CH-53D s/n 156658, who was on short final and decelerating to land with a sling load and the 50 VNMC aboard calmly announced, "We have just lost our starboard engine." This aircraft was in the second flight of 3 CH-53Ds making that assault.

What took out that starboard engine was an SA-7 that flew by Kerr in his Snake and hit the 53. This missile was fired at low flying helos and was successful in bringing down the lumbering Sea Stallion during a very critical phase in its flight envelope. The pilot quickly punched off the load and augered in at YD 345644. The aircraft went in on fire and burned on the ground, leaving a distinct wreckage pattern of the 5 blades on the burned magnesium pile.

Killed, with their bodies never being recovered were USMC SSG Jerry Wayne Hendrix, age 29, of Wichita, KS, and CPL Kenneth Lloyd Crody,

18, of Gritith, IN, who might have been on his first hot combat assault. All others aboard the 53 survived and recovered to other Tripoli based helos for return to the ship. The Joker guns were quite busy. Lead by CPT "Whiskey Jim" Dobbs, Joker 53, the second Snake was AC'd by WO1 Steven Roark, and the third was piloted by Kerr. They all took heavy hits. Roack sustained injuries when his canopy shattered from ground fire and peppered him with plexiglas, causing facial bleeding and impairing his ability to keep the aircraft in the fight. As this was occurring, Kerr was taking fire, with damage being inflicted to the 20 mm ammo in the pod that is on both sides of the bottom of a Snake with the M35 system. With that system down, empty 7 shot rocket pods and no turret ammo remaining, Kerr kept diving at the muzzle flashes to draw fire away from the marine helos. He felt he could not leave the fight because Roark in the second Cobra was already limping home and this would leave Whisky Jim alone. The very next day, the 12th, all Joker pilots would receive DFCs from a USMC general back at Marble Mountain."

11 July Russ Miller, a Cobra pilot with F/4th Cav, comments: "July 11th was a full day. I didn't realize until today (August 9, 1999) that I had received two DFC's on the 11th. The first was for actions in the morning while covering the RVN Marine insertions and the second was for the extraction that night. To me the morning was just another day of doing what we had been doing, but there were a lot more of us. After all the circling offshore I can still visualize the beach coming closer and closer and the smoke from the bombardment, naval fire, Blue Max and all the damn helicopters. As we crossed the beach and the first giant sand dune, there we were taking fire from every tree line. I can remember how safe (falsely secure) I felt behind my chicken plate. Being young and the "It won't happen to me attitude" had a lot to do with it.

"That evening is a blur. I remember being scrambled to Twin Steeples and holding there. I don't remember who was my Cobra lead (probably Tyner). When we started in for the extraction we went in with 2 little birds, 2 Snakes and a chase slick. At least one other full team stayed at Twin Steeples. I can't remember who said later they knew where we were the whole time because of the tracers. Maybe Mick or O'Connell. The PZ was Hot-Hot. I don't know why or how I ended up hovering in the PZ. Maybe I got target fixation or just the shear shock of all the 23s, 37s, .51s and the kitchen sinks. I remember my front seat shooting the hell out of the mini gun. Hell, we may have been shooting ourselves. Pappy tried to kill me once. I'm sure we were only in the PZ a few seconds but it seemed like hours. The next day a US Marine general named Miller came and gave us all awards. The little bird guys were the real heroes."

14 July - D/17 Night Hawk engaged an NVA rocket launching team at AT925655. Destroyed 10 122MM, and 10 KBH. Later that night one AC-119K Stinger engaged same area and destroyed 10 more 122mm and killed 3 NVA.

22 JUL - F/4 destroyed one Soviet built tracked veh at YD383646. 05 AUG - D/17 discovered one 122mm field gun, one T-54, one 23mm, and 5000 rounds of mixed mortar and arty ammo. TACAIR called in. Results unk.

11 AUG - D/17 Night Hawk engaged 122MM rocket site resulting in 16 NVA KBH. Mike Koone was the pilot on this mission:

"One of the most exciting Night Hawk missions I remember was an evening in the late summer or early fall of '72. For the life of me I can't remember the pilot's name I was flying with but he was getting short and was turning the reigns of Night Hawk over to me.

The evening started out uneventful with our standard briefing at Headquarters at 1800 hours and a return to our standby area. In the briefing we were told there would be an attempt to intercept some bad guys who were supposed to be setting up a 122mm rocket site for an attack on Danang. I would be flying in the low bird and Mike Williams ended up flying in the high bird with the Night Hawk pilot. Mike was out of his element not flying a Snake but wanted to get some night flying experience with Night Hawk "Defense of Danang". The plan was set into motion with the low bird leaving a designated point in the foothills SE of Danang and flying due West on a line south of DaNang. As usual, we were flying lights out and only turning on our rotating beacon occasionally so the high bird could direct our flight. We were

at tree top level and 60 knots when we broke over a large sandy area at least a klick square. We told the high bird to begin popping flares. We immediately had at least 12-15 personnel in the middle of the open area humping rockets on a path leading south to north. The pilot kicked the bird into a right turn and the crewmember on the .50 cal. opened up on the dudes, dropping several of them instantly. I never saw such accuracy in my life. I was looking out the door window and yelling at the top of my voice to waste 'em. He didn't need any encouragement. We were in a tight right turn at this time and both the .50 cal. and the M60 on the right side didn't let up until it was apparent that no one was moving on the ground. It was a virtual turkey shoot. There were bodies and rockets scattered all over the open sandy area.

We pulled up to a couple hundred feet and began shooting up the area but when one of our rounds somehow ignited a rocket motor and it took off in wild flight we decided to knock it off and orbit the area and wait for the ARVN ground unit which had been dispatched to the area from Danang. Unfortunately, it took several refuelings on our part and most of the night for them to finally arrive and clean up the mess we had caused. Stinger was also on station during all of this and they provided us with 20mm fire and their "big eye in the sky" lighting capabilities. A few weeks later we were summoned to headquarters for an awards ceremony. The members of D troop who had flown that evening were awarded the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry and we were given a 122mm rocket, disarmed, of course, which had several holes from our .50 cal. or M60. We all jumped into the deuce-and-a-half and rode back to company headquarters whooping and hollering and showing off our captured prize. The rocket was displayed proudly in our operations office."

12 AUG - OV-1D crashed on takeoff at MMAAF. One crewmember safely ejected, the other received fatal injuries. 1LT Troutman was the survivor. He had ejection injuries and was medevaced with Rich Cunnare.

15 AUG - D/17th Cav AH-1G shot down at YD420300 killing the AC and wounding the CPG. Again very sterile. Here is what happened per Rich Cunnare:

"What happened to Chuck Dean and me when we were shot down on 15 August when we blundered into the same anti-aircraft positions we encountered on the mission prior was a good example of how pilots who faced heavy fire every day developed fatalistic attitudes of invincibility. It was not uncommon for pilots returning from these missions to openly challenge the ineffectiveness NVA gunners. D/17 Cav scout pilots Dexter Florence and Doug Brown flew into the middle of an NVA division under heavy fire to rescue me because I was badly wounded. Both pilots dropped off their door gunners, SGT Don Fraighly and SSG Thomas Boyd, who then moved through heavy enemy fire and dragged me to Dexter Florence's aircraft."

16 AUG 72 - 11th CAG moved from Marble Mountain Army Airfield to Danang Airbase. Move was completed by 06 SEP.

17 AUG 72 - D/17 Cav engaged a VC meeting place resulting in 30 KBHs.

20 AUG - F/8 Cav engaged enemy at BT104403, resulting in 30 NVA KBH.

24 AUG - F/8 Night Hawk engaged and destroyed 30 sampans(BT 065713) Enemy personnel also engaged at BT 067617 resulting in 13 KBH.

24 SEP - Danang received 27 122MM rockets. No damage to 11th CAG equip nor personnel.

27 SEP - Danang received 18122MM rockets. Same results.

06 OCT - D/17 engaged enemy pos. at BT 115160, results 30 KBH.

12 OCT - D/17 credited with 10 KBH will on recon msn.

17 OCT - F/4 destroyed two NVA trucks at YD 558035.

25 OCT - Danang hit again with 18 122s, this time one US govt contract worker killed.

26 OCT - "An air cavalry team from D/17 Cav detonated a mine which killed the gunner, and destroyed the OH-6. The pilot died later as a result of injuries received." (Dexter Florence)

The 11th CAG by late June had the combat power of seven aviation companies and two separate platoons (TOW and SS-11) totaling 1600

personnel and 209 aircraft. In late July Group strength began to diminish with the standdown or reassignment of the following units:
F/79th ARA 22 AUG standdown
48th AHC 5 AUG standdown
B/229th AHB 24 JUL Standdown
131st SAC (OV-1 company) 2 OCT Standdown
F/8th Cav 16 OCT reassigned
Atk Hel Plt (SS-11 unit) 21 OCT Standdown
1st Aerial TOW 29 OCT reassigned.

Second Regional Assistance Command (SRAC)

I am deeply indebted to VHCMA member R.D. (Hoagie) Hogan, crew chief of Gladiator 929, 57th AHC at Camp Holloway, Pleiku (70-72), 57th AHC members Bob Thibeault and Pat Cahill who dug out information from the National Archives, and Rick Vogel who was the CE on Gladiator 715. Unfortunately, no one from the 129th AHC nor the 60th Avn Co stepped up prior to the deadline with information concerning their units. There were mentions of Chinooks in II Corps, but again, no one from those units responded to requests for information which were in the VHPA Newsletters during 1998 and 1999.

The 57th flew FOB (Flight Over the Border) missions during the early winter months of 1971. These missions indicated massive numbers of NVA troops, supplies, and for the first time, tanks, moving towards Kontum from the tri-border. Now it seemed that almost any team insertion resulted in a premature extraction, and almost always it was hot.

The "Spring Offensive" in the central Highlands began in March as two NVA divisions led by T-64 tanks attacked from the north toward their objective of Kontum. The ARVN bases between the tri-border and Kontum were either overrun or surrounded within the first few days. Both the Gladiators and the Cougars guns flew extensive support missions north of Kontum including emergency medevacs, resupply, and gun support. It seemed the Cougars had at least one ship in the air at all times. Over QL-14, the road between Kontum and Dak To, four 57th ships were shot down within two weeks.

The main attack on Kontum began 14 April as ARVN paratroopers and South Korean soldiers (ROKs) fought desperately to keep the road open from Pleiku for resupply. At the height of the fighting, the order came down that any area except Kontum city was a free fire zone. Both Gladiator and Cougar crews flew non-stop missions while receiving intense enemy fire in the all out effort to save the city. At one point, Gladiator crews flew special B model Hueys sent by Brigade that were equipped with TOW missiles for use against the NVA tanks. There were no FOB missions. The men had all the action they wanted just outside their own compound. It was house to house combat in Kontum.

During April, both Tan Canh and Dak To fell to the NVA. Just prior to being overrun, a Gladiator was on a mission to Tan Canh to pick up some advisors. The ship was shot down, and amazingly, 13 days later, two of the crew members walked into Kontum. They had escaped, evaded, and were surrounded by the NVA for nearly half a month. It happened on 04/24/1972 at UTM grid coordinates: ZB001219.

Crew members: pilot WO1 Ellen, Wade Lynn BNR (Body not returned), copilot 1LT Jones, Johnny Mack BNR, SP5 Vogle, Ricky V. (Rescued), and SP4 Lea, Charles M. (Rescued), and AC 1LT Hunsicker, James Edward BNR. The single passenger was Army MAJ Carter, George William, BNR.

On the evening of April 23, 1972, CPT Kenneth J. Yonan accompanied his ARVN counterpart to a water tower located on the northwestern edge of the Tan Canh base camp compound near Dak To, Kontum Province. Yonan was an advisor assigned to Advisory Team 22, MACV, and was assisting the ARVN 42nd Regiment based there. At about 0530 hours on April 24, CPT Yonan was still in the water tower when the VC attacked the camp perimeter. Although tanks fired at and hit the water tower, two other advisors spoke to CPT Yonan after the firing and Yonan reported that he was not hit and planned to join the other advisors when it was safe to do so. Radio contact was maintained with Yonan until 0730 hours. The other U.S. advisors began E&E operations from the beleaguered compound.

Team 22 Advisors MAJ George W. Carter, MAJ Julius G. Warmath, and CPT John P. Keller, were extracted by helicopter. The aircraft was UH-1H #69-15715 from the 57th AHC, flown by LT James E. Hunsicker with WO Wade L. Ellen as the co-pilot and SP4 Charles M. Lea and SP5 Ricky V. Vogle as crewmen. Others extracted included 1LT Johnny M. Jones, 52nd CAB and SP4 Franklin Walter H. Ward, unit not specified. The helicopter departed to the northwest from Dak To, but was apparently hit by enemy fire and it crashed and burned about 500 meters from the end of the runway. Because of the rolling terrain, personnel at the airfield did not see the aircraft impact. A pilot flying over the wreckage reported that the helicopter was burning, but they could see no survivors. It was later discovered that five people did survive the crash - Warmath, Keller, Vogle, Ward and Lea. According to their statements, Hunsicker, Ellen, Zollicoffer, Jones and Carter were all dead.

At the end of April, massive B-52 strikes around Kontum began to have their effect on the NVA and the seige of the city ended in early May. But the NVA's foothold in the Central Highlands had been established and would not be lost. That summer, a portion of a cav unit that was standing down formed a third slick platoon with the Gladiators, making the 57th the largest AHC of its type in Vietnam.

1st Combat Aerial TOW Team

Scott Fenwick, VHPA member and former member of the 1st Combat Aerial TOW Team, contributed to the Marine Corps Command and Staff College work submitted by MAJ John C. Burns in 1994, as part of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Military Studies. The work is titled *XM-26 TOW: Birth of the Helicopter as a Tank Buster*. As you read this history you may wonder why the most advanced tank killing system was mounted on older UH-1B gunships, while the older and less effective SS-11 system was mounted on UH-1C models that were upgraded to UH-1M as soon as they arrived in country. The reason is that the Charlie model gunships from Ft. Bragg belonged to the US Government, while the UH-1B gunships deployed with the TOW system actually belonged to Hughes Corporation on bailment to the US Army. The 1st Combat Aerial TOW Team, Vietnam, was designated and deployed to Vietnam on 22 April 1972. The original team was engaged in combat until 20 June 1972. The name awarded the team by the 1st Aviation Brigade denoted its association with that unit as being the first time in the history of the US Army that a heliborne TOW system was employed in combat against an armored enemy. The equipment and personnel were consolidated at McChord Air Force Base, Washington and loaded onto two C-141 aircraft. The team departed 22 April 1972 and arrived at Tan Son Nhut AFB on 24 April 1972. At Tan Son Nhut, reassembly of the two aircraft and the complete installation of TOW systems were expedited. The advancing enemy armored thrusts were overwhelming the ARVN defense and the need for this new and as yet unproven in combat, precision anti-tank firepower was needed to assist in the defense.

On 26 April, the TOW team moved to Long Binh and was placed under the operational control of the 1st Aviation Brigade. The seriousness of the enemy armored threat in several crucial areas of the country was such that COMUSMACV considered immediate commitment of the team once the aircraft were operationally ready. However, in this mid-intensity environment training was recognized as the key to survivability. The period of 26-29 April was utilized to conduct gunner tracking training, continue system checkouts, and to install the armored seat modification. The entire team was considered combat ready on 29 April, and with UH-1 escorts they were flown to Pleiku for live fire training and operational employment with the 17th Avn Grp. From 30 April to 2 May, the TOW team conducted initial live fire training in the Pleiku area. The team had not fired a live TOW missile prior to their deployment to Vietnam. In order to gain a true appreciation for the operational successes of the TOW team, it is important to examine the area of operations, enemy and friendly situation in Military Region II, and the focus of the 17th Avn Grp prior to the April 1972 North Vietnamese Easter Offensive.

The arrival of the TOW team in MR-II and Pleiku was timely. The introduction of the two UH-1B aerial TOW helicopters considerably enhanced the armor defeating capability of the 17th Avn Grp that had been sorely lacking in the battles at Tan Canh and Dak To. This chapter

will look at the MACV decision to employ the aerial TOW team in the Central Highlands. It will include a resume of the tactical situation in MR-II, with particular emphasis on combat actions during the Battle of Kontum. Finally, this chapter will analyze the missions of the TOW team, from 2 May to 12 June, to determine the key findings relevant to the tactical employment of the XM-26 TOW weapons system.

The decision to employ the TOW team in MR-II was in part because the enemy's surface to air threat in MR-II was not as intense nor as accurate as in MR-I and MR-III. The NVA had already introduced the SA-7 Grail, as well as intense anti-aircraft fires, in the initial assault at Quang Tri and An Loc. The anti-aircraft environment in MR-II was such that the slow and relatively ungainly UH-1B aircraft would have a higher probability of survival because of terrain restrictions, and conservation of this extremely valuable and irreplaceable resource was essential. Third, the tactical situation in MR-II was critical.

On 2 May, the TOW team "Hawks Claw", with the XM-26 armament subsystem, was employed in combat for the first time. The team destroyed four M-41 tanks, a 2 1/2 ton truck and a 105mm howitzer. editor's note: There is some professional discussion regarding whether or not any M-41s were ever used in Vietnam. Most authorities believe these must have been M-48s. M-41s will be used herein because that is what our researcher believes to be true.

The equipment was all US equipment previously captured by the North Vietnamese when FSB Lima was abandoned on 1 May. The TOW missiles were fired from a range of 2700 meters and resulted in direct hits on the tanks and howitzer. Additionally, the TOW missiles created secondary explosions a few seconds after impact as a result of ammunition rounds inside the tanks and howitzer. Clearly, the TOW team made a very impressive showing during the initial day of employment in MR-II.

On 9 May, ARVN forces were wedged out of Polei Keng by an assault of tanks and infantry. LTG Dzu then directed that anything within the evacuated perimeter at Polei Keng to be taken under fire. Additionally, the NVA sent dogs into the perimeter wire at Ben Het Ranger Camp to detonate mechanical mines. The tactic was followed by a heavy ground attack at first-light supported by six PT-76 tanks. Two of the tanks, along with infantry, assaulted the main gate but were knocked out by rangers using M-72 Light Antitank Weapons (LAWs). Five PT-76s attacked the eastern perimeter; two were knocked out by LAWs. The three remaining PT-76s were destroyed by the TOW team from ranges of 2000-3000 meters with first-round hits resulting in secondary explosions. The remainder of the PT-76s retired after the NVA infantry had seized the eastern perimeter and the rangers spent the rest of the day ejecting the enemy from the perimeter. By 1700 hours the perimeter was restored. The attacking NVA forces lost 11 tanks and over 100 dead in an attempt to overrun Ben Het. Although the forces there continued to be harassed with probing attacks, no additional major enemy assaults were made.

Following is an account of action that resulted in the shootdown of a 361st "Pink Panther" Cobra. Forrest Snyder provides some background:

"The 361st AWC was at Camp Holloway in 1972. The unit had 12 Cobras and one Huey. During the offensive we were mostly aerial fire support for the entire world. We also did some work covering the H/10 and/or H/17th Cav little birds when the cav couldn't get sufficient guns up. Mr. John Paul Vann, the civilian in charge of all military operations in II Corps, decreed that the cav would fly so many hours a day which would result in flying them all into PE within two weeks.

"When the offensive hit, the 361st was very close to standing down - we had already had our final hail and farewell party and given everyone their going away gifts. As I recall, we had two vehicles left in the motor pool — the CO's jeep and a 3/4 ton used by the armament section to run rockets. Dennis Trigg and Lynn Carlson could set you straight on that. Dennis was supply officer and Lynn was armament officer.

"The cross border stuff was still limping along on 30 JUN when I got shot. We were coming back from taking a hook with underslung water buffalo and replacement crew into Leghorn.

"FOB moved from Kontum to Ban Me Thuot sometime between late April and early June. 1LT John Kinstrey, the launch officer, showed up

at the Panther Pits at Camp Holloway one evening about dark, having driven a jeep down the road from Kontum after everyone else had moved. He left the jeep with John DeBay, our maintenance officer, and continued on by air. The jeep, which was painted black, became John DeBay's vehicle for running parts.

"As I recall, the Easter Offensive in our AO started a bit later for us than elsewhere. We were getting shot at more, and were hearing news of tanks in the area. Even had a little bird shot down by a tank with a cannister round while we were covering the cav, but no real ground action until a couple of days before Tan Canh fell. We had A Teams on station all day the day before that didn't get back to Holloway until nearly 9 p.m. Lynn Carlson was hot to rearm, refuel and get back up there because "those people are in a world of hurt and we're the only support they've got." Not wanting to lose a bird and crew at night, the CO restrained him. We launched four Snakes before dawn the next morning and arrived on station just after first light.

On 9 May, Bill Reeder and Tim Conry were flying lead. WO1 Steve Allen, six feet tall and six inches wide with fluorescent red hair, AKA Flame, and CPT Bob Gamber were flying wing with Gamber in the front. They were first team up and got the mission to support Ben Het, which was under tank attack.

"I was part of the second team up (WO1 Jim Siegfried with yours truly in his front seat, and CPT Owen B. (Skip) McFarland and I think WO1 Sam Scott) standing by at Bikini Beach in Kontum. We were watching the arclights in the mountains east of town. We got word that a Snake had been shot down at Ben Het and with it a request to escort the B model TOW bird to Ben Het to look for tanks. No hesitation there — we took off because those were our guys. One of the cav — I forgot whether H-10 or H-17 — was already en route.

"We got most of the story over the radio en route. Here's how I was finally able to piece things together. Our guys were escorting a 57th Huey that had a resupply of LAWs. Bill took some hits and lost his engine. He called "Engine out!" and entered autorotation. Flame broke around and put a pair of nails down in the area Bill was going to land in, then took a .50 cal. in the chest. Bill landed and the aircraft burned. "Bob Gamber wrestled the controls away from Flame and set down on the road about five miles south of Ben Het, toward Dak To. The C&C bird came down, policed up Flame, and took off for the hospital in Pleiku. Bob Gamber got in the back seat of the Snake and recovered it solo to Pleiku. We met them about halfway there. The crew chief in the C&C kept Flame alive all the way back to the hospital where the surgeons removed one lung and stitched up his aorta. Flame was sitting up and doing breathing exercises the next day.

When we got to Ben Het with the TOW bird, Bill's ship was a pile of white ash with a tail boom. The US advisor at Ben Het reported seeing one of the helicopter crew get out and head for the tree line. No word on the other. The TOW bird scanned the helicopter and the tree lines with his scope and saw nothing. We did not get shot. The cav was ready to go in, recon, and recover but were prevented by Mr. Vann who was afraid of losing another aircraft. We were released to RTB to Pleiku and stand by. The cav was finally permitted to go in at dusk. They recovered Tim Conry from where he was right next to the aircraft. According to the loach driver, Charlie Elliott, who brought him back, he was alive when they picked him up. According to the reports we got from the hospital later, he was DOA and had been dead for several hours. Most of us in the unit are of the impression he could have been saved had Mr. Vann let the cav go in when they got there. Tim had been in country exactly 30 days. We heard nothing further about Bill until his name came out on the list nine months later. His plane out of North Vietnam landed the day after I checked out of Walter Reed. I made sure I was watching. Note: The following is the result of talking to Bill Reeder at the 1999 VHPA reunion at Nashville.

"On May 9th we were flying cover for everybody and started with tanks in the wire at Polei Krang. When it came time to rearm and refuel we recovered to Kontum. Next it was time to cover "Hawks Claw" the UH-1B TOW birds. They had been launched to attack PT 76s that were attacking Ben Het and they destroyed five. We went back to Kontum to rearm, refuel and to cover a 57th UH-1H on a resupply mission to Ben Het. The slick got the load in. We were flying at 200 feet when we were hit in the tail rotor and engine. The aircraft was spinning and on fire so I did not

have a lot of options after the aircraft was hit. We crashed upright with the aircraft on fire and the ammo cooking off. Both Tim Conry and I broke our backs in the crash. Tim had severe head injuries because of the sight in the front. He crawled out of the aircraft and passed out in a bomb crater. I crawled around looking for Tim, but could not find him. Based on my survival training, I knew it was important to get away from the aircraft and hide in the foliage. The night of the 9th, I watched as the OH-6 picked up Conry. Because of my injuries I just could not get out in the open quick enough. I E&E'd for three days. Bill's first tour began October 1968 flying Mohawks in the 131st SAC at Phu Bai. On March 1, 1969, he was shot down but managed to outrun the enemy soldiers and was rescued after one very long hour on the ground. His second tour began in December 1971.

"I managed to avoid capture for three days, but soon they heard me and five NVA soldiers surrounded me. My back was broken and I had one crushed vertebra. I shrank about one inch during my eleven months in captivity. The interrogator tied me to a tree and questioned me for three hours, slapping me around a little. However, even though the interrogating continued for three days, I refused to sign statements that I had dropped gases, firebombs, or germs.

"We hiked through the jungle for three days. I was forced to carry a rucksack full of uncooked rice. With my broken back and a wound in my ankle, this was very painful. We came to my first POW camp in Northern Cambodia. I was placed in a 12 x 40 by 4 1/2 foot cage of bamboo with 25 South Vietnamese prisoners. I was the only American. The prisoners were all piled up. They had a wooden stock through the center of the cage into which they put our feet at night and closed it.

"After two weeks I was moved to a cage with one other American (CPT Wayne Finch, B/7/17 Cav) and four Vietnamese. It was 5 1/2 by 10 feet. Shortly thereafter we began our walk to North Vietnam, 200 miles up and down mountains. En route, I got weaker and was separated from Finch. I was in poor condition and could walk no further. At the time I was with ARVN POWs captured from the 22d ARVN Div. One ARVN LTC took action concerning my plight. He had a gold Cross pen sewn into his pants. He traded the pen for six potatoes, cooked them, and gave them to me to regain my strength. I have never forgotten this man's kindness. He later was released and somehow got to America. Today he owns a liquor store in San Jose, CA.

"Unfortunately, Finch died of dysentery on SEP 6, 1972, while on the trail. As my strength returned I began my trek north again. My ankle became so infected even my knee was twice its size from the spreading infection. They told me they would have to amputate, but I asked that they try penicillin, even though I had previously been very allergic to it. For some reason the adverse reaction to the drug never occurred and by the time I reached Hanoi, the wound was almost healed."

Bill Reeder returned home in FEB 1973.

During the time of employment in MR-II, the 1st TOW team never received a single hit by enemy air defenses. The lack of enemy air defense influence on engagements by the airborne TOW can be attributed to the long standoff range and altitude maintained by the aerial TOW teams. Also, the TOW team developed very close operational procedures and teamwork with the dedicated UH-1 C&C aircraft from the Air Cavalry troops, the 57th AHC and the AH-1G gunship escorts from the 361st AWC employed on every mission. When the TOW team was employed in MR-II, the enemy air defense capabilities included .51 cal. machine guns and 23mm and 57mm anti-aircraft weapons. The NVA did not possess a heat seeking missile air defense capability during this period in MR-II. The enemy air defense fires were active and were primarily directed at air cavalry and Cobra helicopters, USAF tactical aircraft and forward area controllers that flew in close proximity to the targets. The TOW teams operated at an average altitude of 2500 feet. This was deemed appropriate in the absence of an enemy surface to air missile (SAM) air defense capability combined with the small arms ground fire threat at lower altitudes.

The airborne TOW concept proved to be highly adaptable to combat operations. Though installed in an overage UH-1B aircraft, the TOW stabilized optical tracking system proved to be simple in operation

and capable of achieving a very high percentage of first round hits. The airborne TOW demonstrated its capability to track easily and to destroy targets with surgical precision and with no collateral damage. As aircrews gained more expertise with the system, they were able to make multiple launches on the same target run if the first missile malfunctioned. When engaging multiple targets, the crews discovered it was also possible to engage the second target a few seconds after impact of the first missile. TOWs were also successfully employed during periods of marginal weather.

TOW FIRINGS

1st TOW Team - 2 May-12 June 1972 47 total kills: 24 Tanks (10 T-54, 6 PT-76, 8 M-41), 4 APCs, 2 Artillery Pieces (1 105mm, 1 unknown type), 7 Trucks (6 2-1/2 ton, 1 3/4 ton), 1 Anti-aircraft position (Twin 23mm), 2 Machinegun Positions (1 12.7mm, 1 30 cal), 1 Wooden bridge, 1 Hut with small arms ammunition, 1 small arms ammo dump at abandoned fire base, 1 122mm rocket launching position, and 3 Bunkers.

System Performance: Practice Firings, 21; Combat Firings, 85; total firings, 106. 7 Combat Missile Failures as follows: 3 Missile Failures (2 no IR source, 1 no fit motor); 1 System Failure (power supply cut off at firing); 3 Failures to capture missile (could have been system, missile or crew - unknown). Practice Missile Failures as follows: 11 Missed Target, 3 Known Misses (Gunner Tracking Error), 8 Out of Range (2 of these at night) with 85 total target hits.

Cross Border Operations

While many thought the cross border operations supporting missions in Laos ended in 1971, once again, some authors failed to check with army aviators. This is Forrest Snyder's account of how he was wounded on 30 June 1972:

"We were returning from a hook escort to Leghorn (an operating base in Laos), light on fuel but with full ordnance. Dropped down low-level about five north of Pleiku air base — 130 kts, skids in the trees — and called "Pleiku, Panther 023 is two cold Snakes five north for crossing your western extended, low level, landing Holloway."

"All of a sudden, there's this nasty little "pop!" and a new hole in the VHF radio where there shouldn't be a hole. Before I could punch the floor mike and say "Taking hits!", there was a gentle zapping sound and my left foot jumps and goes numb. So I grabbed the controls and announced, "I'm hit!"

"No answer. Check guages — engine is still running. Check caution panel — lit up like the proverbial Christmas tree. Reset master caution light. Announce loudly, "I said I'm hit." and get the one answer I really don't want to hear: "Yeah, well, I am, too."

"Not knowing what else to say, I responded with "Roger. I have the controls", and received an encouraging answer, "No. I can still fly. Where'd they get you?" Check damages. At least three holes, but no spurting blood. "Left foot, leg and hand." Response: "Great. They got me in the right foot."

"Back seater was Jim Siegfried, aka Ziggy, who used to drive people crazy practicing his Mayday call on intercom. He made the call and then asked me to fly while he talked on the radio. I took the controls. Zig told a slick we were going to land at Artillery Hill. I set us up on a left base for Arty Hill, clicking the force trim to allow me to apply left pedal by releasing right. Zig asked for the controls for landing. I said, "Not even all the way", and followed him through. I'm too close to let him crash me. Turned final, saw no room on the runway. It's clogged with CH-47s. Continue turn to final for 180 and land in a vacant lot across the road at Pleiku LSA.

"Ziggy shuts down without a two minute cool-off. I look and see two crew chiefs that could play line for the Packers. "OK," they say, "Where you hit? We're going to get you out." At this point, I imagine them dragging my sore leg over the side of the bird and then dropping me on my head, so I opt to exit under my own power and let them support me as I hit the ground. Zig, braver than me, lets them pull him out and doesn't get dropped.

"Anyhow, I end up on the floor of a slick that had neither seats nor doors, and I was sliding inexorably toward the left doorway during the phenomenally out-of-trim left turn that sets us up for landing at the eva

hospital in Pleiku. It is actually possible to hold onto the cargo tie down rings of a Huey with your fingertips! I am in the hospital within 15 minutes of being hit.

"The maintenance officer was pissed because we got 26 holes in an aircraft that had 109 total hours on it. The crew chief was pissed because I bled all over his nice new aircraft."

Third Regional Assistance Command (TRAC)

The Battle of Loc Ninh

by Ron Timberlake

Mike Sloniker note: Ron Timberlake started his work with the incidents on 5 APR 1972. During the 1999 reunion at Nashville I learned the first 229th KIAs were JJ Jelich and his gunner Owens from the Smiling Tigers of D/229 whose OH-6 was shot down NW of Loc Ninh on the Cambodian border. Timberlake's work follows.

As the hunter/killer teams prepared to laager at Tay Ninh East on the morning of 5 April, they monitored a dramatic radio transmission: "Attention all aircraft, this is Paris, on Guard. Loc Ninh is under tank and heavy infantry attack. I say again, Loc Ninh is under tank and heavy infantry attack. Any aircraft with armament, please respond."

F Troop, 9th Cavalry responded immediately with six Cobras and their three scouts. A C&C Huey and three slicks full of Browns followed. F/79th ARA, Blue Max, always quickly aware of contact missions, would fly the longer distance from their base and arrive on station by lunch time.

The hunter/killer teams that morning, some of whom were veterans of Lam Son 719, had more than 6,000 combat hours amongst the six of them. Even with that base of experience, the fighting they encountered at Loc Ninh was more intense than anything they had encountered. Hundreds of uniformed soldiers were visible around the outside of the perimeter. To the north were burned out APCs and explosions were going off all around the compound of Loc Ninh.

The callsign of the American on the ground who seemed to be holding it all together was Zippo. He coordinated attacks and he relayed information. Although we knew he was an advisor who could not order the Vietnamese soldiers, he seemed to be the cement holding together the defense. Most of us did not even learn his name until 1998, when several general officers started an effort to have Mark Smith awarded the Medal of Honor.

The morning was extremely confusing. CW2 Tom Jones and CPT Don Gooch were asked to engage a huge formation of uniformed soldiers that seemed to be ignoring all of us, and each Cobra ripple-fired its entire load of rockets into the group. Body count and kill claims were ignored by the troop during the heavy fighting. Supporting the defense was all that mattered.

Most amazing to any of the pilots was the volume of anti-aircraft fire. Aside from what was later reported to be nine battalions of NVA anti-aircraft, the NVA soldiers had already captured large numbers of US-made Browning .50 cal. heavies from the APCs of the South Vietnamese (ARVN) 1st Armored Cav Regiment. Literally hundreds of heavies and AAA weapons reached up for any Cobra that attacked.

Zippo asked for a tank to be destroyed on the road just north of the town and compound, where the road ran past the rubber plantation. The F/9th hunter/killer team on station advised him that the tank was sitting across the road and appeared to be too obvious to be an NVA tank, and the profile did not seem right. It appeared that it was either an ARVN tank or an intentional trap. Could it be an ARVN tank?

When Zippo said that the tank had killed ARVN APCs and was blocking his people from joining up from the north, the Team Leader admitted to himself that he was poorly trained at armored vehicle identification, and dove for the tank. Even from much closer it appeared that it might be an M-48, but the commander joined hundreds of his friends in shooting at the approaching Cobra before the 17 pound HE warheads actually destroyed the vehicle. There was no joyful feeling at destroying the tank, because the Cobra was very low and the volume of heavy weapons fire was absolutely terrifying.

A FAC on station had wasted no time targeting freshly arrived fighters, and he rolled a flight of Phantoms in what appeared to be a move to help the Cobra escape. As the Cobra flew north from the burning tank,

an F-4 pickled its entire load of bombs on an east-west line across its path, with the bombs going directly over the Cobra and impacting into the rubber west of the road. The silence after that tremendous blast of explosives allowed the Cobra pilot to start breathing again.

Not far from where the road turned back west, the Cobra pilot saw five APCs tail to tail in a star shaped defensive formation down in the rubber trees. They were not only destroyed, they were completely burned out. Some even appeared to have had fires so hot that their aluminum armor melted. The desperation of their stand left a lasting impression. The ARVN cavalry had faced and fought overwhelming odds. These and many others had died before the American Air Cavalry troopers were even told about the battle.

MAJ Thomas A. Davidson, an ARVN advisor who received a DSC for his actions at Loc Ninh, later told of his relief at having that particular tank destroyed. Years later Mark Smith solved this mystery of armored vehicle identification, explaining why the tank looked like it was an M-48, and why the 17 pounders destroyed it so effectively.

The tank had been a PT-76, but unlike most of the published photos of this Soviet vehicle, the ones that morning at Loc Ninh were mounting 12.7mm heavy machineguns on the turret for the commander, changing their appearance significantly for untrained armor observers.

Later that afternoon Blue Max lost the first Cobra and crew of the battle. On a rocket run at almost 4,000 feet just south of the town of Loc Ninh, CW2 Charles Windeler and CPT Henry Spengler were hit. Told by his wingman that he was on fire, Windeler tried to make it to the ground, despite the number of enemy soldiers in the area. It appeared that his controls burned through at about 1,500 feet, and the helicopter impacted on cleared ground on the side of a slight rise. A Cobra from F/9th confirmed that the two pilots did not survive the crash. The entire cockpit area was a crater.

The second morning, 6 April, was just as confusing and perhaps even more frightening for the aircrews. It was uncertain whether the troop would laager from a camp at Song Be or from the former American 1st Infantry base at Lai Khe. Lai Khe was still active as an ARVN headquarters for the 5th ARVN Div. The first sortie was flown by a team directly to Loc Ninh. Between Lai Khe and An Loc, the leader noticed that a rocket with 17 pound HE warhead was working its way forward out of an inboard rocket tube. Aside from the fact that he wanted all his rockets, this one had worked itself into a position that would make it dangerous to shoot any rockets from that pod and any intense flight maneuver might allow the rocket to work itself free and cause main rotor or tail rotor damage. Demonstrating a perfect ignorance of the enemy's ultimate intentions, he decided to land in a safe area to re-seat the rocket. There was a provincial capitol along the line of flight, a place where on his first tour he and his crew had not been allowed to eat because they were too dirty after flying missions for the senior advisor all day. He landed at that sleepy and safe little town of An Loc, corrected the problem by re-seating the rocket, and continued northward.

Like most of his fellow team leaders, he was unaware of the magnitude of the battles in other areas of Vietnam, so he did not see the battle at Loc Ninh as a serious push to take the country. All the pilots were extremely impressed with the size and ferocity of the forces attacking, but they assumed that when the NVA took a pounding and suffered enough losses at Loc Ninh, they would pull back across the Cambodian border as they had always done in the past. From the first day of the battle, it was obvious that enemy losses would be in record numbers. No information had been given to the teams about ARVN losses.

The anti-aircraft fire was even heavier and more organized than the day before. During that day COL John Casey, Deputy Commander of the 3rd Brigade (Separate), 1st Cavalry Division, called an F/9th Cobra to engage without collateral damage a 57mm anti-aircraft gun in the town square in Loc Ninh. The 57mm had been firing at jet fighters. With about 60% cloud cover, the Cobra engaged the 57mm cannon from a steep dive, but the pilot was so distracted by ground fire that he unintentionally selected the less accurate outboard wing stores instead of the well bore-sighted inboard stores. Normal F/9th load was HE inboard and flechettes outboard, so outboard pods did not get the attention of the ones "shot for record" every day. Although the 57mm cannon was silenced, a nearby building was also damaged, so permission to engage was withdrawn. The pilot felt bad about the collateral damage and felt

terrible about selecting the wrong stores, but he was surely relieved not to have to dive back into that boiling cauldron again.

While the cloud cover worked both for and against the helicopters, it worked more against than for the tac air support. About 50-60% cloud cover gave a feeling of occasional concealment to the helicopters flying above it, as most of them moved to ever higher and safer altitudes. The helicopter pilots also learned that an F-4 climbing from a bomb run and popping up through the clouds looks just like a large surface to air missile. And even when it is not coming directly at you, it certainly appears to be.

That afternoon an F/9th Cobra destroyed a heavy machinegun set up as an anti-aircraft weapon in the drained swimming pool of the Frenchman's villa on the west side of the airfield at Quan Loi. F/9th also shot for the ARVN units under attack at Quan Loi, and were asked to engage a force of at least 80 personnel in the open on the runway near the Frenchman's villa. Because they smiled and waved and refused to shoot at the helicopters, all members of the team, Scout and Cobras were convinced these Vietnamese, armed with both AK-47s and M-16s, were ARVN. At first everyone, especially the FAC who first spotted them, was happy the team did not engage, but when the team left to rearm, the same men started shooting at the ARVN. Later, to keep the ammunition from being captured, a Cobra from F/9th expended his remaining rockets into the ammo dump on the north side of the runway. At the request of the ground personnel, the beckoning target of the POL point at the southwest side of the runway was left intact.

Plans were made to insert H/75th Rangers into Loc Ninh, but those who had been on station knew that no single company of soldiers of any caliber or capability could stem the NVA attack at that point.

Air strikes that were not available for the Air Cavalry Troops to attack the NVA while concentrated inside their Cambodian sanctuaries were allocated to stop the multi-division communist attack, but few of the strikes were allowed to be put in on actual targets developed by the hunter/killer teams. Air strikes were most often allocated by staff personnel safely bunkered at Long Binh and Bien Hoa, both almost a hundred miles from the battle. Fortunately, FACs on station would often divert their flights from the staff-selected targets to enemy positions actually being engaged by the men in the battle.

On the third day of the battle, Loc Ninh fell. CPT Mike Brown was near by in his Blue Max Cobra the afternoon of April 7th, and recalls the last radio transmissions from the defenders. Hauntingly, there was a baby crying in the background as the NVA captured the command bunker. It was assumed that Zippo was killed after his heroic stand. F/9th Scout Richard Dey had tried to pick up Zippo earlier that day, but the man we would learn years later was CPT Mark Smith refused to leave his post.

It was years before most of us learned that Zippo had survived his 27 or more wounds and his captivity. He recently gave an excellent insight into what that battle actually cost the communists, and what American advisors and American air power actually faced in that battle. In October of 1998, Mark Smith thanked some of those who participated in the effort to have his heroism recognized, and he explained events many of us had witnessed. Parts of his letter follow: "Those of you in the air had a very good view of the battle. That is probably why your statements are much more in line with the things that George and I have always said about certain events.

"There were some hard feelings about my demand that pilots and aircraft not be brought in for a rescue, unless there was a reasonable chance they would survive. That was my call and I don't regret it for a moment. I still don't know how Dey survived on either occasion he came in on 7 April.

"For Ron Timberlake, I would like to put your mind at ease on the vehicle. After reading your statement I realized that you were referring to the tank left on the road after the cavalry had been ambushed. Originally there had been five, but the remainder, one PT-76 and three T-54s were marshaling surrendering to 1st Cavalry (Note: 1st ARVN Cavalry) vehicles to the west. The reason you initially mistook that tank for an M-48 was that it was, in fact, a PT-76. What was unusual about the PT-76s at Loc Ninh is that they had been mounted with a

12.7 on the turret. This gave them a similar 'look down' profile to the M-48. I know you attacked Soviet armor that day and not ARVN.

"There was another mistake about armor made on 7 April. Gentlemen, those APCs that got inside Loc Ninh were not manned by ARVN. They were 1st Cavalry APCs, but were loaded with NVA. I didn't know that until they lowered the ramp and tried to run out and I saw them. They all died. Strangely, I believe the driver of at least one was an ARVN, because after he lowered the ramp, he swung the APC out of the gate and went full bore down the airfield and did a right over the hill and made for Highway 13, toward An Loc. I'm sure he had agreed to take the guys with guns into the compound, but as soon as they were gone, he headed for home and not back to get some more NVA.

"There has been some discussion about who the NVA were at Loc Ninh. I can assure you that you fought elements of three Divisions and not only the 5th NVA Division. I was captured by the 272nd Regiment, 9th Division at their blocking position south of Loc Ninh. They had POWs from the 3rd Battalion (all wounded) 9th ARVN Regiment, that had been captured on the first hill mass south of Loc Ninh. This told me they had been there since the 4th, in the evening. General Tra and the Division Commander were also there. This should tell all of you that you fought a lot more folks and killed a lot more than you thought you did at Loc Ninh. We also had POWs from the 9th Division, early on the first day.

"Sometimes I wish the NVA were more like a lot of 'Vietnam Veterans' I run into who also claim to have been on the ground in that battle. 'Just down the road from you.' Yeah right. The NVA are more hesitant about revealing how much time and men they expended at Loc Ninh. But, I met General Tra in Vietnam a few years before he died. When I said he had lost about seven thousand at Loc Ninh, he said, "More than that."

"Larry (McKay) (commander of F/79 ARA, Blue Max), I was particularly happy to hear your description of the tanks rolling into An Loc. The first tanks that came at Loc Ninh and the last ones always opened their hatch covers and the commanders stood in the turret and glared at you as they came in. If you shot the commander they left. If you shot the driver they stopped. It became evident that cross training was not a strong suit of the NVA tank corps. Why the tanks seemed to wish to operate alone and only came unescorted, I do not know. Why they only supported the infantry from the woodline, I can't figure out, either.

"I was especially touched by your remembering the baby crying in our bunker Michael (Brown). As a matter of fact, Ken and Ed had civilians, dependents of the soldiers, in the underground complex with them also. One thing I did notice about the NVA, they did not take vengeance that I could see, on the women and children. They did use the kids from the school as shields, but I believe those were political types with the Sapper Battalion. I brought this up with General Tra in no uncertain terms and he queried all the others present about who was responsible. I don't think that was a show.

As to the reason Loc Ninh fell, Smith wrote, "We just ran out of soldiers and in many parts of the perimeter where soldiers remained, ammunition was depleted. As my little band left the perimeter we rearmed and reloaded off the dead NVA in the wire and on the bunker line. What the Air Force, Navy, Marines and VNAF did with the limited number of fixed wing aircraft available was a great feat of arms and should not be diminished with talk of 'gaps in air power.' What helicopter pilots did in a high threat environment was a miracle. There was every reason not to fly, but fly you good men did."

He concludes his comments about the fighting: "Each of you, from the generals on down, participated in great battles in 1972. Few men now living, ever saw such raw power and shear numbers in such a small area."

A valiant attempt was made to pick up the surviving American advisors late the afternoon of 7 April. Although referred to in some accounts as "Bay Rum," the official duty log called it "Bay run." It was essentially a test of non-lethal chemical agent to attempt to lessen enemy fire.

After delays for tactical and logistical reasons, USAF fighters delivered an incapacitating riot gas on the NVA positions. 1LT Richard Dey, scout for CW2 Tom Jones' F/9th hunter/killer team, flew into the compound to pick up the advisors. The gas did not work as advertised, and to quote the brigade's official duty log, "LOH F/9 checking Loc Ninh LZ. Took

heavy .51 cal. fire from E, W, SW, NE. LOH seriously shot up, going to Song Be."

The true number of NVA casualties will never be known, but more than 7,000 communist soldiers were killed in a savage three-day battle. To the men observing and helping to create that carnage it seemed certain that the NVA forces would soon fold from the losses but on they came, to lay siege to the pretty, sleepy little provincial capitol of An Loc.

In front of the main force of NVA in their drive toward An Loc were survivors from Loc Ninh, trying to evade or fight their way to An Loc. On a small hill by the highway about midway between Loc Ninh and An Loc, was an ARVN FSB that Smith mentioned in his letter.

Early in the morning of April 8th, a pink team Leader from F/9th noticed that all of the M101 series 105mm howitzers on the firebase on the little hill were pointed south instead of north. Characteristically, the teams had not even been informed that the base had been taken by the NVA, but he radioed An Loc, and they confirmed they were under artillery fire from the north. The Cobra expended on the firebase and the pilot, not anywhere near the top of his class at the Field Artillery Officers Basic Course the year before, actually recognized an equalizer soar past him from one of his hits.

About halfway between that outpost and Loc Ninh, an evading group of ARVN soldiers and their US advisors trying to regroup at An Loc were pinned down near the intersection of a dirt road going west into the rubber plantations. NVA forces, already sent to recon and isolate the defenses of An Loc, formed the anvil for the huge NVA hammer to the north.

The plan to extract the advisors was a complex multi-service exercise. Hunter/killer teams had offered to have their scouts pick up the advisors or they could expend rockets on the way in and let the advisors ride the rocket pods out, but apparently Air Force logistics had caught up with the riot agent that might help to reduce possible casualties on the extraction.

An old term denoting conspicuous valor is to be "mentioned in the dispatches," and John Whitehead certainly was mentioned. The task force daily journal mentions few individuals by name, and then only for particular reasons. Brigadier General Hamlet's succinct orders designating who would rescue whom, followed by reports from the 3rd Brigade (Separate) Deputy Commander, COL John Casey, were logged on 8 April:

0830 hours - CG: S-3 will rescue personnel from Nui Ba Dinh. DCO-A, D/229, 75th Rangers will rescue Cornish 67 from Cat Lo Bridge. CO 1/21, F/9 Cav will move 2,000 ARVN from Bu Dop to Song Be.

This 0830 log entry is as poignant as it is significant. In the real world, unlike in the movies, soldiers and missions within like units are normally either somewhat or completely interchangeable, and there is not a case of "There's only one man who could pull this off."

The commanding general assessed the major missions for his brigade that morning, and without any of the dramatics one learns to expect from the less informed, he designated which missions would be performed by which units and leaders. Once the missions were tasked to the particular units, it became the luck of the draw as to which particular pilots had already been assigned to be flying that day, and who would be assigned in what order. No planning the night before, no preparing the roster for a special mission. The missions were assigned to the units, and they were carried out with the personnel and equipment on hand.

So it was that John Whitehead's unit was tasked to rescue advisors. Had that mission fallen to the other cavalry troop, it would probably have been their scout platoon Leader, Joe Harris, who would have attempted the rescue. Would he or anyone else have succeeded as well as John Whitehead, or would he have died near the Cat Lo bridge instead of in the rubber plantation near Bu Dop?

The die was cast as the assignments were divided and the progress of the missions was logged:

1045 hours - DCO-A: Bay run on ground at Cat Lo Bridge, putting CBU around advisors position checking with LOH after CBU.

1055 hours - DCO-A: LOH received ground to air fire vicinity of XT 7297, unknown damage. AH-1G also hit from D/229.

1110 hours - DCO-A: 3 advisors at Cat Lo Bridge rescued by D/229 and 75th Rangers. Critically wounded update to follow.

1215 hours - DCO-A: LOH used for extraction at Cat Lo took 4 hits small arms and .51 cal. Carried 3 U.S., 4 ARVN, pilot and gunner total 9 people. Pilot CPT Whitehead, gunner SGT Waite.

Nine people on an OH-6A that had been hit by automatic weapons fire. Nine men on a LOH, with the blood flowing in the airstream.

John Whitehead, Dave Ripley, and Ray Waite-D/229, 8 April 1972

9 people in one OH-6A.

USAF A-37s made passes low over the rubber trees to the west, dispensing a chemical agent said to be similar to CS tear gas, but also causing a temporary burning sensation and nausea. John Whitehead, a scout in Delta Troop, 229th, may have broken the world record for the number of passengers carried by an OH-6A when, under heavy fire, he rescued the advisors. Desperate ARVN seized the opportunity by mobbing his helicopter. Here are the details: At Lai Khe that morning, Whitehead, Smiling Tiger 16, had been briefed to lead a second empty D/229 OH-6, flown by the 1LT Dave Ripley, on a rescue attempt. Ripley would be the sole person in his OH-6, Whitehead would have Waite.

Responding to a call for help from three American advisors evading south from Loc Ninh to An Loc, CPT Whitehead landed under withering enemy fire only to have his aircraft swamped by desperate ARVN soldiers seeking to escape the surrounded town of Loc Ninh. CPT Bill Leach, Blue Max 26 from F/79 AFA remembers thinking the little bird was lost in a cloud of dust and intense ground fire. However, with 9 people inside or clinging to the aircraft and enemy fire increasing, Whitehead skipped, bounced and forced the OH-6 into the air.

Whitehead had one panicking ARVN across his arms, the left front seat was empty. Today if you ask John who was in the left side, he will say God. On the floor of the aircraft in the rear was an American E-8, who had 3 ARVN stacked on top of him. On the left side was an American captain, barely inside the rear compartment. On the right side, Ray Waite was held into the aircraft by a monkey strap and he was holding an American O-5 who was sort of on the skids.

The aircraft was way out of the CG limits and would not fly level. Once clear of the fire, Whitehead landed the aircraft at Chon Thanh, and the 7 pax, 3 US advisors and 4 ARVN were placed on larger aircraft and evacuated. The mission was flown with M-24 gas masks because a preceding B-52 strike had mixed CS with HE, and the gas was floating over the PZ. Nobody's mask fit and it was the first time any of the majority of the pilots and crews had ever put the protective gear on.

Whitehead, nominated for the Medal of Honor by BG James F. Hamlet, 3d BDE CDR, received the Distinguished Service Cross. Ray Waite also received the DSC.

Dave Ripley recalls: "The Battle of Loc Ninh was recounted in the VHPA files by the late Ron Timberlake. I just have to believe where "the cobra pilot" is referred to, it is Ron. He and I had many discussions via the phone and email on the sequence of events, which he also bounced off Mike Brown, who lived near him in Houston. I will always admire the clear writing style of Ron Timberlake. Happy Trails.

"John Whitehead was my platoon leader and was indeed the lead ship in this action. He was flying with SGT Waite, who was to assist with loading the three advisors on board. When he landed, his ship was swamped by people. I was in the second Loach, and when I put down the same thing happened to me, except I had the advantage of being second in, so I had stopped at a hover. One guy in particular, I remember vividly. He jumped in the front and tried to pull himself in by the cyclic. I started to go left and down toward a tree line full of the entire NVA Army as if in a low level left hand turn. All of a sudden he went stiff, blood splattered across the left seat and chin bubble, and he fell backwards out of the Loach. John was just struggling to get in the air. I had three guys on board and several standing/hanging on the skid base. There were guys hanging all over John's loach and I didn't think he was coming up, but he did. Right as we took off, a pretty wicked burst got him, and most of the hangers-on got shot and fell back to the road. I think that the MSG (US advisor) was wounded in this particular burst. I remember thinking that I was flying right into it, but for some reason it missed the front of my ship and hit the tail boom and vertical stabilizer several times.

"John performed an amazing act of heroism while flying his ship, maintaining control under really bad loading, being shot up really badly, but still keeping his cool. He and SGT Waite were awarded the DSC, and in my opinion it was as fine a display of courage and coolness under fire as could be recalled.

"A crystal clear image remains as John and I put down on the first air strip that we could find where we wouldn't take fire (Chon Tonh, I think). By the time I put down, people were coming over to get the troops off of his bird. At that time we really thought that we had failed to get the three US advisors off the ground, and I think that John and I really were starting to see if our ships were shot up and whether we were going to make another trip. I started over to him and a Vietnamese soldier ran up to John, fell on his knees, and kept bowing down in a sign of thanks.

"Incredibly, John was embarrassed. Just another day in the life of a scout pilot. Both OH6s were pretty shot up." Dave Ripley received the Silver Star for his action.

In 1998, an unsuccessful effort was made to have John Whitehead's award upgraded to a well-deserved Medal of Honor. As the deputy brigadier commander remarked on the day it happened, if John Whitehead had landed within sight of journalists, he would have been assured the Medal of Honor.

On April 8th, F/9th planned to laager at Lai Khe, but when the CG tasked them to evacuate 2,000 ARVN from the imperiled Special Forces camp of Bu Dop, the teams flew to work out of the small firebase in the red clay of Song Be. The level of opposition would have been considered heavy at any previous time, but after the astounding ground fire of the past three days, it seemed almost restful there.

That afternoon a hunter/killer team went to help the CH-47 unit which was engaged in the evacuation of the Special Forces camp across the river to the northwest of Song Be.

The Chinooks reported taking fire from the east and slightly south of the camp and the pink team quickly located the source of fire, then scouted and identified a clear path for the heavily loaded cargo helicopters. The annoying fire was originating from a rubber plantation on rolling terrain, and the relieving team was advised of its location and briefed on the route selected for the Chinooks. The enemy location, and indeed Bu Dop itself, was far out of range of supporting artillery and neither tactical air nor ARA support were readily available. With no way to prosecute the enemy force, and especially since it was already late in the afternoon, it was judged best to continue to screen as cavalry instead of try to develop an unproductive and unsupported contact with a force of unknown size.

By the time the original hunter/killer team re-armed at Song Be, the relieving scout was reported down in the rubber. The team scrambled back to where the Cobra flown by CPT Don Gooch had experienced a complete failure of his armament systems and CW2 Tom Jones had lost all radio communications. With no radios, Jones remained on station and fired whenever he identified a target.

COL John Casey, called The Silver Fox by his troops, arrived overhead, assessed the situation and made assets available. Blue Max was now enroute to the crash site but had not yet arrived. The Cav pilots were unaware of what an eventful day COL Casey had already experienced. CPT Larry Corn, a lift pilot with F/9th, hovered at the tops of the rubber trees as his load of eight Browns rappelled into the crash site. The original hunter/killer team leader put his scout at altitude, and with Louis K. Breuer flying wingman, covered the insertion at treetop level. They kept the NVA from rushing the crash site and drew the fire that would otherwise have been directed at the hovering Huey.

Once again the Browns proved their value. Though under almost constant fire, they comforted the slightly wounded gunner, SP4 Neidel, and recovered the body of the pilot, CPT Joseph Harris. A short time later a Blue Max fire team from F/79th and a medevac helicopter arrived. The pink team escorted the medevac in to use its jungle penetrator to extract the scout crew. CPT Harris' body was to be transported to a morgue facility, but the aircraft needed fuel, so Neidel was taken to where the Troop was now located at Song Be.

Recovery of the Browns presented a dilemma for the crews on station. With the recovery of the aircrew, some considered the mission to be

over. The eight soldiers on the ground faced an enemy force far too strong to be assaulted or repulsed without reinforcements, and they could not move to the closest available landing zone about a kilometer to their northeast. The sun was low on the horizon, and they would lose the light within the hour.

Eight soldiers would die if they could not be extracted quickly. The men flying in support of them did not know even their nationality for certain and it was possible that at least some of the soldiers had fought against them at some point in the war. But on 8 April, those eight soldiers were US Cavalry and were fighting for their lives in a rubber plantation many miles from any other support because they had rescued a scout crew.

F Troop's Blues had been brought forward to Song Be, and were assembling rockets and supporting the fastest possible turnarounds of the Cobras. As the pink team leader rearmed and refueled, the medevac helicopter dropped off SP4 Neidel, and the two captains talked briefly at POL. The medevac helicopter cut short its refueling and took off to the northwest. CPT Harris was left at POL for a while, watched over by the Blues. Minutes later, with darkness fast approaching, the two Cobras of the heavy pink team arrived back at the crash site to monitor a radio discussion about leaving the Browns.

Resuming the Air Mission Commander role at the direction of The Silver Fox, the pink team leader radioed that he needed medical evacuation of eight wounded from the crash site. Surprisingly for all but two of the crews, the medevac pilot radioed that he was on short final to pick up eight wounded. With the pink team circling him at treetop level while under fire the entire time, the medevac helicopter hovered over the rubber trees, raising and lowering his jungle penetrator repeatedly.

At one point he lost power for some unexplained reason, and began to settle into the treetops. He recovered and continued the extraction of the wounded Browns. With the Browns extracted after their courageous rescue, the LOH was destroyed by the pink team's rockets, and the team went back to Song Be to inspect for damage.

The evacuation of Bu Dop had continued during the recovery. Sent to evacuate 2,000 ARVN, the effort resulted in the removal of 1,500 ARVN, 2,000 civilians, six 105mm howitzers, and two 155mm howitzers. Assets were available to lift out all the ARVN, but many chose to stay behind, either to be with their families and about 500 Montagnards, or to let their families move to a safer location instead of themselves.

The lead F/9th Cobra had taken hits during each sortie, with one round hitting the frame beneath the pilot's feet with such impact that his foot was knocked from the pedals and he thought for an instant that he had been hit himself. Another hit on the left side of the aircraft directly below the pilot made a huge hole. Inspection revealed that it was only a 7.62mm round that had been fired from directly below and almost missed, but tore along the aircraft skin upward to form a fist-sized elongated hole. Although hits in the rotor blades would require their replacement, it was deemed safe for a one-time flight home. The troop flew from Song Be to Bien Hoa in the darkness.

This interesting action would be covered in the official duty logs by two entries:

1605 hours - ARTY LNO: F/9 LOH down at XV 971290 cause unk GAF (ground to air fire) in area; Pilot trapped in A/C, gunner wounded and trying to get pilot out DCO-A enroute with gunships.

1645 hours - DCO-A: Pilot of F/9 LOH KIA, going in W/Medevac now complete at 1700.

The DCO-A was Colonel John Casey, and the 1605 entry is an excellent demonstration of the artillery chain of communications, which was reporting as F/79th was responding.

Only years later did the hunter/killer team leader realize that in three days of flying, his flight times were 10.8, 10.7, and 12.1, for 33.6 hours of the most hotly contested fighting he had seen in 2,000 hours of combat flying. And the main battle had not yet started.

An Loc

On 9 April, F/9th fielded five Cobras, which were launched from Lai Khe without scouts for the first and only mass attack by the air cavalry troop. These aircraft commanders were accustomed to operating on their own, usually without any support at all, and being extremely judicious in placing their rockets. A strike as a flight of five was a unique and exciting

opportunity. When the coordinates were decoded and the map was checked, the leader asked the other aircraft to check to make certain. Hand signals indicated surprise at the target, and the leader asked the liaison officer to re-shack the grid. The second set of alphanumerics decoded indicated the same target. The flight flew on.

As they approached the target over 70% cloud cover, the leader called Operations Forward, and asked for the grid in the clear, and to confirm that the target was the village just southwest of An Loc, inside the rubber plantation. None of these men had ever fired into a village except for the engagement of the 57mm at Loc Ninh, and they could not believe the order.

Liaison confirmed that the village was the target. The civilians had been run out, and had reported that the village now housed an NVA regimental headquarters. Lead intended to check the village from low level before firing, but began receiving fire as he broke through the cloud base. He and the other four Cobras engaged as a heavy team, with all but lead staying above the clouds.

Because of the volume of fire, the lead Cobra stayed low level on his engagement, as the others shot through openings in the clouds to allow themselves more protection from the AAA. Fireballs rose from secondary explosions from many of the village buildings, as anti-aircraft positions fired ineffectively into the clouds.

The cloud cover made the AAA much less effective than at other heavily defended areas. From high above the clouds, the Cobras selected targets between small gaps in the clouds. They used steep diving attacks and made their breaks while still above the cloud cover whenever possible. This allowed them to engage without any weapons other than those directly around the intended target being able to see them.

CW2 Stew Scannel had a Cobra with an inoperative turret, which was the only aircraft in the troop in a heavy hog configuration. On this golden opportunity his rockets would not fire, but he stayed on station to make dry covering runs, and to function as the self-appointed unit cheerleader.

Completely expended against such a rare and lucrative target, the flight headed back to Lai Khe with the lead Cobra still at treetop level. Before he was far enough away from their target to safely begin a zoom climb to altitude, he came across a UH-1H on the ground, and turned back to see if the crew needed rescue. It was a VNAF helicopter that had been abandoned intact, and NVA were shooting at him from all around the area. Without armament remaining, he reported the situation so that other assets could check it. A Blue Max fire team from F/79th soon checked the ship, with the same reception.

The next day F/9th was sent once more to verify the position of the VNAF helicopter, and were engaged by AAA that had been dug in around the point of interest.

The rate and speed of redeployment of the USAF was nothing less than remarkable. The distinctive whine of F-4s lowering their landing gear in the pattern at Bien Hoa was soon heard again, as airpower expanded sharply. The eerie whine of the immensely capable Phantoms was a comforting sound to men who had grown accustomed to support by the lightly armed counter-insurgency aircraft.

From the levels of only two months before, compare the Order of Battle of USAF strike aircraft on 30 MAY 72:

Bien Hoa - 20 A-37 (3 were lost), 2 A-1, 5 AC-119; Danang - 60 F-4, 5 AC-119, 2 A-1; Korat - 34 F-4, 31 F-105; NKP - 4 AC-119, 16 A-1, 4 F-4; Ubon - 92 F-4, 14 AC-130; Udorn - 86 F-4; U-Tapao - 54 B-52; Guam - 117 B-52; Takhli - 72 F-4.

On 11 April - the Brigade S-3 Journal of the 1st Cavalry recorded some rather remarkable reports. Consider this entry:

0900 hours - TRAC: D/229 tasked to go to Tay Ninh west and work for 25th ARVN w/mission to find 271st NVA Regiment and 24th NVA Regiment. Mission complete at 0930.

Modestly and succinctly reported, this entry says that only a half hour after the provisional Air Cavalry Troop was assigned the task of locating two regiments of NVA, they had completed their mission. The second documented tank engagement of the battle occurred on 11 April, and was reported by BG Hamlet himself:

1100 hours - CG: F/9 Cav LOH at XT 6867 spotted footprints estimated 100 individuals in possible staging area using trails. LOH F/9 spotted fresh cuttings at XT 615745 est 10 individuals in the last 24 hours at XT 7388 F/9 Cobras engaging tank.

Hit with 17 pounders, the tank was reported damaged, but after remaining in the same position for days, it was obvious that it had been a kill.

That afternoon COL John Casey was hit in the hand and wrist by a 12.7mm, and BG Hamlet and the brigade lost an outstanding deputy.

1700 hours - At XT 691955 F/9 found 1 tank in brush, type unknown. At XT 690952 observed 1 APC moving into brush area. AH-1G took fire, unknown number of .51 cal. at 100 kts. FAC and Spectre on stand to engage targets, negative hits, negative damage.

HEAT

Although HE warheads were not expected to destroy tanks, the first tanks killed by helicopters during the Spring Offensive were destroyed by multiple hits from 17 pound HE warheads fired from extremely close range. Within only a day or two, the rearm pads at Lai Khe and Song Be had small stocks of 2.75 inch rockets with warheads few of the pilots had seen or used, High Explosive Anti-Tank, or HEAT.

Manufacture date on these Korean War-era warheads was 1953, when they were used by fixed wing attack aircraft. The only upgrade was to mate them to current rocket motors with canted nozzles, instead of motors designed to be fired at high speeds, so these little six-pound warheads were propelled by the same rocket motor as the heavier warheads.

That resulted in impressive velocity and trajectory for pilots accustomed to shooting 17 pound warheads, but terminal effects did not satisfy those who needed the bursting radius of the 17 pounders. Against armor, HEAT usually made deadly little holes, but they were all but useless for other types of targets, so they were not favored by the Cobra pilots in the cavalry troops.

In contrast, the Cobras of F/79th accomplished what should be considered some of the army's best work of the war with those HEAT rounds. On 13 April, as Soviet-made T-54 tanks rumbled and clanked arrogantly and without infantry support into An Loc, the situation seemed as bleak for the US advisors as it did for the ARVN defenders they were helping.

The story cannot be told better than it has been told by COL Bill Miller, the senior advisor at An Loc. As the tanks penetrated into the city and approached his command bunker, a Blue Max fire team from Battery F, 79th AFA reported on station, and called that they were prepared to engage. COL Miller did not think helicopters would have any effect on the tanks, and told them the anti-aircraft fire was so bad that if they rolled in they would not roll out.

CW2 Barry McIntyre had the F/79th commander, MAJ Larry McKay, in his front seat. A comment about McKay that says a lot for his character is that although he regularly flew the extremely hazardous missions to An Loc, he usually did so in the copilot's position with his aircraft commanders. That was not because of a lack of experience on his part. He already wore the star of a senior aviator on his wings. McKay responded to the senior US advisor that his team was armed with HEAT rounds.

Expecting heavy ground to air fire but receiving almost none, Blue Max rolled in with 17 pound HE warheads in the inboard pods and old HEAT warheads outboard.

That day at An Loc, almost at the feet of the senior officer who was at the very center of the most violent battle of the war; that ultimate infantryman to whom every senior army officer would listen with respect; McKay and his pilots dramatically demonstrated that army helicopters could indeed kill tanks in a hostile anti-aircraft environment.

COL Miller's observations and accounting of the incident were riveting, and his debriefings of the battle were instrumental in contributing to the future of the attack helicopter and army aviation. The summation, delivered in his distinctive voice, is marvelous to hear: "The Cobras were the instruments of our salvation."

That remarkable endorsement from an infantryman's infantryman, already selected to command a brigade of the 101st Airborne Division

and noted for his heroism and leadership in one of the most visible and significant battles of the war, could well justify the declaration that, "Colonel Miller was an instrument of the attack helicopter's salvation."

Within days of the tactically and politically significant tank engagement, a newly developed and far more effective anti-tank warhead was delivered to the attack helicopters fighting near An Loc. Arriving in-country on 15 April with a manufacture date of that very month, the High Explosive Dual Purpose (HEDP) warhead was introduced and combat tested. The rear portion of a 17 pound warhead was fitted with a shaped charge cone like the Light Anti-tank Weapon (LAW), a streamlined nose cone, and a piezo-electric fuse. The warhead casing allowed for far more explosive than the LAW, to produce the same lethal bursting radius as a normal 10-pound HE warhead.

By actual experience that month, the warhead was found to be able to penetrate a T-54 series tank from all directions as promised. On soft targets it gave the same anti-personnel effects as a normal 10-pound HE warhead, and was the perfect compromise to engage armor, vehicles, equipment and personnel.

The new rounds were accompanied by a field grade officer on temporary duty from CONUS, who duties included ensuring that the rockets were made available to the correct units, briefing the pilots on the warhead's capabilities, and learning of the results.

I briefly met that officer at Lai Khe in April of 1972, and in preparing this history I was surprised to be contacted by Father Jerome R. Daly, of Saint John's Catholic Church in McLean, VA. That's quite a change of pace for a man whose callsign with the 235th in Vietnam was Devil Six.

When Father Daly was MAJ Daly, he wrote an article for ARMOR magazine's July/August 1972 edition, which spelled his name Daley. Jim McKnight, formerly a scout with B/1/9th and H Troop, 16th Cavalry, and later with the SS-11 Team deployed to the Spring Offensive, sent me that article along with others.

Jerry mentions that the HEAT round was past its shelf life and displayed a high dud rate, so his team at Picatinney Arsenal was developing a new warhead with the armor penetration of the LAW, and the antipersonnel and soft target capability of the 10-pound HE warhead.

When it was apparent that armor was a threat in the new offensive, the team produced 1,000 of these new warheads in a four day period, and Daly accompanied them to combat. Arriving in Vietnam on 15 APR, he determined that An Loc was where they were needed most, and he accompanied their delivery to Lai Khe.

Daly flew combat missions with F/79th, and his article describes in detail their engagement of tanks on 13 APR, prior to his arrival. His assessment of the anti-aircraft threat, even before confirmation of the SA-7, was interesting:

"The anti-aircraft fire around An Loc was continual and impressive. Having been at Lam Song (sic) 719 last year, I can say that the fire was as high, and a bit higher around An Loc, as it was around some of the fire bases established by ARVN in Laos."

While mentioning the problem of gathering data on engagements and kills, Daly reported that Cobras equipped only with the 2.75-inch rocket system destroyed ten T-54s, three PT-76s, and damaged six T-54s for the period 30 MAR through 11 MAY.

Though covering only a portion of the battle, his report is unlikely to have brought joy to most armor officers, or to the men wearing blue suits and planning their version of close air support for the future.

Task Force Garry Owen

These entries below, from the Task Force Garry Owen S-3 journal, reflect the level and intensity of the fighting around An Loc in mid-April. TRAC is MAJ GEN Hollingsworth's unit of advisors.

15 April 1972:

0255 hours - TRAC: F/9 to stage from Lai Khe. Be prepared to depart Bien Hoa at 0700H and to engage enemy armor vehicles, conduct visual recon in designated boxes. F/79 to be on standby (30 min) starting at 0630H. Be prepared to engage enemy armor vehicles.

0520 hours - TRAC: Since approx 0440H An Loc had been under heavy ground attack from S-SE and taking incoming. Bounce heavy fire team of F/79 AFA ASAP w/nails. Weather at An Loc is bad. All families of fighters cannot operate. Marginal weather for helicopters. Put F/9 on alert to depart 1st light. Fire skids up at 0520. 2nd team at 0550H. Notified TRAC to make sure Lai Khe fuel and ammo points are open. F/79 ships are Serpents 25, 33, 12, 24.

0625 hours - F/79 has five ships at An Loc. Serpent 26 was #5 our assets 5 MAX birds for our AO. Note: It was unusual that callsigns of the attack helicopters would be included, especially down to identification of wingmen. Though always reported to brigade, elsewhere in the journal even heavy hunter/killer team leaders, who were the air mission commanders, are not identified by call sign. This appears to be a personal touch by whoever kept the journal that day.

0730 hours - TRAC: Reports 23mm AA E of An Loc. FAC's report 37mm but no location.

0815 hours - TRAC: Requested F/9 to be bounced to work visual recon boxes. Skids up at 0825H. Our representative at An Loc will control our assets. Approx 1000H the rest of the 8th ARVN Airborne Battalion may airlift into An Loc. May need MAX to engage ground-to-air fire.

0940 hours - TRAC: LTC Fuloyer wanted a message passed to DCO-A that An Loc requested gunships support to protect Tactical Operations Center. Tanks 500 meters from the TOC. TRAC Commanding General says Cav Troop to be used to find anti-aircraft positions for forward air controller.

1035 hours - TRAC: Troop concentrations and 10 tanks in box at XT 735894, 731885, 721905, and 716897 requesting arclights.

The hunter/killer teams found, attacked and silenced the active major caliber AAA positions, resulting in the next log entry:

1050 hours - DCO-A: Reports no 23mm or 37mm AA fire East of An Loc at this time, but great deal of .51 cal. ground to air fire.

1135 hours - Msg fr GEN Hamlet: Get 400 heat rockets to Lai Khe ASAP. Note: This was the day the newly developed High Explosive Dual Purpose actually arrived in country. The journal never differentiates between the old and marginally effective HEAT, and the refined HEDP, referring to all armor piercing rockets as "heat". This is similar to the unit's generic method of referring to any Cobra being used in the attack role as MAX.

1500 hours - TRAC CG: At 1450 ten tanks were attacking An Loc. 9 were destroyed. CG TRAC wants more air to destroy tanks before they get into the city. They are in the city and the ARVNS are destroying them there by cluttering the street.

CW2 Ron Tusi, F/79 ARA, made real good use of those HEAT rockets. The NVA tanks were within a few meters of the 5th ARVN Div headquarters in downtown An Loc. They were close enough to fire into the windows of the buildings that had command bunkers in them. When the conditions further deteriorated the US advisors specifically requested Cobras and not TACAIR because of the proximity of friendly troops and civilians. Confident of his ability to deliver accurate fire on moving tanks, he responded immediately despite intense air to ground fire. He single-handedly attacked the threatening enemy forces, killing four tanks, damaging one and forcing the others to withdraw from friendly positions. Turning his attention to the supporting NVA infantry, he killed several and forced the retreat of the remainder. For his extraordinary heroism and devotion to duty, Tusi received our nation's second highest award for heroism, the Distinguished Service Cross.

Although the action described above was the high point in Tusi's activities during the An Loc defense, it should be noted that he also received a Silver Star, three DFCs, a Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Gold Star and numerous other awards for heroism during the forty five day period of the battle. Many former members of Blue Max recall that Ron Tusi was so enraged over the high density of tanks inside the city that he hovered down the roads, sought out the tanks, got in behind them and hover fired into the engine decks causing massive explosions in the power train and fuel storage areas of the tanks. Although he did not blow the turrets off the tanks like as a TOW missile would, a burned up tank is a dead tank.

The last journal entry for the day promised that the excitement would continue:

2310 hours - TRAC G-3: Mission tomorrow is to prepare to execute an order to 1) Send 1 heavy fire team to arrive An Loc by first light. 2) Send 1 cavalry troop to arrive An Loc area at first light. Additional guidance from 1st Cav S-3: All gunships should have at least 50% HEAT rockets.

Some sources report that the enemy tank threat was active at An Loc for only a short time. Although incomplete, the G-3 journal lists other tank activity for the next month:

24 April 1972:

1830 hours - F/9 Cav found a bridge at XT 609424 at 1710H had been used by track and wheeled vehicles last 24 hours. Will be engaged by TAC Air.

26 April 1972:

0630 hours - TRAC: An Loc SITREP: 5th Airborne received heavy incoming at this time. 8th Airborne receiving a ground attack. Spectre is engaging tanks at XT 668850.

1430 hours - Tanks and troops massing at Loc Ninh to attack from the West of An Loc.

1655 hours - Bien Hoa Sector: VNAF reports that 80 VC are at YT 144143 with 5 X 122mm rockets and 8 X 107mm rockets, 3 rating. Request clearance for airstrike. Denied so that we could send a pink team.

2057 hours - S-2: Approx 120 enemy are at XT 828456, and 20 tanks at XT 878488 with intent to attack Lai Khe.

27 April 1972:

0045 hours - TRAC: At the present time numerous tanks have been sighted at An Loc. Request that F/79 AFA heavy fire team have heat rockets when they arrive in the morning.

29 April 1972:

1030 hours - TRAC: APC spotted 2 km west of Lai Khe. F/9th Cav checking now.

Portions of one of the most intense days of the later part of the battle were recorded as follows:

11 MAY 1972:

0420 hours - TRAC: Tanks have been sighted at An Loc. Request heavy fire team be on station at 0600 hours. Will have Lai Khe opened early.

0530 hours - TRAC: At 0440 hours, Intercepted enemy radio message stating that this was the last big attack to take An Loc.

0625 hours - TRAC: At the present time tanks are inside the An Loc perimeter. Launch second heavy fire team. Skids up at present time.

0640 hours - TRAC: There are 200 heat rockets at Lai Khe.

0805 hours - RASH FAC: A-37 shot down 2 km north of An Loc. F/9 Cav heavy team covering downed at this time. Note: The hunter/killer team leader had his hydraulics shot out while he was low level at the crash, but was able to slide onto the runway at Lai Khe. This A-37 was the aircraft of 1LT Michael Blassie, who would later be interred in the Tomb of The Unknown Soldier until a CBS News investigation confirmed his identity in 1998.)

0920 hours - F/79 ARTY. Three tanks at XT 715892, 5 tanks inside An Loc. A-37 shot down in item 16 was shot down by 23mm.

1025 hours - F/79 ARTY. Report total of 11 tanks destroyed by ground troops, TAC Air, and F/79th ARTY. F/79 claims 4 tanks destroyed.

BG Hamlet was particularly active that day, personally making the following reports:

1040 hours - CG: Anti-aircraft positions at XT 810902 - 37mm, XT 754865 - 37mm. XT 7585 right 1 up 1 numerous 51 cal positions. XT 7390 right 2 up 2 numerous anti-aircraft sites.

1040 hours - CG: At XT 746894 A-37s attacking 2 tanks and troops in open.

1215 hours - CG: AH-1G shot down north of An Loc, at 1215 hours at XT 755872. F/79 bird. Note: This Cobra was destroyed by an SA-7 missile, killing CPT Rodney L. Strobridge and CPT Robert J. Williams. Their bodies were not recovered, and because of legal considerations, Strobridge was briefly listed as a possibility of being in the Tomb of The Unknown Soldier.

1425 hours - RASH: At 0937 one FAC in 02 birddog reported down. At 1120 another FAC reported missing.

1740 hours - TRAC: An Loc update total 13 tanks destroyed today. Only one penetration by two tanks and VNA platoon. Heavy buildup to the north and west of city. No ground probes in 30 to 60 minutes.

2300 hours - DCO-A: Send TOW missile section with MAX to An Loc. Note: This refers to the SS-11 team, and not actually the TOW team, who were not in that AO.

The SS-11 team, escorted by F/79 Cobras, actually flew to An Loc the next day but found no targets to engage, and on 14 May, they re-deployed to I Corps.

The entry from the TRAC log of 6 June (TRAC, not 3rd Brigade journal) makes reference to this time period:

Passed following info to T30 Aircraft downed in the An Loc area - VNAF UH-1, South of An Loc:

XT 778888 - US C-130 on 3 MAY

XT 732912 - US A-37 on 11 MAY

XT 764875 - 2 US FAC (Chico 11 & Sundog 34) on 11 MAY

XT 775875 - AH-1G on 11 MAY

XT 748868 - VNAF A1-E on 13 MAY

XT 8175 - VNAF UH-1 on 13 MAY

XT 760864 - US FAC (Sundog 07) on 14 MAY

A TRAC log entry that begs for more information was logged the night of 6 June. Remember that "slow mover" refers to aircraft:

2105 DASC reports Spectre has a slow mover at XT 655992. Is it clear to shoot. Cleared with III Corps Fire Support Element, CPT Long.

A C-130 gunship, in the dark of the night, with a slow moving aircraft far west of An Loc. Air-to-air? How could any C-130 driver not publicize an air-to-air kill? A helicopter on the ground?

The armor battles around An Loc were essentially finished for the campaign, but the missile war had already begun. Not a single Cobra had actually lost a tank engagement. Certainly, some missed their targets, but not one was destroyed by a tank or even while engaging a tank. The missiles would prove to be more costly to the Cobras and their crews, but even they would not prevail over the attack helicopter.

Missile! Missile! Missile!

As April became May, and An Loc held, the men who saw the carnage as they flew at treetop level wondered when the mauled NVA would retreat back to their neutral sanctuaries.

The first SA-7 fired in the vicinity of An Loc was most likely the one fired in mid-April at a hunter/killer team ILeader low level southwest of the town. He reported that as he turned sharply to engage what he thought was an APC, a missile streaked past him, leaving a slightly spiraling thick white smoke trail. He continued his turn and engaged the individuals at the still-smoking launch point with 17 pound proximity-fused rockets. His report was ignored, and military intelligence continued to insist that surface to air missiles were not deployed in the area.

After 11 May, it was more difficult to ignore that particular threat. To quote the USAF report, *Airpower And The 1972 Spring Invasion*, "At one location (An Loc), one pilot reported 'four of five 37mm, and the same number of 23mm weapons, all surrounded by .51-caliber weapons.' By late afternoon on 11 May, a VNAF A-1, an A-37, a Cobra, and two O-2 FAC aircraft had been shot down."

The air force report seems wishful in reporting, "All slow movers were thereby forced to stay at higher altitudes, and helicopters were banned from the area." Although air force helicopters with their less flexible tactics may have been banned from the An Loc battle area, Army helicopters never were banned.

Another item of interest that may be a bit confusing, is that the A-37 shot down on 11 May was not VNAF. It was a USAF aircraft, flown by the man whose remains would later be interred in the Tomb Of The Unknown Soldier. When 1LT Michael Blassie's A-37 was shot down, a FAC who would himself be shot down and killed later that day saw and reported a parachute near the crash. An F/9th hunter/killer team was bounced to locate the parachute, and the recently attached pilot.

Ground fire in the area was intense, so the scout was not committed, but the lead Cobra went to treetop level to check the parachute. It turned out to be a flare parachute from an expended flare, hanging in the top

of a rubber tree. In the process of gathering that information, the Cobra had its hydraulics shot out, but made a successful running landing at Lai Khe.

The Brigade S-3 Journal was compiled from third hand information. The hunter/killer teams and Blue Max fire team leaders made their reports by radio, and their reports were forwarded. In the case of the cavalry teams, that chain of forwarding included an operations jeep sitting under the rubber trees at Lai Khe. Entries at all levels relied on the understanding, fast copying, and legible writing of the radio operators involved. Consequently, it is little wonder that the journal entries were usually even more cryptic than the unit log entries, and much information was unintentionally left out, or slightly changed like in a whispered verbal party game.

First Surface to Air Missile's (SAM) in III Corps

The US Air Force reports that the initial SAM firings at An Loc coincided with the heavy attacks of 11 and 12 MAY, after which time "helicopters were banned from the area." A review of the reports that made it into the journal shows that missiles had been reported earlier by army and air force pilots. On 8 MAY a missile fired at an F/9 Cobra at 2,000' was reported as a missile, but logged in the journal as a possible B40. An RPG engagement at 2,000 feet doesn't make sense. A 9 MAY report from a FAC was very specific and recorded far more accurately:

0345 hours - TRAC: FAC in An Loc area reported the firing of possible SA-7 missile at 0140 hours vic XT 743865, fired from ground, left white smoke trail and went between 2 FAC's and exploded in white flame. Negative damage.

The first really bad day for missiles was indeed 11 MAY, as reflected in the journal:

0720 - RASH FAC: At XT 740882 sometime this morning an unidentified rocket was fired at FAC's.

1215 hours - CG: AH-1G shot down north of An Loc, at 1215 hours at XT 755872. F/79 bird. (Note that the journal does not show this to be a loss to a SAM. Through this date, reports of missile firings by army aviators were completely ignored, or reported as B40 RPG firings. Imagine the trajectory that would allow an RPG anti-tank rocket, even with airburst fuse, to burst as high as 2,000' above ground level.)

1425 hours - RASH: At 0937 one FAC, an O2 Bird Dog reported down. Note: An O2 is not a Bird Dog, an O1 is a bird Dog.

1120 another FAC reported missing.

On 13 MAY the losses continued to mount. Note how consistently missiles fired at USAF assets are referred to as missiles, but missiles fired at army aircraft, even at altitude, are called B40 rockets, even though the reported locations and incidents are only 600 meters and 25 minutes apart.

1440 hours - RASH FAC: VNAF A-1 shot down SW of An Loc. Pilot bailed out, F/9 Cav will try to support. Possible ground to air missile. Pilot is at XT 750870.

1705 hours - F/9 Cav: At XT 750876 at 1505 hours AH-1G F/9 Cav received unknown amount of 51 cal ground to air fire and one B40 round, negative hits or damage, negative response due to weather.

The toll continued on 14 MAY:

1650 hours - RASH FAC: Approx 1500 hours 2 kilometers S of An Loc, Sundog 7, and O-2 FAC was shot down by a SA-7. Pilot was recovered by ARVN and taken to An Loc (ARVN AIRBORNE).

It was not until 15 MAY that the missile threat was taken seriously enough that army pilots were no longer told they were seeing B40s, as Blue Max reported missile sightings:

0820 hours - F/79 AFA: At XT 746885 spotted a surface to air missile being fired at an F-4. TAC AIR employed.

0955 hours - F/79 AFA: Report SAM at XT 769881 being fired at C130 left tremendous white cloud and heavy smoke trail. Note that their description of the smoke trail is very similar to the cavalry pilot's report the month before.

Mike Brown, later shot down by an SA-7, relates that pilots from his unit stated that some of the missiles observed during this time appeared to be the large SA-2 missiles, not the shoulder-fired SA-7.

The larger missiles were fired only at cargo and high performance aircraft.

1005 hours - ACC: Report following SAM launching sites:

TIME PLACE

0800 XT 750855

0845 XT 746885

0945 XT 769881

0845 XT 746695

Report from F/79 AFA and AF. TAC AIR is presently being employed on firing sites. F/79 is being pulled away by DCOA. F/79 away from An Loc due to SAM situation.

Note: This temporary agreement to remove army helicopters from the area while TAC AIR attacked missile "sites" may be the basis for the air force claim that helicopters were "banned from the area." This method of engagement also supports Brown's impressions that the missiles involved were indeed SA-2s, because SA-7 missile sites happen to be wherever the soldier carries it.

1700 hours - DCO-A: XT 773700 A1E while putting in air was shot down. American pilot bailed out, landed between enemy and friendly lines. Low bird from D/229th tried to pick him up, received heavy ground to air fire at XT 772701 went from another direction and picked up the pilot. Pilot is OK. Request combat response from TRAC for grid of ground to air fire.

By 17 MAY the fighting at An Loc had been so reduced that for the first time since 5 MAR, TRAC relieved the 3rd Brigade of the requirement to have an air cavalry troop in the area. The teams still went back when needed, which was regularly, and the aerial field artillery of F/79 continued to augment tube artillery.

On 24 MAY, Blue Max lost another helicopter and crew:

1045 hours - F/9 CAV: AH-1G from F/79 Arty shot down by a SAM at XT 765785 missile firing site at XT 766788. 1-33 ARVN moving to site at this time. TRAC reports Rash saw the aircraft crash. It burned for six minutes and then exploded. 2 U.S. MIA.

1120 hours - TRAC has bounced Jolly Green Giant and one set of A-37s to respond to missile firing.

1205 hours - TRAC: 1/33 ARVN in contact near the crash site of F/79 Arty AH-1G. They have not reached crash site.

1930 hours - LATE ENTRY: 1/33 ARVN recovered the bodies of the two F/79 Arty pilots and returned them to Tam Kai Firebase vicinity XT 768773. Results 2 U.S. KIA.

A small mystery appeared in a 30 May journal entry:

1315 hours - TRAC: 33rd Regiment claim to have found a body with a scrap of paper with the name ISAAC HOSAKA on it. This body was found near the crash site of the F/79 Arty ship vicinity of FSB Tam Khai.

CW2 Isaac Yoshiro Hosaka was indeed one of the Blue Max crewmembers shot down on 24 May with CW2 John Robert Henn, Jr. The mystery continues, for while the 1/33rd ARVN reported recovering both Blue Max pilots on 24 May, the day they were shot down, a 4 June journal entry confuses the issue even more:

4 JUN 1972:

1430 hours - 229th AVN BN: A body has been recovered by the ARVN and is enroute to 24th Evac. Believed to be the body of Mr. Henn F/79 AFA pilot shot down near Tam Khai.

Both bodies were reported to be recovered by ARVN the afternoon they were shot down, and six days later a body that is not identified is found with a scrap of paper with one of the pilots' names. Then the second body is transported to 24th Evac at Long Binh 11 days after the loss.

The data base developed and maintained by Gary Roush shows that while Hosaka is listed as KIA, Henn is still shown as Body Not Recovered. This is the kind of disorder that existed in the turbulent and confusing times during June of 1972. The fighting was more intense than earlier in the war, with far fewer US available to do the tasks that were previously routine. The remaining units had to rely more and more on their ARVN counterparts to carry out functions that in the past had routinely been done by other Americans.

The following journal entry documenting recovery of remains from another day and a different type of aircraft, is edited somewhat to

preclude possible pain for the family, but will show why recovery efforts were sometimes so difficult to document during that period.

1730 hour D3 - AN LOC reports a patrol has reached the crash site of a possible (Aircraft type) (possibly [Aircraft callsign]) vicinity XT _____. Wreckage was burned. Engine was made by continental motors, some item of unknown type equipment made by Teledyne # 629-XXXX, a number on the wing "TAN KCA/44-XX, a piece of equipment #RT 859/APX-72. Also some burned dog tags which were unreadable, bones. No skull returned to An Loc.

Another entry was made the next day:

1450 hours - 5XX - An Loc units found a few pieces of skull & some teeth, a silk survival net (survival vest?) and some engine parts at crash site noted yesterday.

In the more intense combat environment, with less and less support available, recovery and identification of remains, with the technology available in 1972, was becoming increasingly difficult. Fortunately, the number of US soldiers and aircrews involved or actually fighting was at the lowest point since before the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

On 8 June a medevac helicopter from the 215th Medical Company was shot down, and after the crew and passengers were picked up, the aircraft was burned. The luxury of recovering helicopters from even disputed locations in the field with CH-47s was almost at an end.

A Co., 229th had a UH-1H shot down on the morning of 13 June, with others in participating aircraft also hit by ground fire.

As the reader has gained an appreciation for the pace of the battles, for the desperate stands and situations of the men on the ground, repelling seemingly endless probes and assaults without even the hope of US ground troops to relieve them, consider the log entry below. Read it as though you were a US advisor to the defenders at An Loc, not knowing when the next wave of tanks will again break the perimeter. Read it with the hunger of not having a full meal in two months, with the pain of watching Vietnamese civilians who are hungrier than you and who are crouched in the rubble of their NVA artillery-pounded homes. Read this entry knowing that what your boss would later say was true: "The Cobras were the instruments of our salvation." Read it with the full awareness that the Vietnamese Air Force helicopters had repeatedly declined to bring supplies or reinforcements to you and would not do so without full support from the US Cobras. Consider how you would have felt in the rubble of An Loc when you read:

19 JUN 1972:

2140 hours - TRAC G-3: MACV has to ask TRAC for an impact statement on what would happen if TRAC lost the following assets: 5 ea AH-1G; 4 ea CH-47A, and F/79 AFA. Danger 79 (MG Hollingsworth) and Defiant 5 have objected but it still may happen. Also message has been forwarded to MAJ Bentson. He said he would inform Danger 79. TRAC Forward has notified and will relay message to MAJ Nadal. MAJ Bentson said he would concur with all aspects of the message (JDW). Note: Because of the seriousness of this log entry, in compliance with previous instructions the officer who personally informed Danger 79 was required to enter his initials.

By mid-June, the Spring Offensive had been won, the NVA attack had been broken and the U.S. was continuing its withdrawal from the war. When the North Vietnamese walked away from the peace table, President Nixon stepped up the bombing with a more effective target list and ordered the mining of Haiphong Harbor. Those acts brought immediate and positive reaction. Even as some of its soldiers were fighting battles of greater intensity than experienced previously in the war in Vietnam, America was continuing its policy of standing down entire units and bringing them home.

But around the ever-smaller town of An Loc, 20 Junew was another bad day, and the log shows the different styles of those making the entries:

0820 hours - AH-1G, F/9 shot down at XT 769770, 0812, SA-7, no survivors. CPT Edwin G. Northrup and 1LT Stephen E. Shields.

0820 hours - AAE reported that an AH-1G of F/9 exploded in the air and crashed at XT 769770 at approximately 0815 hours. Suspected SA-7 missile shot it down. No survivors. 1LT Louis K. Breuer, IV was

dead with his copilot, second-tour CW2 Burdette D. Townsend, Jr. Breuer and wingman Andy Kisela, had been scouting an LZ for a troop lift that was about five minutes out, when the missile turned his Cobra into a flaming projectile.

Lou Breuer had been immediately and immensely popular when he came into the troop when the 101st stood down, and he was affectionately and respectfully called Animal. He was a great companion and comrade. He was risking his life when he could have been playing football for Dallas. As we scouted Cambodia in March, Animal spent his last birthday in my front seat.

Ghostriders did not seem to do well on survivability in the troop, as 1LT James Calvin "Reb" Williamson had died with 1LT Donel Dobbs and nine others when their Huey went down from an internal explosion in March.

Townsend had been CW2 Andy Kisela's copilot the day I was shot, when Andy landed beside me so that Townsend could fly my Cobra back to Lai Khe as I transferred to the C&C ship and took the rest of the day off. Although at least three F/9th Cobras were engaged by SA-7s, Breuer's was the only F/9th crew actually lost to a missile.

And the day had only started. Almost immediately, other entries document the action:

0825 hours - AH-1G, F/79, received unknown number hits .51 cal., returning to Lai Khe with escort Cobra, escort Cobra reported missing.

0825 hours - 1 AFA received unknown number of hits from unknown type ground to air fire and was returning to Lai Khe when another AH-1G trailing the bird disappeared and is missing at this time.

0915 hours - TRAC, U.S. FAC sighted wreckage of AH-1G, downed 0820 hours, vic 752797.

1020 hours - TRAC: 2 bodies have been recovered and are located in the ville at XT 7677. Request TRAC to determine status of maps, SOI, & condition of aircraft.

1055 hours - TRAC: Reports that VNAF observed two Cobras being shot down this morning. 1 aircraft still missing

1330 hours - AAE reports that F/79 AH-1G has been located at XT 783762. Aircraft intact, however crewmen killed by small arms fire outside bird.

1625 hours - Notified signal brigade of possible SOI compromise because of downed aircraft.

1700 hours - TRAC: Reports that 2 bodies of F/9 Cav AH-1G shot down have been extracted from Than Kai and will be transported to 3rd Field Hospital.

The last time Lou Breuer had been at the 3rd Field Hospital was when the pilots came down to say goodbye to me with an impromptu party the month before. Setting aside the nurse's protests, they wheeled me out of the ward to locate a club. That night Lou offered \$125 for my \$26 Stetson that I brought out of my Cobra and had with me. The money would have been long gone, but that Stetson still sits on the cav boots on the mantle.

Blue Max went back in the barrel, but a very lucky barrel, the next day. 21 JUN 1972:

1523 hours - GC notified that a F/79 Cobra down near road at 1510 hours. Crew O.K. Securing force on way. A SA-7 missile shot down the Cobra at XT 758773. Crew extracted, condition unknown.

1645 hours - 2 F/79 pilots O.K. 16 lifts completed. Estimate 10 lifts to go.

22 JUN 1972:

1030 hours - 31st ARVN Regiment recovered bodies of 2 F/79 crewmen shot down 20 June.

CPT Mike Brown was the aircraft commander of the Blue Max Cobra hit by an SA-7 above 4,000 feet. With his tailboom blown completely off, he and his copilot, CPT Mark Cordon, survived. His story was reported in Stars & Stripes, and he taped an excellent debrief of his actions that very day. Cordon was injured by the impact, but very much alive. Brown flew again that day, but not in a Cobra.

Brown's audiotaped debriefing goes through an impressive list of actions he took on the way to the ground. The same hit and loss of tailboom that killed other pilots in the same unit had proven, in one case to be survivable.

Here is Mike Brown's story:

"On 21 JUN 1972 I was working on a mission in support of an ARVN airborne brigade in the vicinity of the village of Tan Khai on highway 13 approximately 6 miles south of An Loc. We were escorting a US slick unit that was tasked with extracting the ARVN airborne brigade from Tan Khai for redeployment. In support of this we had a heavy fire team, 3 AH-1G Cobras. The method of support was to put one ship low with the lift flight and two ships high to provide overall area coverage. Chalk 2 and 3 in the heavy team were the high birds. I was the AC of chalk 3.

"On my second gun run into the area, in which I was providing suppressive fires, I broke to the right and made a pass from SE to NW breaking right over Highway 13. I was in the process of rejoining chalk 2 and taking his wing position when I was struck by an SA-7 missile.

"So far as I know, no one else has survived in a helicopter this type of anti-aircraft fire. I think there was a combination of things that accounts for the fact that my pilot and I are alive. And I don't want to underestimate the importance of luck as a significant contributor to our good fortune. I do feel, however, there are some things that we did, that had we not done, the luck we had would not have been able to save us. I think the single most important thing that happened was the fact that other personnel in the area, other aircraft in the area, were able to observe the missile being fired.

"As they observed it, they yelled, "Missile, missile, missile!" over the VHF radio. I think the fact that I knew what I was hit by and what the aircraft should do combined to be the single most important contributing factor, outside of luck, in my survival.

"I feel every unit, or every task force, that is operating in an area where SA-7's are known to be, should have an SOP on alerting aircraft when a missile is fired. They should also have observers posted in position to advise or observe 360 degrees around the flight whenever possible.

"After hearing the words, "Missile, missile, missile!" I looked over my left shoulder and I saw the signature of the missile. I thought it was heading for my aircraft. Just as I saw the missile, I saw it hit the aircraft. Probably at the same time it was hitting my aircraft, I was rolling off my throttle, and bottoming my collective pitch.

"The impact of the missile did not seem to be that severe. There was concussion, but there was not as much as one might expect. I would say judging on the way it felt to me, as far as concussion was concerned, there was probably not more HE charge in the warhead of the SA- than there was in a 40MM grenade.

"What happened to the aircraft as it hit, is the tailboom was total severed, completely severed in the vicinity of the battery compartment, which on the Cobra is directly below the exhaust stack. The aircraft, as soon as it was hit, jostled slightly, it seemed to pitch up and pitch down and from side to side. This was followed by (and during the autorotation) the aircraft beginning to spin about its mast to the right in a nose low attitude. As the aircraft descended, it spiraled, making a spiraling descent and continuing to spin slowly about the mast. The speed of the spin was, I would say, about the same angular velocity as one would experience in a normal rate pedal turn.

"I did not look at any of my instruments after being hit. Shortly after I was hit, as soon as I was hit, I lost all radio communication. I had no radio communication whatsoever. I did, however, have intercom with my front seat. Using the intercom, I instructed my pilot, CPT Cordon, to empty his turret weapons system - to fire it out. He attempted to do so, but was unable to do it. My control movements during the descent were very few. Having been aware for some time that this could happen, I had thought - pretty well thought it through - what I would do if I were hit by an SA-7 and my tailboom were severed. It seems to be characteristic of the missile that it does severe the tailboom if it strikes you from the side. I felt the biggest problem that I would have with no tailboom would be the CG shift. I thought it would be most difficult to prevent the nose from becoming extremely low, particularly in a loaded helicopter. And this would have to be the biggest problem I would have to cope with. As it worked out, that was exactly the case. I told myself, that if this were case, and even prior to the crash I had told myself, that my action would be to pull complete

at cyclic and attempt to correct for the CG shift. This I did, but it did not prevent a nose low attitude. Those who observed my descent said I appeared to be descending in a skids level attitude, however I felt that I was nose low. I attempted to experiment with the cyclic enroute to the ground. I tried slight left and right cyclic movements which did little for me, and as far as I am concerned, were a waste of time. I feel that anybody that has the same misfortune that I had in flight should attempt to only pull aft cyclic. Their only concern should be CG. As far as collective movement should be, I bottomed the pitch and I left it that way. I made no attempt to control RPM. I made no attempt whatsoever to select a forced landing area. There was no way I could have controlled the aircraft to bring it to a forced landing area. Probably if I had selected a forced landing area, I probably would have not made it anyway, even if I could have guided the aircraft to it. I'll explain the reasons for this later on.

"During the descent, RPM built, and as it built, I felt feedback forces in the cyclic and the collective. The cyclic tried to pull itself forward, I pulled it back and I was able to keep it against the rear stop during the entire descent. The collective attempted to push itself up, but I was able to keep it on the bottom until my pitch pull. I attempted to jettison my wing stores but my wing store jettison did not function. I had suspected this might not work (when I had thought about this prior to the accident) because the wing store jettison circuit breakers and electrical power are largely located in the forward portion of the tailboom.

"So my wing store jettison capability was lost, and having determined this, I attempted to fire out the remainder of my ordnance. I was 50% expended at the time. My ordnance, my 2.75 inch rockets, could not be fired. With these three unsuccessful attempts, the turret, the wing store jettison, the rocket firing, all these failing, I abandoned all further hope of slowing my rate of descent by getting rid of extra weight or by shifting my CG by getting rid of extra weight in the wrong places.

"As I said before, the only control movement that I made, cyclic-wise, was to pull full aft cyclic and hold it there and full bottom collective pitch and held it there.

"At about 30 feet above the trees, I pulled pitch. I pulled pitch at about the same rate that I would in a normal autorotation, except I pulled every bit of pitch that I had. The collective was full up as I reached the ground. This significantly slowed my descent and it also assisted in my CG problems. I wouldn't say that I recovered from the nose low attitude, but it recovered somewhat. It also caused a violent spin. At this point, I can't remember if the spin went to the right or the left. I do know it was violent and I do know that it was stopped by my landing in the trees.

"The second most significant thing that saved me was the fact that I did land in trees. I had no choice over whether I was going to land in trees or in an open area. It was something that fate alone determined. As I said, there was no directional control, so there was no selecting a forced landing area. But luck was with me and I did land in trees, which helped me in two ways. One, they stopped the spin of the aircraft, and two they assisted in cushioning my fall. On impact there was no fire but the engine had continued to run. I had rolled off the throttle to the flight idle position initially, however, I did not make further attempts to shut the engine down. If I had it to do over again, I would probably do that. I would probably attempt to shut the engine down, especially if I would have had time to do so.

"My concerns were fire and my ordnance exploding, however I think my impact was soft enough that the fuel cells were not broken, and therefore the fire was not a factor as it had been in other cases where people had come down as a result of an SA-7 strike.

"As far as what I did on the ground, I was on the ground for approximately 10 or 15 minutes. And I don't believe what I did on the ground is of that much assistance to anyone else. Suffice it to say that I did land in a bunker complex and that my front seat and I both made attempts to conceal ourselves until friendly aircraft got in the area. My survival radio would not operate, so we moved into a clear area and waved until we were spotted by friendly aircraft. At this point we concealed ourselves again to await pickup.

"Other significant things that I think contributed to the success here were, number one I had only had 600 pounds of fuel on board the aircraft at the time of the crash and I was 50% expended. I had fired all of my outboard pod, and I believe, a few of my inboard rounds.

"As far as feelings, I think the psychology is as important as anything else, is how you survive this thing. There was no question, having been around SA-7 environment for the last two months, there was no question in my mind that I was dead on the way down. However, I never gave up. I had enough control over the aircraft to do something for myself. I still had a good rotor. I still had two controls - my aft cyclic and my pitch control. And in the end, the things I was able to do assisted in saving my life.

"I think probably the most critical point is when you come to the altitude where you should pull pitch, the last 30 feet or so, you know in your mind, or I knew, in my mind, that I had it, that I was dead at this point on or I would be dead in a very short span of time. However, I did what I thought I should do anyway. Fortunately for me it worked out to the best. I hope that by putting these things on a tape and putting them in a place where other people operating in the same environment can have access to what I say, I hope that it will save other lives. I feel that all the elements must be working in one's favor, because they were with me. I feel that, as I said initially in the tape, luck was the biggest factor in saving my life. The aircraft did go to a place, i.e., the trees, where ground conditions assisted in bringing the descent to a favorable conclusion.

"There is no question in my mind, that I had gone to an open area, that the outcome would have been much different. As I said, also, whether I would have wanted to or not, I would have had no control over the aircraft. I will not say it's impossible to survive this type of crash by landing in an open area, I feel now that an important thing is as long as you continue to fly the aircraft, no matter what your situation is, that you use every available control that you have. Every control you have is an asset, you have some chance. I do feel, however, in my case, that the violence of spin after pitch pull, and probably that fairly high rate of descent, I don't believe we would have made out of the aircraft it had not been for the trees.

"Had I had 100% ordnance on board, and a 1200 pound load of fuel, the situation would have been far different. So again I conclude and say that it is my hope that this tape will do some good, and the right combination of luck and knowing what to do with the aircraft, in the event that this happens to anyone else, that it will result in saving somebody's life. Thank you."

Mike and Marco's story continues. The aircraft crashed into the trees, falling through the trees to a thicket of bamboo. The initial strike into the trees was extremely violent. Marco had injured his back on his first tour and this blow re-injured his back. When the aircraft finally stopped its fall, Marco was able to open his front door, crawl back and assist Mike who could not open his door and who was trying to break the canopy with his knife. Mike remembers there being about a foot and a half of blades left on the main rotor, but the main rotor was stopped and the engine was still running. However Mike did not shut it off because he wanted to get out because of his concern for fire.

Mike and Marco got to the ground and saw lots of C-ration litter on the ground. Looking around they realized they were on top of empty NVA bunkers. Just then a Blue Max Snake (Serpent 12, CW2 Ron Tusi and CPT Harry Davis) overflew the two and saw them. Tusi immediately called out to some B/229th slicks who were coming out of An Loc paralleling Highway 13. Black 5 flown by WO1 Bill Wright answered the call. He had five ARVN bodies in body bags in the aircraft at the time. Wright took direction from Tusi and said, "I can't get down in there!" Tusi said, "You gotta get in there!" So Wright began his descent into the hover hole that was not big enough for the rotor diameter of his UH-1H.

Wright had a lot of things going on simultaneously. His aircraft was heavy with the load of bodies and since it was 1440 in the afternoon, the density altitude was going up. And he was going to have to chop down some tree limbs with his main rotor to get over the AH-1G. As Wright went down into the hover hole, he keyed his mike button on a UHF frequency to everyone about what was happening. WO1 Dennis Woods from B/229 recalled watching the Cobra going in streaming a white trail (believed to be fuel) and thought the Cobra was gone. Woods was now extremely excited to learn the crew was being rescued.

Mike and Marco climbed up the wreckage of 725 to get to the hovering slick. Mike got in and was immediately overwhelmed by the smell of the ARVN bodies. Marco took "forever" to get in, which was a result of his back being injured. The exit up through the hover hole was uneventful and Wright flew to Lai Khe via Chon Thanh.

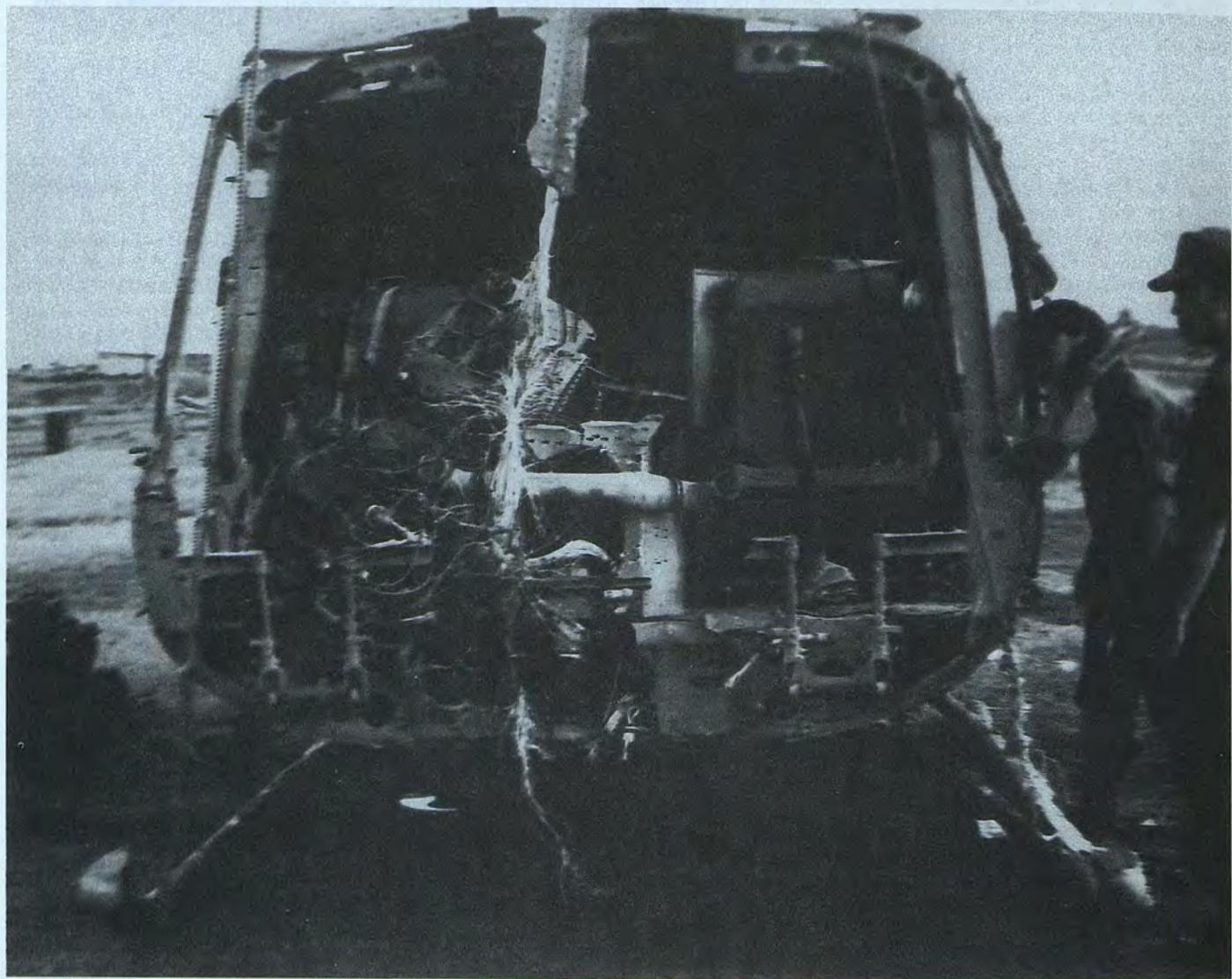
Tusi, not sure the slick was going to get Brown and Cordon, jettisoned his rocket pods and landed close to the crash site. He told his copilot gunner to hold the aircraft, while Tusi ran through the bush looking for Brown and Cordon. Seeing the slick leave with the two, Tusi went back to the Snake and returned to Lai Khe.

Approaching Lai Khe, Wright asked Brown and Cordon if they needed medevac. Brown declined, but Cordon said yes. Cordon was placed aboard a medevac at Lai Khe and flown to the 3d Surgical Hospital in Saigon. Brown got off at Lai Khe, happy to be alive and happy to be away from the stench of the ARVN dead. Brown and Cordon would not meet again until Saturday, 20 OCT 1996.

Heroism was commonplace, as seen by the B/229th crew that bored a hole in the trees to rescue Cordon and Brown, and Tusi's attempt to find them after dismounting his Snake. Tusi was a legend. On his third tour in Vietnam, one as a Navy UDT and one in 7/17 Cav, Tusi was the absolute warrior. It was always satisfying to hear Serpent 12, Blue Max's call sign at An Loc. We were trying to fool the NVA. We enjoyed hearing his deep voice clearly take charge of everything; telling BG Hamlet, the Bde Cdr where to fly the flights, where to fly and demanding minimal radio transmissions. Tusi received the Distinguished Service Cross at An Loc.

During this period, D/229th had at least two Cobras shot down, with both crews and aircraft recovered.

The next loss of an F/79th Cobra and pilot was not at An Loc, and was not from a missile. CW2 John L. Dilallo was on a maintenance test flight on the night of 24 JUN when the cyclic locked up and he crashed into the Saigon River. His body was recovered.



October 16, 1972, 57th Assault Helicopter Company

WO1 Onefry and 1LT Dugger were flying advisors around when a call came to perform a medevac mission. They immediately responded to the call and did not wait for gunship cover or request it. When they landed on the pad the ARVs refused to come out from under cover to load the wounded. At the time the firebase was under attack by an estimated battalion strength NVA unit. The crew chief and gunner left the Huey and began getting the wounded aboard the slick. While the loading was in progress the NVA hit the front of the ship with a 60mm recoilless rifle. The actual strike was under the nose, killing 1LT Dugger immediately and knocking Onefry unconscious. Two wounded ARVN and one American advisor were killed. For three hours the battle raged until another slick got in there and evacuated the wound. The KIAs were left and later recovered.