

From a very good book on RVN

"Bright Shining Fire" 763 || A BRIGHT SHINING LIE

Nick Sheenan

Remember the Hoai An  
City of 80

Vann explained the Hoai An withdrawal plan over the radio on the morning of the 19th to Lt. Col. Jack Anderson, who was to fly the command and control Huey.

About half an hour before the noon departure time, a couple of mortar rounds exploded near the convoy assembly point below the district compound. Most of the wounded had still not been loaded into the armored personnel carriers. Duc jumped into the nearest APC with his staff and took off up the road. The rest of the M-113s and trucks and jeeps raced after him. The district chief, an ARVN major, raced off in his jeep too after kicking his deputy for administration out of the vehicle to make room for his refrigerator. Some NVA were waiting in ambush in a nearby inlet, but Duc's M-113 and the district chief's jeep were among the vehicles that crashed through.

Colonel Schorr could have left with Duc, but he did not want to abandon Major Hacker and Lt. Thomas Eisenhower, the assistant district advisor, who had been conscientiously burning their classified documents and destroying the radio and other equipment up at the compound. He waited for them to run down the hill. They fled east over the paddy dikes toward Route 1. All around them, ARVN soldiers were reverting to instant peasants, tossing away M-16 rifles and helmets and combat web gear and stripping off boots and uniforms to run across paddies in bare feet and undershorts. The advisors had not gone far when Schorr fell with a bullet in the leg from the NVA who were chasing them. While Eisenhower gave him first aid, Hacker and two Kit Carson Scouts, Viet Cong defectors who had originally been hired as mercenaries by the U.S. Army and were now serving as bodyguards for the advisors, tried to fend off their pursuers. With so many ARVN unassisted, Hacker had difficulty telling friend from foe. He began shooting any Vietnamese approaching him with a weapon who was not wearing ARVN uniform. Some of the NVA soldiers started to crawl forward while their companions laid down covering fire.

Colonel Anderson in the command-and-control Huey had been listening to what was happening on the ground; as he flew toward Hoai An up a neighboring valley, he had tuned his radio to the frequency of the portable radio Schorr was carrying. The Cobra gunships would not be until noon, too late for the advisors. If Anderson attempted a rescue and was shot down, he and his copilot and crew would also be dead or captured.

The aviation units were the sole combat element of the U.S. Army. It did not come apart under the stress of the war in Vietnam. Nearly all helicopter pilots and crew members perished, but the Army did not

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never cracked. Whether it was the oneness of man and acrobatic flying machine, whether it was the equally shared risk of officer pilot and enlisted crew member, whatever the reason, the men of the helicopters kept their discipline and their spirit. As the French parachutists became the paladins of that earlier war, so the U.S. Army aviators became the dark knights of this one. Almost all career aviators served two tours in Vietnam. Anderson was on his second. He was a tall, big-boned Westerner, the commanding officer of the 7th Squadron of the 17th (Air) Cavalry, and his radio call sign befitted him: it was Ruthless Six. He raised Schorr on the radio and asked for the advisors' position. He told his copilot and gunners over the intercom that they were going down.

Anderson started to draw fire as soon as he began his descent; he was fifty to seventy-five feet above the rice fields before he spotted the little band, despite a smoke grenade one of the advisors set off to guide him. The helicopter vibrated from the thumping recoil of the .50 caliber machine guns Anderson had installed for his door gunners to replace the 7.62mm guns a Huey normally carried. He was glad he had decided to mount the great machine guns. His gunners knew how to handle them. If they got in and out on this trip, Anderson thought, it would be because the .50s spoke with such authority. He hovered on a dike while Eisenhower helped Schorr aboard and Hacker and the two Kit Carson Scouts then vaulted inside. A couple of mud-covered ARVN in their skivvies appeared out of the paddy and scrambled aboard too. The door gunners were killing NVA soldiers twenty-five yards away.

When they reached the airstrip at Landing Zone English near Bong Son town, they counted the bullet holes in the aircraft. There were only nine. The crew chief, who served as one of the gunners, had several pieces of shrapnel in his leg from a round that had struck an ammunition box and exploded a .50 caliber shell.

Over the next twelve days the two larger districts of Bong Son and Tam Quan went in the same wretched way Hoai An had. The whole of northern Binh Dinh, where 200,000 people lived, fell to the Communists. Vann took time he could not spare from the battle for the Highlands to fly down to the coast and exhort another Canute vainly commanding the waves to stand still. Thousands of RF and PF deserted. The two remaining battalions of the 40th Regiment would not even defend their home base at LZ English. The ARVN military police forced the wounded to die on the airstrip at English while they sold seats on the VNAF medical evacuation helicopters to deserters. They split the pro-