

Final draft from: probably about 95% done, except for editorial decisions and how placed into paragraph form:

Kelly tried to swallow, but the dry sensation of cotton mouth made it impossible. The pulsating rhythm of a hundred helicopters flying at 3000 feet on Combat Assault and heading due west, over the vast hazy and smoked covered Laotian Escarpment pulsated throughout the sky. The open radio mic was filled with the chatter of men talking back and forth, pointing out possible enemy positions. Kelly adjusted the audio level of his aviation headsets and with his left hand grabbed his left knee, trying to stop it from tapping up and down in an uncontrollable rhythmic beat. He was scared. Afraid he was about to die. He could feel his nineteen year old heart pounding hard behind his bullet proof vest. He switched off the safety switch on his M-60 machine gun and glanced down at the long brass string of 7.62 mm bullets that fed into the top plate of the gun. "You better not jam you stupid mother...", he cursed at the gun and then squirmed uncomfortably in his doorgunner seat, hand adjusting for the hundredth time the half inch thick armor plate that protected his underside. It was the first time in Kelly's young life that he felt unable to control his fate. The reality of the mission was slowly sinking in. A very big and historic military operation was about to take place and he would be a part of it. A very small part of it. "Jesus", he said almost prayer like, "If I make it through this... I promise I'll quit..." Suddenly the radio filled with a panicked voice. "May Day! May Day! 51 Cals. on the east ridge! Hydraulics out... Going Down! May Day! Going Down!" Kelly instinctively pointed the M-60 toward the smoke covered Laotian countryside. The radio now alive with a confusing mix of voices and sounds of heavy gunfire. "Someone see where he went down!... Get a rescue ship over there!... I See them!... Right off the Yellow Brick Road. Jesus! 51's all over that ridge line... Tanks! There's tanks

on road! Taking fire! Taking fire!.. Damn it! I don't believe it! A tank just shot at us... Keep the radio clean! Where's the fire coming from?... Three O'clock. Off of QL9. Oh shit! The whole area is hot.... Get some guns down there to protect that rescue ship!... There's ACK ACK at 3500 feet.. Witchdoctor is taking fire.... taking fire!... I got bad guys in tanks at 4-6-3-8. Fire at 4-6-3-8... Witchdoctor is down!... I'm breaking off, 2-9 take the lead. 2-9 take the lead! I'm breaking off to help Witchdoctor!... You get back in formation... Recovery ship will take care of all downed birds... I'm breaking off, damn it!".

Kelly felt the adrenaline rush through his body. He knew that Witchdoctor was his unit's rescue ship. He thought of the crew wondering if they were still alive. Captain Johnson spoke into the chopper's intercom. "All right guys. We're 5 minutes out from the LZ. We're on 30 second staggerers. Something happens.... follow the river back... got that...". No one answered. Johnson continued, "We're the second flight in. Fire for Fire rule". Eddie Nichols, the chopper's crew chief shouted back, "My ass! Fire for Fire! We're 20 clicks into Laos. I'm going in hot!" Kelly felt a little uneasy. He didn't like being the second flight into the LZ. In Laos, the N.V.A. would let the first choppers in, and then open up with mortars and 51 Caliber machine guns as the rest of the choppers made there troop insertions.

The radio exploded with pandemonium, "Shark down!..Shark down!.. Pilot hit in head!.... Roger, where you at... I got a mark on 'em.unable to get in...to much fire... 51's all over... get some F-4's in here!.. Blow the little bastards off that ridge line!.. You people watch the tanks... where in the hell are the F-4's..."

Above all the confusion, at 12,000 feet, was the Command and Control ship flown by Colonel Maxwell, known more for his willingness to sacrifice a

ship full of men than taking a chance to sacrifice himself. He spoke loudly above the commotion on the radio, "Dolphin group, This is C&C 1, Stay away from the north side of the river. All kinds of 23mm coming off that ridge line. Follow the bend in the river where it turns South. Still Fire for Fire rule. The LZ should be marked" Kelly smirked, "You Son of a whore. Easy for you to say when you're flying at 12,000 feet". Kelly heard Johnson speak as he dropped pitch with the cyclic and lowered the RPM, "There's so much smoke. Hope I can I.D. the LZ". Kelly glanced at Lt. Story, the co-pilot. It was his first mission with Story and he hardly knew him. The helicopter began a gradual left turn and descent. The smoke covered Laotian hilltops coming closer. Eight ARVN Infantry Troops sat quietly on the metal chopper floor. They looked frightened and uncomfortable. Each soldier was fully geared and ready for combat. He caught eyes with one of them and for an instant Kelly felt a comradeship. It quickly went away as Kelly grasped the M-60 and peered down at the earth shutting out the panicked voices on the radio and the constant frightening sounds of war.

The chopper continued to descend slowly into the valley. They were at 300 feet when he noticed something out of place near a group of 150 foot tall teak trees. He aimed his M-60 at the trees below him. In five more seconds he would open fire, "To hell with the stupid rules", he cursed to himself. In an instant the trees seemed to quake. A deadly looking sizzling white tracer began flying toward the chopper. Kelly instinctively opened fire with his M-60 thinking he could shoot it out of the sky. He aimed at the head of the arc, blazing M-60 tracer rounds at a rate of 10 rounds per second. The white arc now seemed to be moving in slow motion. Kelly changed the direction of his fire into the group of trees. The tracers appeared to be bouncing off the area like they were hitting something made

of metal. "Oh, God," yelled Kelly as the fierce looking arc climbed directly toward him, "it's gonna go right up my ..." Kelly shifted his weight thinking he could move out of the way. WHOMP! It smashed into the belly of the chopper. The force of the hit causing the chopper to rock slowly back and forth, like a boat in choppy water. Kelly instantly fired toward the trees, his M-60 jammed. There was an eerie moment of silence. Captain Johnson spoke first "What the hell... Did we take a hit?" Kelly fumbled with the jammed gun. Yeah... Yeah.. At three o'clock. Down in that group of trees on the east ridge. I don't know what it was, but, it was big and white". Eddie Nichols, screamed over the intercom as he fired his M-60, "Jeezuuz. There's all kinds of dinks down there. Tracers at eight o'clock". Johnson talked confidently into the radio, "This is Dolphin 29. On approach to LZ. We're taking heavy fire from the west ridge and took a big hit from the east ridge. Checking Instruments". Kelly looked down at his feet. Smoke was curling up from underneath the chopper's belly. "Oh no...", the words stuck in his throat.

Johnson's voice seemed to change in pitch, "This is 2-9. I'm getting warning lights. Hydraulics sticky. Losing power". Story spoke quickly, "What's the smoke from? There's all kinds of smoke". Nichols screamed, "I... think...we're on fire....". Johnson yelled into the radio mic, "Dolphin 2-9 is going down. May Day! May Day! 2-9 ... east of LZ...lots of fire! ...heavy caliber...we're on fire!... May Day!... May Day! Dolphin 2-..." The radio went dead. Kelly looked around in a panick. The biggest fear to any person who flew on a combat chopper was happening to the crew of 2-9. They were on fire and still 150 feet in the air.

Kelly felt his stomach tighten. There was chaos aboard the ship. He took a quick glimpse out the right side of the ship seeing numerous tracer rounds flying at the them. The N.V.A. on the ground new they had a

chopper in trouble and were doing their best to finish it off. Kelly felt a warm splash smash onto his leg. He looked down and seen blood. He glanced up and saw that several of the ARVN had taken hits. One was hit in the head. The blood spurted onto Kelly. Kelly grabbed his M-60 and tried to fire, forgetting that it had jammed. He cursed under his breath and reached over for his M-16 rifle, grabbing the canvas strap bag that held several magazines of M-16 rounds. He turned around, to look at the rear wall and could see the flames within the small portholes that were used to check the oil and hydraulic levels. "God!" he shouted, "The fuel cell!" He was sitting right next to it and the thought of blowing up in midair overwhelmed him. The fierce N.V.A. fire continued tracking the burning ship as Captain Johnson tried desperately to get the disabled chopper closer to the ground. Kelly was helpless as the event unfolded. Reality was playing in the familiar fatal slow motion he had witnessed before during combat in Vietnam. It was decision time and Kelly knew the wrong decision would mean the end of his life. Should he jump? They taught the gunners not to do that. You risked being cut in half by the main rotor blades because the chopper could be descending faster than the human being who had jumped out. Kelly released his seat belt then stepped out and onto the skid of the chopper. The wind blasting his face. The heat from the fire warming his back. He forgot about the N.V.A. and watched the ground coming toward him closer and closer. He remembered what they had taught him in paratrooper school, knowing that it was possible to safely jump from 15 feet. He grabbed tightly onto his M-16 and estimated they were 50 feet in the air and going down. He waited. 40 feet. 30 feet. 20 feet. "The Hell with it!" he screamed and then he jumped.

The old paratrooper training must have worked. Kelly landed in a heap and could hear the battle still raging on. The N.V.A. weapons firing throughout the area and being answered by the return fire of the helicopter gunners and the blasts of rockets and mini-guns from the gunships. He turned and stared at the burning helicopter. "Gotta help the crew" he rose slowly not sure if he had broken anything. He glanced quickly around, checking for N.V.A., didn't see any and ran toward the downed chopper, up to the co-pilot door, and in one motion slung the M-16 over his shoulder and tried to open the co-pilot's door. He could see both pilots. Story was frantically trying to rid himself of the safety harness that had now become a spiders web, trapping the co-pilot in his seat and Johnson trying vainly to shutdown the chopper. The chopper surged slightly forward with a deep sounding groan, causing the main rotor to smash into a small tree. The ship shuddered violently and the rotor broke free from the head mast and flung slowly through the air like a deadly slow flying machette. The force of the break was so strong that the chopper began to roll over and on top of Kelly. He fell to the ground, the M-16 dropping off his shoulder. He felt helpless and could hear the horrible sounds of metal twisting and turning as the huge metal monster slowly tumbled over. Kelly looked up, frantically trying to move out of the way, but the gravity continued its deadly pull on the burning ship, Kelly pressed himself against the earth trying to find a recession and avoid being crushed to death.

The chopper settled in and Kelly, although trapped under the chopper, was still alive. He cringed as two close gunshots rang out, glass shattering around him. He looked up to see Story, pistol in hand, climbing out the front chopper window. He looked down the chopper toward the tailsection and remembered that the ship was on fire. He reached for his M-16. It lay just

out of reach. He could hear a man screaming inside the chopper. Kelly figured it was Eddie Nichols. For some unknown reason he remembered that Eddie had an unusually high voice and it seemed to match the agonizing scream.

Kelly stared at the burning tail section. A complete calm had come over him. He knew that in moments the chopper would blow up. He thought of his mother and father, "What will they say when they get the news?". Kelly closed his eyes and prayed. "Dear Jesus, is this how I'm going to die?"

Kelly opened his eyes. He was now sitting in the thick elephant grass 30 feet away from the burning helicopter. It lay on its side totally engulfed in flames. The deadly screaming voice continued to echo amidst the sounds of battle. He shook his head trying to understand what had just happened, "How did I get out...". He had little time to consider, because not more than ten feet away, was an N.V.A. trooper, walking slowly toward the LZ. Kelly held his breath. He'd never seen the enemy this close before. He reached for his M-16 and realized it was still underneath the burning chopper. He stood perfectly still, amazed at the size of the N.V.A. soldier and how cool and calm he looked strolling through the jungle, his AK-47 held firmly with both hands, wearing faded blue-green jungle fatigues and a small pack on his back and, oddly enough, he was wearing sunglasses and smiling. Kelly watched him walk onward and disappear into the thick elephant grass. Kelly turned and looked back at the burning chopper. He couldn't believe his eyes. It was Johnson. "My God", he yelled to himself as he rushed toward Johnson. Captain Johnson was stumbling around in the LZ waving his .38 pistol in the air. Kelly grabbed him and yelled, "You O.K.?" Johnson looked quizzically at Kelly and struggling with his words said,

"Someone's... on... ship... ... gotta help..." They looked at each other, and in a comrade effort, ran toward the burning ship hoping they might be able to save whoever was trapped inside. They could get no closer than ten feet because of the intense heat. They looked at each other and in a futile bitter shrug knew it was to late. Johnson frantically grabbed Kelly by the shoulder and pointed to a clearing on the opposite side of the burning chopper. Miraculously, a pilot had landed and was attempting to rescue them. The gunner was standing on the ground waving and trying to get their attention. Kelly and Johnson began to run toward the rescue ship. The clever N.V.A. seemed to be waiting for the rescue effort and began laying down a fierce line of fire, tracers filled the air. Kelly fell in behind Johnson running as fast as his weary legs would go. He could feel the bullets flying past him and see them hitting the dirt near his feet. He started to laugh like a crazy man, his adrenaline pumping with every bullet that missed. He was weary, yet, determined that it wasn't his day to die, "No way mother fuckers...I'm gonna get out..." he yelled to anyone who could hear. The final 10 feet to the rescue ship took an eternity, the chopper was hovering a few feet above the ground and he had to jump up and climb aboard with help of the gunner.

Kelly hugged the warm metal floor of the chopper but the celebration was short. The gunner yelled at him to get in the gunner seat and start firing back at the N.V.A.. Kelly quickly hopped into the seat. He glanced over and could see Captain Johnson on the floor and incredibly there sat Eddie Nichols. Kelly instinctively fired the M-60, peppering the hillsides with sporadic bursts. The chopper attempted to lift off. He heard the gunner yelling and cursing and looked over and seen the gunner pointing his .38 pistol at two ARVN soldiers who were hanging onto the skids and trying to get back on the chopper. They couldn't lift off with the extra weight! The

N.V.A. fire continued flashing through the air and numerous rounds were finding their marks in the body of the chopper. The gunner cursed at the ARVN's and after several warning shots. He screamed, "GET... BACK... TO... YOUR FUCKING... LZ!" and then shot them dead, at point blank. Kelly watched the bodies tumble to the ground, the loss of the excess weight allowing the chopper to lift off. "This has got to be , hell" he figured. The chopper ascended slowly out of the valley. Fierce N.V.A. fire chasing them in the air as they flew upward. The gunner yelled at him for not firing the M-60 and pointed to the headset and motioned for him to plug it in. The aviation helmet filled up quickly with chaotic voices. He realized they were talking to him. "Did the co-pilot get out? Did the co-pilot get out?" Kelly was too tired to speak and simply nodded, yes. He listened to the pilot speaking to the frazzled C&C Commander, "Roger, Sir. I got three crewmembers. The gunner says he seen the co-pilot on the ground." Kelly felt a surge of hate as he listened to the conversation and spoke to himself, "Asshole. Why don't you get your litter ass down here and try flying in this shit". A new and calmer voice came over the radio, "Dolphin 1-7. BlackCat 1 here. Right outside your door at three o'clock. Gonna cover ya, buddy, back to Khe Sahn. Good job getting those boys out". Kelly looked out the door and could the Cobra Gunship on the flank. He looked down at the valley floor. It looked peaceful from 3000 feet up. "At last" he thought, "We're safe". A strong, sharp jerk tossed Kelly back against the metal wall behind him and the rescue ship began descending downward, quickly as if in autorotation. The pilot quickly stabilized the ship at a lower altitude. There were loud shouts and people talking frantically. Kelly saw Captain Johnson pointing out the chopper door on Kelly's side. Kelly looked up and watched in isolated horror a single main rotor blade tumbling slowly to the earth and small pieces of

glistening metal and white paper shimmering in the sunlight spiraling slowly down to the valley below. The BlackCat cobra had disintegrated in midair, taking a direct hit from either a Surface to Air Missile or Anti- Aircraft fire. Kelly sat back in his seat. Exhausted. The rescue ship chugging its way toward Khe Sahn.

They flew in silence. Gathering their thoughts, saying private prayers and sobering up from the hell they had just left and knowing that tomorrow they'd be flying back again. The ship's pilot, switched on the AFVN radio network and the soft voice of an announcer was giving the news report. "Today in Vietnam was a quiet one. There were no reports of American casualties from the units involved in the LamSon 719 Operation. Command Operations report light contact with the N.V.A.. Khe Sahn, Lan Vei and Fire Base Vandergrift report little or no enemy activity. The ARVN forces are pressing on toward Techpone, Laos in there attempt to cut off the Ho Chi Minh trail. Enemy losses for the week have been placed at 1357 N.V.A. Killed, 2345 wounded and 42 captured. ARVN losses, 23 Killed, 47 wounded and none missing. Hope you're having a great day, G.I.'s and now, how bout a little rock and roll to help make this day go by a little better. I got some Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young and a hot tune called, "Wooden Ships".