Kingsman reports on Lamson 719

On the morning of March 20, 1971, I was flying as Chalk 2 behind Maj. Jack Barker, Color 6, in a flight of 10 UH-1Hs flying from Khe Sanh to a PZ near FSB Brown in Laos.

B Company, 101st Aviation Battalion's traditional call sign was "Kingsmen," but we were "Color" during Lamson 719.

As was the case in most instances, I really didn't know all the details as to what had or what was happening as we headed out to extract more ARVNs who were surrounded. By this time in the operation (six weeks) it seemed every PZ and LZ was hot in Laos, some just hotter than others.

On the way out, we got on top of what I thought was smoke from a recent Arc Light. I have since read in Keith Nolan's book "Into Laos." It could have been a naval smoke screen.

As we approached the PZ, we kept about a one- to two-minute separation. We were no longer setting our aircraft down, but rather coming to a hover in the PZs and holding until the crew chief and/or gunner said we were loaded. If we sat down, we'd be swarmed by the ARVNs and not be able to take off.

Lead, Maj. Barker, rolled left off the smoke. It was hard to keep him in sight as the air was hazy from all the bombing.

About 90 seconds later I dropped the collective and actually skirted the smoke band on the way down, keeping the airspeed at about 120. I lost sight of the lead ship, but had the PZ in sight. Not long after I started my descent, it appeared as if the whole area around the PZ started sparkling — muzzle flashes from everywhere.

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Dustoff picked up all five wounded

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"You picked up five in that time?" I was incredulous.

"Yep, those guys down there have got their sierra together. Let's go home."

Amen to that!

The U.S. adviser thanked Denny and his crew profusely as we turned east and climbed out.

Four hundred pounds, 45 minutes — it was going to be close.

Bob took the controls for the flight back, and 15 minutes later we saw the lights of Ban Me Thuot.

I called in, "Operations, Falcons 2 and 9 are inbound, ETA is three zero. Lead is a little short on gas. This one is going to be real close."

The fuel gauge showed 250 pounds.

"Understand 2. Keep us advised," said Capt. Giordano.

The Dustoff ship was lighter and faster than our Charlies, so it was quite a ways ahead of us.

"Falcon 2, this is Dustoff 63. Weather is good all the way back. We're switching to tower freq now. Thanks again for coming out."

"Great job, 63, call us anytime. See you in the club."

Click, click.

The first flicker on the 20-minute light. Ban Me Thuot still looks a million miles away.

I can't stand it. I'm so tense I have to do something, so I take the controls back from Bob.

Then, the CO's distinctive voice. "Falcon 2, this is Stagecoach 6."

Maj. Owen had been a gunship pilot during his first tour. He knew who was flying late, and who might be in trouble — and he cared.

Just under 150 pounds.

"This is 2, go ahead."

"Do you want us to send a slick with fuel to meet you on the road?"

A night landing to an unsecured area, with lots of flashing lights from two helicopters — not my idea of a good time.

"Ah-h-h, you might have them start getting ready, just in case, Stagecoach 6. We're about two-zero out, and the fuel light just came on."

"Roger 2, we're standing by," came back Maj. Owen.

Except for the whine and the whop-whop, it sure is quiet in here.

"Chief, how far has anyone gotten into your fuel light?"

"Capt. Cunningham used 11 minutes coming back from Happy Valley, but that was in the daytime." No one laughed at Dave's joke.

Twelve minutes into the light; eight minutes left.

There, I can see the lights on the landing strip. Bouncing just under 100 now. Is that gauge accurate?

Oh me, oh my, pucker factor is WAY UP.

It's funny, the things you think about. I'm back with the Air Force recruiter, and he's telling me to stay in school, get my degree, and then I can come fly with them.

I should have listened, I could be doing 500 knots right now . . .

Sixteen minutes. I hate to, but dogleg just a bit south to avoid the most heavily populated areas of the city and angle in to the strip from high above.

Fifty pounds, give or take. We're high and fast on the approach, just in case — but it's so fast that we shoot right past the taxiway turnoff.

It takes almost all of the 2,500-foot runway to get stopped.

I'm soaked in sweat, shivering cold, and nearly frozen on the controls as we settle onto the runway.

Nobody said a word. We made it.

Nearly eight hours until the next mission.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Dedicated to Joel Erickson, Paul Dollk, Dave Nachtigall, and Cal Seruin, the crew of Falcon 484, who were lost when their gunship went down near Nha Trang on Feb. 23, 1970.

Aircraft took hits at perimeter of PZ

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Lead did not report any information on the PZ. Later I found out it was receiving heavy fire and made a go-around.

We didn't receive any hits until we were right at the perimeter of the PZ. Because I was coming in hot, in order to slow down, I stood the bird on its tail and pulled in all the pitch I could.

At this time I could see the ARVNs through my chin bubble, crouching in the middle of the PZ with no weapons.

At the same time, all hell broke loose inside the bird. It sounded as if every NVA had a hammer and was pounding on the bottom of the bird.

My co-pilot, WO Edward R. Cash, jerked back as both of our greenhouse windows shattered. Cash took a round through his flight suit leg, but it never touched his skin.

Cash, a former Green Beret for two tours, had his M-16 with scope slung over his seat. A round entered the eye piece and exited the side of the scope.

More rounds came through the radio controls and instrument panel.

The crew chief, Spec. 4 Lyle C. Smith (now deceased), and gunner, Spec. 4 Roger L. Perales, were shooting and hollering to keep moving.

Still taking hits, I rolled the nose over and radioed Chalk 3 not to follow my path in as the NVA were right on the edge of the PZ. Our climb-out was to the east.

Smith and Perales got out on the skids to assess the damage. They reported we were hit numerous times through the tailboom and rounds had come out the tail rotor drive shaft housing. We also were streaming fuel.

I called lead, Maj. Barker, and told him we would be climbing to altitude and heading back to Khe Sanh with the wounded bird. I don't recall him answering.

We lost our UHF and VHF radios, as it seemed everything quieted down except for FM. Chalk 3 aircraft commander WO Gene Haag and Chalk 4 aircraft commander WO Tom Hill went in low level after my call and were both able to pick up troops and get out.

Chalk 5 aircraft commander WO Bruce Sibley was hit by something larger than an RPG. He crashed short of the PZ. I didn't find out about this until the crew was rescued by Capt. Willis E. Wulf, our recovery ship.

Our attention was on our crippled aircraft. We decided we would pick up Route 9 and fly right at the base of the clouds. We crossed our fingers and headed for Khe Sanh.

Just after reaching the cloud base, I believe it to be about 4,000 to 4,500 AGL (I couldn't see — everything was smoky), it felt as if someone had punched me between the eyes.

As my senses came back I found us in a dive heading what seemed to be straight down. I pulled back on the cyclic and started to pull in power when I noticed most of the instrument panel was gone and all I had was flight idle.

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It seemed things were happening faster than I could comprehend. The images impressed on my mind are: My co-pilot, Ed Cash, was slumped over in his seat; I thought he could be dead. The windshield in front of both of us was blown out.

The windshield in front of both of us was blown out. Even the center post for the windshield was gone. Wires were dangling and sparking from the upper control panel.

I tried talking to Smith and Perales with no results. I turned to see Smith looking at me wide-eyed and talking, but I could not hear him. With the radios all out, shouting became our communication.

I noticed a big hole about the size of a football going into the transmission wall, which didn't help my confidence any.

Later Smith said we received an airburst in front of the bird, thought to be from a 37mm radar-controlled gun. The blast knocked Cash, Perales and me out. I slumped forward and pushed the bird into a dive.

Smith said he was forced back against the wall and couldn't get forward, and that's when I came too.

There, right in front of us, was a hilltop, FSB Delta 1. At the time I thought it was FSB Delta. This later caused a little problem which could have been fatal for us.

We were to evacuate this FSB later in the day after we evacuated the first PZ. This firebase had about 400 ARVNs on it and was overrun later in the day. Only a few survivors ever made it back to Vietnam. This count came from "Into Laos."

We were autorotating. As we crossed over the perimeter, we started receiving heavy small arms fire. This base was surrounded by NVA, who were right up against the perimeter.

As soon as the skids touched the ground, I bottomed the pitch. I wasn't going to take the chance of floating along and getting shot at any more than we needed. We slid some, but the surface was level. We continued taking heavy fire from the right side of the bird.

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ARVNs rush aircraft from a bunker

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Cash and Smith both got out very quickly. Suddenly, I heard a burst from an M-16 right behind my head.

The ARVNs had rushed the bird from a bunker on the left side and were pinning Perales in the bird. He was able to have them back off when he fired toward them over their heads.

Cash had gotten around and helped him take off the M-60 and as much ammo as they could carry. The three of them headed to a trench about 30 or 40 yards away that had been bulldozed out.

I was crawling for the trench when I remembered I hadn't pulled the self-destruction handle on the scrambler. I didn't think about it not working with all the damage we had taken. I remember shooting it about four or five times with my M-16.

Crawling for the trench, I rolled in and landed on top of an ARVN soldier with a bandaged, bloody leg. He let out a hell of a yell.

Cash had already gotten the CE and gunner set up with the M-60 on the western edge of the 15 yard-long trench. They were suppressing fire from the closest perimeter.

I had my survival vest on with the portable emergency radio that put out a beeping sound on guard. When I listened, all I could hear were other beeps from either other downed aircraft or jamming by the NVA.

This trench had about 15 or 20 ARVNs in it — with no weapons, except one ARVN officer with a pistol. They had given up fighting and were waiting to be withdrawn. At the far end of the trench was the ARVN officer with a PRC 25 FM radio.

Even though I didn't speak Vietnamese, I convinced that ARVN I was going to use the radio for awhile. I should have taken his pistol too, as he gave me the impression he might use it to get his radio back.

I called on our company frequency, but didn't get a response. Now the mortars started coming in. It was easy to see they were working the hill top to try to take out the bird.

After some time, I received a response on the radio from "Kingsmen 69," CWO Bill Singletary, Chalk 6, with crew members WO Joe St. John, CE Sgt. Bill Dillender, and doorgunner Pfc. John Chubb. (Later that day, Dillender and Chubb, Capt. John Dugan and Maj. Barker were shot down and listed as MIA's. Eventually their status was changed to KIA BNR.)

Singletary's bird had also been hit and couldn't make the PZ. I told Singletary and St. John we were on FSB Delta, but they couldn't see a helicopter on the ground. He asked for a long count and homed in on us on Delta 1.

I told Bill it was getting very hot with small arms and mortars and that he should break off and not risk it. He replied with a chuckle and said he would come in low level from the north.

As he was about to break over the edge of Delta 1, we were to give him a mark. I distinctively remember hearing both the bird and the shooting increasing steadily as he approached.

"I told Bill it was getting very hot with small arms and mortars and that he should break off and not risk it. He replied with a chuckle and said he would come in low level from the north.

As soon as he broke over the edge and came into view, Smith jumped out of the bunker onto his knees holding his M-16 over his head in a "T" fashion to mark our position for Singletary. He couldn't have been in that position for more than a few seconds when the dirt all around him exploded from small arms fire.

Thinking the worst, I figured he was dead or wounded badly and that this would cause us not to escape. Pretty selfish of me when I look back at it.

Smith, from a prone position, held his M-16 up again to give a mark — he wasn't hit. Why, I'll never know. I believe our guardian angels were working overtime this day.

Either Singletary or St. John said he had marked us. Whether they told us to take off running to the bird that was going to touch about 20-30 yards from us or it was instinctively the only thing to do, I can't recall.

We did know we had to be the first ones to the bird or it would be overloaded with ARVNs.

The following sounds like something out of a John Wayne movie.

As Singletary was flaring hard to slow down, all four of us took off running to where we thought we could jump on without the bird stopping.

As we ran we were shooting under the bird's path at the far perimeter to suppress the increased fire. Bill never had to stop as we jumped on. I was the last.

When I jumped to get on, the bird was going up. My chest hit the floor of the bird and knocked the wind out of me. The very next thing I felt was someone (I think it was the CE Dillender) grab my coat by the back of my shoulders and literally throw me across the bird. I reached out my right arm and caught the back of Singletary's seat or I'd have been back out the other side.

As I came aboard Singletary pulled in all the power he had and nosed over, staying as low as possible until we

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