



May 3, 1999

B Co 158th Avn Bn 101st Abn Div

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Dear Tom,

I enjoyed your book "The Price of Exit". After 28 years, I had forgotten a lot. Also there was much that I just did not know about the overall Big Picture. I was not one to ask questions. Just kept in back of the formation and did what I was told.

Thought you might enjoy the photos. Pete Dagastino needs no introduction. You mentioned him in your book. He was just a heck of a good person. If you know where he is, please head him toward the Lancer home page. Mike "Benny" Monroe was my crew chief on aircraft 013. He was the last one in our company to have a free M-60. He lost his ammo can on one of our trips into Laos during LS719. I think it still bothers him today. The last photo is of the round table. Most of my missions began and ended there.

Per your request for stories about LS719, here is a "Once Upon a Time and This is No Sh*t" story.

On March 5th or 6th (not sure of the date) I was part of assault into LZ Sophia. I understand that there were two LZ Sophias. I think this one was the western most LZ. This was my third or fourth day as AC. I learned more in the first week as AC then all the time that had gone before. I had a new lt in the right seat whose name has gone with the years. The DG was Buhcanon I think. The CE was Willie Tate I think. I flew the first round trip. I'm not sure where the Lancers were in regards to who our aircraft were following. I'm not sure where I was in our flight. I recall that going in and out of the PZ and the trip to the LZ was no problem. No fire taken during the insert.

There was a real mess when we got close to the PZ for the second round. Aircraft were backing up. Aircraft were doing 360s. Aircraft were slowing up to 40 knots. It soon became very difficult to tell who you were following. Lt Lance Ruck, Lancer 13 was behind me. Some how he called going into the PZ ahead of me. He had WO Lane as a right seat. Have no idea who the back seaters were. I let him know that we had changed positions and we would just continue that way.

The first trip was mine, the second belonged to the lt. He took it out of the PZ behind Ruck. About half way out I was watching an F4 pull out of his bomb run. The fast mover came around in a race track pattern. When he came back around for his next run he headed right for us. I often have wondered if he ever saw us and if his heart skipped a few beats. It was amazing how fast the good separation became zilch. There was no more than a hundred feet between us. He went directly in front and I could see rivets and flames out his exhaust as he went past. I recall the Lt saying he was glad I did not tell him about it. Scared the hey out of me. By the time I realized what his flight path was it was to late to even take evasive action.

Things were starting to heat up at LZ Sophia. You heard a lot of folks taking fire. The lt had our timing about right, Lance was leaving we were landing. As the troops unloaded Lance called that his aircraft was a

dead duck. Not those words exactly. I look up and to my left to see him coming back into the LZ, but to the north western most portion. I would like to see a picture of the LZ if you have one. I do not recall that it was football field size, but it was larger than most. The Lt started to depart. I took the controls and said something to the effect that we had to pick up Ruck and his crew. Little did I know that I was about to loose my cherry big time. About the time I had the aircraft turned 90deg to the left and hovered toward his aircraft, all hell broke loose.

I would like to know if others have a feeling of slow motion when the stuff hits the fan. I recall a sense of everything slowing down. I'm not sure where the opposing forces were. They must have been dug into holes. I do not recall seeing any. My CE was hit in both legs from the front. His gun stop kept him from getting the little bastard shooting at him. He also took a round in the butt from the other side of the aircraft. The DG had a round come through the ammo can and got him in the chest. Not a bad wound. I now wonder if he had a chicken plate on. The Lt was saved by the seat. There were 3 or 4 to the side plate and a few underneath. I felt my knee move. A round came through the vent looking window and just missed my leg. Then I felt something in my leg. I did not want to look and did not until we got back to KS. Found two big pieces of plexiglas from the chin bubble stuck in it.

I recall the whole landscape looking very surreal. I had to hold a high hover due to the large number of tall stumps (4 to 6 feet). Looking down I felt like a rerun of the infiltration course in basic. However this time I was above it. Tracers all over the place. By the time I got near Ruck and his crew, they were standing on a well worn path a few yards from their aircraft. I recall making eye contact. The four of them all in a line behind Ruck looking up at me as if to say you are too high to get in. Just could not find a place to get the down to the ground. The odd thing about the stumps was that they looked like they were cut off at shoulder level with an ax. I do not recall any trees blown over as if a daisy cutter was used. I think the area was free of debris.

I start searching for a spot to get down to ground level. I look back at Ruck and he is headed back toward his aircraft with the rest of the crew in tow. Like ducks following their mother. Where to hell was he going. That is when I made the decision to depart. I already had two wounded on board. I tried to make a call to the flight letting them know that I did not get Ruck and his crew. Crap, the radio was shot out. As soon as I was clear of the LZ I changed radios. And let the rest of the flight know that I did not recover the crew. I do not recall how we used the radios during LS719. I think we used the FM for comm within the flight and not the vhf and I switched to vhf.. On the way back another Lancer aircraft came up beside me. He was having trouble keeping up with me. I had the airspeed at 120 knots.

Later I found out that Ruck went back to get his map. Here I am taking hits on the right side and he is worried about his map. He had a map of coveted scale. Not sure what scale (1/250?) it was but, there were very few of them. After that they ran down the trail to where the original touch down point was. Hopped on the next aircraft and out without a scratch. I do not understand how they avoided all the lead in that LZ. I think it helped that they had their sights set on me instead of the Ruck. I talked to Ruck about a year ago. Should have asked him if he still had the map.

One of the first places pointed out to me when I came in country were the location of all the hospitals. As I approached KS I realized I did not know the location of the hospital.. You could not get a word in edge wise to the tower. There was a lot of radio traffic. A few other aircraft with their own emergence. I just could not find the hospital. I spotted a white flag with red cross and landed to it. Turns out it was a small med station. The guy looked in back of the aircraft and pointed in the direction I should go. There are a few parts of that day I recall very clear and this is one. I still have this image of this guy looking at the back of my aircraft. He had this look of "Its to much of a mess for me to handle. You need to go over there". Finally I see the pad. Unload the two in back then hop over to the runway. Saw the CE a couple days later at

May 4, 1999

QT. He seemed to be in good spirits. The DG was out for a couple weeks then came back to finish his tour. If possible I would like to find out for sure the names of the folks that crewed with me.

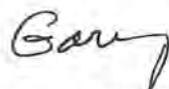
The aircraft had taken about twenty rounds. Possibly more since I did not get underneath to count. Just about every one on the second run through the LZ took hits. It was the next day, I think, we started the pool talked about in the Time article. I would have take a better count if the pool was on at that time. We had those folks surrounded. I can prove this because there were holes from all directions. No holes on top and that was the only place. We were extremely lucky since the fuel control took a hit. When the maintenance folks tried to start the engine they found the fuel control inop. I do not know the aircraft tail number. I think it suffered some kind of structure damage and was not flown by our company again.

That's my story and I'm sticking to it. You are welcome to use it as long as you do not mention the award I received. I have always felt a bit embarrassed about the award because I did not recover the crew. There is a possibility that a fellow Lancer may relate this story to you. So NO write up about the award please. In the back of my mind I think of this as an award for flying CCN missions.

I would like very much to see some pictures of LZ Sophia. If you have some, would you be so kind to e-mail a couple?

Do you have the story about the reporter's camera being thrown into the jungle? There should be a Time or Newsweek article on it. I will ask some of the folks at the BNA reunion about it.

Have you considered doing a book on flying for CCN?????? I hated that mission. Loads of stories.



Gary M. Whitty