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January 11, 1996

Mr. Hovey Bennet
Sr. Project Coordinator
MACV-SOG History Project
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Dear Mr. Bennett:

Thank you for your review of my short story in "Behind The Lines".

Please keep in mind, my story is that of a young W-1, serving as a pilot. I had long been interested in "the war" while I was raised in Pensacola, Florida. I saw many Navy and Marine pilots training for service. I had an above average interest in the news reports and had a better than average understanding of the conflict before arriving there. I also had the benefit of four quarters of college at Florida State University, with an emerging anti-war effort I vehemently disagreed with. I knew the landmarks of northern I Corps, due to news coverage of Con Thien and Khe Sanh, well before I arrived there. I, like all Warrant Officers, was a volunteer, wanting to serve my country, undeterred by the rumors that one of three Army pilots died in action.

As a pilot, we didn't know what your specific assignments or equipment needs were. For that reason I offer no objection to your comment regarding "McGuire Rigs". Whatever equipment was used, the pilots didn't know or care. Pilots had their own problems; which most SOG teams equally cared less about, due to respective mission demands. Pilots called them McGuire Rigs and I'm sure continued calling them as such, long after the name and equipment changed for Special Forces. A similar difference in terminology common to the time was F.O.B. To a special forces soldier at Quang Tri, it may have been "forward operations base"; however, pilots referred to it as the "flight over border" pad. Based upon your duties and need to know, acronyms frequently had very different meanings.

I agree with your statement that recon missions were not normally run "up north", I am not aware of any existing Presidential directive allowing them. It was however, the time of President Nixon and Henry Kissenger. Sanitized military records wouldn't surprise me in the least. The larger picture, including General Abrams pending invasion of Laos, was obviously the reason for the Phoenix missions.

I categorically reject your contention that the mission described was in or on the Laotian Border. Due to some minor editing by Gary Linderer, the impression that this was a routine mission is inaccurate. Crossborder flights were very, very special events. There were times we stood on standby to recover teams, with missions suddenly cancelled without explanation. Losses were never explained to us, we merely stood ready to extract teams, where ever, whenever called.

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The mission I described was quite simply in North Vietnam, and it simply was scary as hell. We were told it was not a "legal" mission, hence the importance of the overpowering briefing I described.

Even as a young "peter pilot", I clearly knew that going northwest to the Rockpile and turning right put you in one place, North Vietnam. I originally thought we'd flown three missions into North Vietnam. I remain certain that the mission described and the subsequent one, where I took the series of photographs, were most certainly in North Vietnam, well north of U.S. artillery fire from Camp Carroll. My photograph of the Huey's descending reveals a generally untouched landscape, unlike Laos, the DMZ and I Corps.

We did have a third cross-border mission, within a week of the first, which you are very likely accurate in thinking was Laos, near the border, but well north of the DMZ. On that mission, while returning, I took a distant photograph of the Razorback, with the Rockpile to it's left, obviously looking southeast. I was over the DMZ-North Vietnam border when I took it.

The remainder of our missions were in Laos, working with teams apparently reconing future LZ's and targets for the ARVN invasion to Tchepone, Laos.

I personally believe, after twenty-five years have passed, with serious study of the history and analysis of the "LamSon 719 After Action Report", all of the Phoenix missions and recon extractions were the prelude to the Laotian invasion.

The mission described in my story was on the fourth of December, 1970. I was assigned to the second platoon. I was then transferred to the first platoon which was then rotated onto CCN direct support. We remained on extended CCN duties until I transferred out to a Remf unit on January 21, 1971. The fact that we were kept on those duties continuously, was very unusual. This, in retrospect, was apparently a command descision to minimize the number of individuals aware of or participating in the the actions. Fewer mouths so to speak.

Colonel Mike Sloniker is familiar with my story and those involved in it. He also knows of other 101st pilots who reported flying up north. One is a former Kingsman, currently an airline pilot. He has a photo of the NVA flag north of the DMZ, near Cua Viet, taken at altitude, heading south.

I personally believe the written records of that era are intentionally incomplete, so at some level of your research, you may want to carefully consider anecdotal reports from participants.

Some notes of interest about the Phoenix. They remain a fairly tight group, many regularly attending VHPA meetings each 4th of July. In October, 1990, Mike Sloniker accidently discovered in a conversation with a DIA Colonel, a funeral ceremony For Nelson, Moreira, Hatley and King, scheduled on Friday that week. Nine Phoenix attended the ceremony, after 19 years, at their own expense, from across the country. In two cases, with less than twentyfour hours notice.

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On September 20, 1970, a Phoenix bird was shot down attempting to insert a Ranger team on the north side of the DMZ. They impacted west of Con Thien(YD113725). Lt. Al Finn and W.O.1 Larry Baldwin were killed, along with 4 of the 5 Rangers on board.

The evening before Khe Sanh was reopened in January, 1971, Phoenix Warrant Officer John Michaelson, flew out at dusk and placed a "Welcome To Khe Sanh" sign for combat assaulting engineers and their security force to enjoy the next morning.

On February 8, 1971, Captain David Nelson flew the lead Huey on the first CA into Laos. There were forty slicks in the formation. He was given the lead position based upon his personal experience and knowledge of the AO. The first Huey lost in the operation was the third bird in line behind Nelson, flown by CW-2 Paul Stewart. 23mm fire destroyed the Phoenix birds' tail boom. His copilot was WO-1 Tommy Doody, who'd also flown the missions up north.

Nelson was lost on March 5, 1971, with WO-1 Ralph Moreira leading a Phoenix platoon onto LZ Sophia in Laos, with ARVN's aboard. Moreira also flew the missions up north.

The last Phoenix pilots lost were CW-2 David Soyland WO-1 Dale Pearce. They were lost attempting the hot extraction of Recon Team Alaska in May, 1971. Special Forces Sergeant Dale Dehnke, died trying to assist them, a victim of "friendly cobra fire". He was the same S.F. NCO that reconned the Son Tay Prison Camp six months earlier. That story may be in a subsequent issue of "Behind the Lines." The story is carefully based upon personal interviews with those present as well as Defense Intelligence Agency casualty resolution efforts. DIA researchers located the wreckage in 1989. The official briefing records at Da Nang incorrectly reported the map coordinates of that action. This may be confirmed with Col. Mike Sloniker, U.S.A.R.

The records you have obtained may be official, yet may well be inaccurate, or incomplete. The short story you've read is part of a much larger carefully researched writing project which has been ongoing for nearly three years. Many of the veterans named in my book manuscript reviewed it months ago and contributed to it. All agree, individuals may have different perspectives of similar events. Each may have different interpretations of specific actions. In my case, I have reported it as the Phoenix pilots and myself experienced it.

I wish you well in your historical research endeavors.

Collectively, thankfully unablaze!

Tom Marshall

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