

Tom Marshall

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February 21, 1996

Mr. Hovey Bennet  
Sr. Project Coordinator  
MACV-SOG History Project

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Dear Mr. Bennett:

Thank you for your challenging 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 tactical 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 at Quang Tri, waiting to recover teams, with missions suddenly cancelled without explanation. Losses were never explained to us, we merely stood ready to extract teams, wherever, whenever called.

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The mission I described was quite simply in North Vietnam, and it was scary as hell to the pilots. We were told it was not a "legal" mission, hence the importance of the overpowering briefing I described. We had been taught in Flight School, "Tac-X" training, to always know the exact location of borders. We'd been taught that straying across a border was suicidal. Intentionally flying across them instantly put us at our nerves limits.

Even as a young "peter pilot", I clearly knew that going northwest to the Rockpile and then heading 350 degrees put you in one place, 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 another mission, within a week of my story, which was near the Laotian/North Vietnam tri-border, but within the northwestern corner of the DMZ. On that mission, while returning, I took a distant photograph of the Razorback, with the Rockpile to its left, obviously looking southeast. I was over the DMZ-North Vietnam border when I took it. On that mission, two platoons of 101 Avn. Group Hueys, Phoenix and Ghostriders, extracted either Hac Bao ARVN's or South Vietnamese Marines. Both the Griffins and Redskins provided ARA/Gun support.

Other than the mission in my story and the subsequent one when I took the photos, the remaining missions I flew were in Laos or the DMZ. The SOG teams were apparently reconing future LZ's and targets for the ARVN invasion to Tchepone, Laos. On December 29, 1970, we took flak at 4,000 feet climbing away from a PZ southeast of Tchepone.

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. We also flew only extraction missions during that time, no insertions. This, in retrospect, was apparently a command decision to minimize the number of individuals aware of or participating in 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. I know two pilots who flew cobras up north. One, Rick Freeman, lives in Argyle, Texas. I talked with him extensively after receiving your letter. He's currently an airline pilot. He attends the annual special forces reunion in Texas. You may know him from that event. He can confirm there were many such missions up north during his three year extended tour. Another Griffin pilot was Bill Sorenson. He's now a CW-4 serving at Fort Riley, Kansas. He personally told me last summer that he may have been flying cover on the mission that I photographed. Freeman has a photo of the NVA flag north of the DMZ, near Cua Viet, taken at altitude, heading south, during 1969.

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Some notes of interest about the Phoenix. They remain a fairly tight group, many regularly attending VHPA meetings each 4th of July. On a Tuesday afternoon in October, 1990, Mike Sloniker accidentally 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.

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. Michaelson is now a Tax Attorney in upstate New York. In November, 1970, he responded to a Marine aircrew's Mayday in Laos, north of the DMZ. He flew in at a 100 knots between the trees, successfully extracting them. He took continuous small arms, .51 cal and RPG fire going in and out. He was ordered by the Battalion Commander to "never do that again" or face a court-martial. He then received a DFC for his successful rescue. In typical Warrant Officer style, one week later he tried it again. The aircrew unfortunately had been captured or killed before he arrived on scene. Luckily, he was not tried or reprimanded. Michaelson flew the missions north.

The Phoenix and other 158th aviation battalion companies knew how to fly in high threat areas, between the trees, as fast as the bird would go. Dean Grau, also experienced these missions. In 1982 he told Pat McKeane, another Phoenix pilot of my time, the Army finally had a formal name for it; "nape of earth flight". McKeane, as other Phoenix, simply called it "trying to fucking stay alive!".

On February 8, 1971, during LamSon 719, Captain David Nelson, the Phoenix aircraft commander in my story, 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 bird's tail boom. His copilot was WO-1 Tommy Doody, who'd also flown the missions up north with me. Stewart had six days left in-country, yet insisted on flying.

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. Soyland and his Phoenix crew attempted the extraction knowing of the four previous Hueys being badly shot up with wounded crewmen. Soyland was also a veteran of the missions up north.

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Special Forces Sergeant Dale Dehnke, died trying to assist them with a response team. Dehnke was a victim of "friendly" cobra fire. He was the same SF NCO who'd 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. or retired Lt. Col. Skip Butler, a Redskin pilot at the scene, who was also SF trained prior to flight school.

The records you have obtained may be official, yet may well be inaccurate, and/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. Most 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 am in the process of having additional photos of the actions being made for Gary Linderer. I will provide you copies as well. I remain steadfast in my personal experiences and beliefs, that we definitely had missions in lower North Vietnam. They were well north of the DMZ, far enough east of the Lao border, to avoid any confusion as to our location. Back at the hootches after the missions, the only discussion among the Phoenix pilots was an oft heard comment, "can you fucking believe it?"

You can obtain back issues of the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association Directory. In past issues are records of casualty statistics, including map references and actions described.

I wish you well in your historical research endeavors. Having read Harve Saal's article in BTL, I sense an overpowering desire to protect the "purity" of your fraternal veterans history. Harve's fervor in protecting his concept of history, may have led him to unconditionally reject some history that doesn't fit his personal experiences and concepts. There may have been an official policy of no-one up north at the time, but many pilots can assure you some teams were most definitely operating in the tri-border area of **North Vietnam**.

Just as you've worked at assembling your history of that era, I believe it long past time to get the story of the Phoenix and others written into history. I have been a real estate technical analyst and report writer since I left the Army. I submitted my book manuscript to Gary Linderer last summer, in hopes he could help me find a publisher. In grateful appreciation of his encouragement, I offered him two short stories, to use or discard, without payment or expense reimbursement. They are extracted from a much larger work, which Gary has read. He is also aware of confirmation sources through Sloniker and others.

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I distributed copies of BTL among the Phoenix veterans. On February 11, 1996, I received a phone call from an excited Bruce Bender, a former W-1 who also flew missions north with the Phoenix, in March and April, 1970. Like me, once he realized they weren't going to stop, he requested a transfer out of the Phoenix, just as I did eight months later. Remarkably, I had replaced Bender at the 163 Avn. Co., Camp Eagle, when he derosered, in January, 1971. We shared the very lucky callsign One-Three (13). He is now a physical therapist, living in Globe, Arizona.

I hope that you reconsider the research sources utilized for your project. A lot of other documentation sources and support personnel experiences may add to the understanding of SF accomplishments during that time.

I hope this satisfies any concerns you may have regarding the accuracy of my story.

Can you possibly help me with the answers to two questions I have?

A former SF NCO, Jimmy Thornburgh, was my roommate in flight school. He told me the story of a friend of his, also a SF NCO, captured up North in 1964 or 1965, who was given a public execution. Do you have any records of that story?

Also, can you tell me how many North Vietnamese and Chinese were killed in the Son Tay raid?

If you can help me with these questions, I'd gratefully appreciate it.

Collectively, thankfully unablate!

Tom Marshall