I remembered in early January when Captain Hunt had Stewart try to talk me out of transferring from the Phoenix. Stewart was working off a thirty-day leave, near the end of his tour of duty with the Phoenix Company. Stewart was in the same hootch I was in. Our sleeping cubicles had been next to each other.

Stewart had said, "I'll probably die driving a slick." Now, Stewart was dead, along with one of the nicest guys I'd ever met, Tommy Doody. It was Doody I had photographed on the CCN mission and deer hunt. I was shaken. Keith held his head down, shaking it slowly from side to side. We shook hands and parted.

February 17, 1971

On the seventeenth, I flew five hours for the engineer battalion commander, Colonel Rodolph, picking him up from the engineer pad at Camp Eagle and flying out to the eastern side of the A Shau Valley. Firebase Rendezvous was located just below the eastern mountain ridge, on the A Shau Valley floor. I thought of the infantrymen's poem, a blasphemed Psalm 23: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I shall fear no evil, for I am the meanest son of a bitch in the valley. My M-16 is my rod and staff . . ." While Rodolph was out, I kept the engine going at flight speed. I was prepared to leave after the first shot fired. I couldn't believe the men working were going to spend the night there. They truly were *combat* engineers. The colonel had everybody working intensely.

Bulldozers were clearing the one-lane dirt road from Camp Eagle for trucks. A dozer on Rendezvous was digging deep bunkers. Artillery registration was underway from Firebase Berchtesgaden, on a mountaintop overlooking them. Other artillery bases to the north and east could also support them. This was a major operation into

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the A Shau Valley or these guys were simply bait. Other engineering units had been air assaulted in to work eastward toward the other elements, speeding the road improvements. In addition to the road and drainage improvements, seven large helicopter landing zones were cut.

After finishing the colonel's business at Rendezvous, he wanted a quick tour of the valley floor. We flew at one hundred knots with a slight zigzag up along the old Highway 548, which was a two-lane dirt road, obviously in heavy use. From our ten-foot altitude, we observed well-placed, corrugated culverts at small creek and drainage areas. I asked him why they were there, and he said simply, "The North Vietnamese maintain them. We go out and blow them up now and then, but they rebuild them." He then wanted to divert to Firebase O'Reilley, near Ripcord. A bulldozer was working on the mountaintop there. Then the Colonel surprised me with a request for a low, slow flyover of Ripcord. Ripcord had been closed since the preceding summer when it was evacuated.

We did the flyover at Ripcord, low and slow. I thought of Jim Saunders six months earlier, shot down and evading NVA on the very hill below me. Flying there was an eerie feeling. I felt very exposed. We proceeded to O'Reilley, where I landed. I let the colonel off and kept the aircraft engine going at flight RPM. The colonel spent several minutes talking to the people working. They were clearing mines and preparing new defensive positions. After a few minutes he hopped back in, and we departed. He then pointed out a one-lane red clay road that ran from Ripcord to the A Shau Valley. It had been exposed by B-52 "defoliation" (bombing). I asked him when we built that. He said, "We didn't build that. The North Vietnamese built that last summer. They still maintain it." That was a shock. There I was in my little Loach, flying south of Ripcord. The North Vietnamese Army was maintaining and occupying the land and being resupplied by truck

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only twenty miles from Camp Eagle. Time to climb a little higher.

February 18, 1971

A Shau Valley. The Commanchero flight of Hueys from Camp Eagle was attempting a hot extraction of a Special Forces team on the west side of the A Shau Valley near the Laotian border. CW2 Phillip Berg piloted the Huey to a hover for a hot string extraction, similar to my first CCN mission with Dave Nelson. They came to a hover, and the ropes were dropped as a 12.7mm antiaircraft machine gun riddled the aircraft, stopping the engine. The aircraft lost rotor rpm, rolled over, and crashed, killing Berg. Another WORWAC 70-3 class member dead.

Ranger North Laos

On February 19, the northern flank of LZ Ranger North came under massed human wave attacks, supported by field artillery and tank fire. Resupply to Ranger North, Ranger South, and Hill 31 had been canceled for three days. The few helicopters attempting resupply were shot up before even reaching the landing zones.

Sp5. Dennis Fuji, stranded on Ranger North after his helicopter had been shot down, was directing tactical air strikes for the ARVNs. If he hadn't been so effective, they would have been overrun the previous day. Plans were under way to extract him, regardless of the enemy fire.

Also on February 19, Dustoff pilot, WO John Rauen had flown his Huey into Laos to an evacuation of wounded. On approach to the pickup Zone, the aircraft was riddled with bullets, the hydraulic system was shot out, and flight controls were damaged. They attempted a running landing on return to Khe Sanh. Damage to the Huey prevented

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them from a normal landing to a hover. The aircraft crashed and burned on final approach, near the runway, killing Rauen, who was trapped in the burning wreckage. Another WORWAC 70-5 class member, John Rauen, dead.

On February 20, an emergency resupply of Ranger North and extraction of Specialist Fuji was commenced. A flight of twenty-one Hueys was led by a Phoenix Platoon. Capt. Dave Nelson was the lead aircraft commander. The company commander and flight leader was Maj. Jim Lloyd, flying in Nelson's Huey.

Sp5. Dennis Fuji, was stranded on Firebase Ranger North, four miles inside Laos, west of the DMZ. The NVA was massing tanks and preparing to overrun it. Little time was left. In desperation, a gambling attempt to extract Fuji proceeded from Khe Sanh to Ranger North.

The Vietnamese Rangers had not been resupplied in two days due to intense antiaircraft fire. Lt. Col. William Peachey, the air mission commander, decided the flight could not make the approach. However, Specialist Fuji was still in radio contact.

An American was on the ground, in the most dangerous circumstances. Nelson and Lloyd agreed. They had to get Fuji out. With Peachey's acknowledgment, they dashed in low-level, flying between the trees, as fast as possible. They slid to a landing among mortar bursts, uncountable rounds of AK-47, .51-caliber, and 23mm fire. Fuji was hauled aboard, along with *seventeen* uninvited ARVNs who desperately wanted out.

As Nelson departed, the Phoenix Huey began trailing the white smoke characteristic of vaporizing fuel and burning oil. A few seconds later, the turbine engine belched a black-donut smoke ring, indicating catastrophic engine damage. Then fire erupted from the engine compartment, flames leaping back to the tail boom! Lieutenant Colonel Peachey, radioed, "Fire! Get out! Get out!"

As taught, Lloyd reflexively reached to shut the engine fuel flow off to keep the Huey from exploding!

But Nelson, fearing they would crash land to certain death with the NVA, slapped Lloyd's hand away from the fuel cut-off switch. Too late; the engine died. Nelson, alert to the crisis, calmly said, "Now we're committed." He entered powerless autorotation onto Ranger South, which luckily, was in his flight path. Ranger South was also in the process of being assaulted by NVA. It was approximately eight hundred meters south of Ranger North. Nelson slid the flaming, smoking Huey to a powerless landing on Ranger South. But it was like Ranger North; he'd again landed among flying bullets, exploding mortars. Despite being grossly overloaded with eighteen passengers, shot up, on fire, and powerless, Nelson completed the perfect autorotation!

When they slid to a stop, everyone quickly evacuated but Nelson, who was calmly shutting down the aircraft as if it'd been a normal landing. Fearing an explosion, the gunner, demonstrated his own minor miracle of coordination and physical prowess, simultaneously unlatching Nelson's seat belt and ~~pulling~~ yanking him out of the aircraft. It could have exploded at any second. As he was yanked from the Huey, Nelson's only injury was the scuffed toe of his brilliantly polished boots. Most men running from the flaming Huey went left. But Nelson ran to the right and dove into the wood line. Ranger South was taking very heavy fire.

Overhead, the circling Phoenix pilots had a commanding view, and the pilots grimaced as they watched friends running from the burning Huey. The fire and the heat were obviously intense as the aircraft's magnesium components flared; the tail boom sagged to the ground as the crew leaped into the jungle, away from the flames.

When they realized Nelson was down, without asking permission, warrant officers Butch Doan and Pat McKeaney dove to get them. A Phoenix crew was down,

they would retrieve them! Doan commenced a tightly spiraling dive, nearly vertical, down three thousand feet to the left side of the burning Huey. Green .51-caliber tracers and fluffy white puffs of 23mm air bursts enveloped them during the descent. One 23mm struck the rotor mast, badly damaging the main rotor system vibration dampeners. Mckeaney would later tell other Phoenix pilots of what could have been his last two thoughts, "Doan is fucking crazy, and now we're gonna die!" When the action was safely over, laughing at mortal threat released some tension.

With Major Lloyd, the crew chief, and gunner aboard Doan's Phoenix bird, they departed under fire, taking many more serious hits leaving Ranger South. Doan and McKeaney, with their crewmen and passengers, barely made it to Hill 30. They'd taken a 23mm hit on the main rotor mast, which caused a horrible vertical vibration. The Huey's collective control actually bounced during the short flight, As Doan crash landed at the larger ARVN position, they radioed the others that they didn't have Nelson on board!

The Phoenix had been lucky, one more time, but good luck was quickly being used up. Capt. John Bottman called Doan to see if they'd gotten everyone out. After a couple of minutes' confusion, the call came: Nelson was still on the ground. Covered by Skip Butler, Redskin One-Five, with 2d Lt. John Henry Bond in the Cobra's front seat, Capt. Don Davis and Capt. John Bottman came in next.

Bottman descended the Huey east of Ranger South to approach low-level, trying to avoid the murderous antiaircraft fire above the hill. Doan and McKeaney had barely survived. Don Davis saw the intense antiaircraft fire. As they raced a couple of feet above the treetops, Davis saw North Vietnamese Army troops everywhere he looked. The twinkling muzzle flashes of AKs were clearly visible

in broad daylight. As they raced between the trees, Davis, the copilot, began calling out critical engine and flight instruments while Bottman kept his eyes outside the cockpit. Then, incredibly, Davis called out, "Airspeed 145 knots." In a desperate attempt to disrupt the North Vietnamese Army gunners aim, Bottman had the empty Huey exceeding its designed airspeed limit.

They landed on the right side of the smoking pile of debris that had been Nelson's Huey. Only a piece of the tail boom remained. Bottman sat thirty *very* anxious seconds, under fire, waiting for Nelson, who finally came high stepping out of the woods, running across the LZ under fire. He ran on his heels so he wouldn't scuff the toes of his legendary shined boots. Nelson dove into the back of the aircraft, rolling on his back, feet in the air, as he hit. He wouldn't scuff his boots further. While climbing out with bullets whizzing around them, Nelson tapped Davis' shoulder. Davis turned to find Nelson disgustedly pointing to a scratch in the black mirror-glaze toe of his boot.

Fuji spent one more night in Laos, at the safer ARVN position, but he was evacuated early the next morning. Bottman and Davis carried the Phoenix crew members home to Camp Evans. The second rescue bird had been the charm. The Phoenix lived their vow. When one bird went down, another went to get them. It continued until accomplished!

The Phoenix pilots' actions were memorialized with Silver Stars for the pilots. Specialist Five Fuji received a Silver Star for his actions as a forward air controller, after surviving the helicopter crash on Ranger North.

The Phoenix crew chiefs and door gunners had excelled in their duties. Their personal courage and gunnery skills were acknowledged with Distinguished Flying Crosses, very rare awards for army aircrew. Sp5. Ronald Merek, Sp4. William Starbuck, Sp4 Brian Fitzgerald, Sp4

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Clarence Davis, and PFC Matthew Regner were the recipients. They made front page news in the *Stars and Stripes*, as well as *The Screaming Eagle*.

When Bottman and Davis began their approach, Redskin pilot Skip Butler was out of ammo in his Cobra, but still dove on a .51-cal. machine gun, firing at the Huey. Davis thought it was one of the bravest things he's ever seen. Davis got a Silver Star for his actions; Butler was not recognized for his valor, just another day at work for a Redskin. The NVA gun crew ducked long enough for the Huey to escape. On the following day, Ranger North was overrun by North Vietnamese Army tanks and troops. The ARVN suffered horrendous losses.

February 23, 1971 Laos. Things stayed lively in Laos. Virtually every landing zone was hot. Every pickup zone was hot. The air between the Laotian border and Khe Sanh was the only place the helicopters weren't getting shot at. As a combat assault was underway, a Crossbows Charlie-model Gunship, flown by CW2 James Miner, was turning out of a gun run and collided with a UH 1 exiting the landing zone under fire. The gunship rose below the Huey and lost its rotor system. In the ensuing crash, CW2 Miner was killed. Another 70-3/70-5 class member.

February 24, 1971

I watched John Wayne in the movie *Chism* under the beautiful starry skies of the Nam. I'd just realized that the previous month passed faster in the 163d Aviation Company than any week at Camp Evans. Couldn't really believe it until I sat and started thinking. Lieutenant Hardin transferred down from the Phoenix. He said Laos is really bad. He was extremely happy to get down here. Hardin told us that the combat assaults in Laos were much worse

than the missions we'd flown on CCN because the landing zones were preregistered by the North Vietnamese artillery and ringed with antiaircraft weapons.

On some firebases the Phoenix resupplied, the NVA were dug in just outside the wire. Even so, orders were that the door gunners could not fire their machine guns for fear of hitting friendly troops.

Hardin said CW2 John Michaelson packed an M-79 grenade launcher and used a couple of *cases* of ammunition per day. He was said to have made more NVA kills than any other Huey pilot just while sitting on the ground, unloading supplies in Laos. Michaelson told him it didn't matter if he hit the NVA or not, he just felt better firing back.

I could only shake my head in amazement, grateful to be in a Loach with the 163d.

That evening was eventful at Snoopy's Pad, or hover area. Warrant Officer Schwab, and a nonaviation CW2 got drunk. They sang all night long, country and western music. They didn't cut it off until after 4:00 A.M. Then Schwab decided to give the nonflying warrant officer "hovering lessons" in a Loach. At 4:30 in the morning, Schwab and his friend, who had never been trained to fly anything, commenced to hover in the Snoopy's Pad hover area. Schwab gave his friend hovering lessons for about twenty minutes then landed in the wrong revetment and shut down facing in the wrong direction. They were appropriately corrected in the morning by the commanding officer, who called Mr. Schwab and his nonrated friend, obviously hurting puppies, very early that morning. A notice was immediately posted that any flying activities after dark and before sunrise would have to be cleared with the staff duty officer. Everyone got a laugh out of that.

February 26, 1971. Dustoff missions continued with the 498th Medical Company. During another extraction of wounded, WO John Souther took ground fire and be-

came an aircrew casualty. Another WORWAC Class 70-3 member dead.

February 28, 1971

My wife complained in a letter that my parents were acting poorly, worrying about me. I wrote her that it should have been expected. But I hated to hear it. Knowing I was there, they had been religiously watching news coverage of the Rock Pile and Khe Sanh areas. I'd learn later that there was a lot more TV coverage in those areas than in Laos; after several news-personnel deaths, cameramen weren't willing to fly into Laos with the VNAF, so TV carried lots of scenes of trucks carrying wrecked Loaches and Hueys. There were even horrifying scenes of dead pilots being carried away, face down on stretchers, arm's dangling. The graphic news coverage sickened those with loved ones committed there. But all I could do was write and let my folks know I had the safest job in I Corps I could get. I wasn't a hero nor a fool. I would simply do my job and come home.

March 1971

On the first of March, at lunch, I walked out of the division mess hall and headed back to the company. On my way, I noticed a slick on the division pad and saw Ralph Moreira from the Phoenix Company. He yelled, "You REMF! What'cha doing?" I walked over, and as we talked of the people we knew, he told me of Nelson's flight with Major Lloyd and Sp5. Fuji's unexpected sojourn with the ARVN.

Moreira laughed as he told me of Nelson replaying the action that night in the Phoenix officers club. Nelson, who was the quiet, introspective type had everyone in stitches.

"There I was, NVA everywhere, the whole world shooting at us, eighteen packs (passengers), losing hydraulics, losing power, and the major gives me a fucking autorotation!" All present had laughed themselves to tears.

Moreira and I laughed about Major Lloyd's cutting the fuel off. Only a real live officer would attempt that. We shook hands, and I wished him well. I didn't know it was the last time I'd shake hands with a Phoenix in Vietnam.

9

Lolo: The Worst Landing Zone

By March 3, ARVN movement in Laos had bogged down, and there were heavy tank battles between the North Vietnamese Army and the outnumbered South Vietnamese. A firebase on the northern flank was lost, and the 39th Ranger Battalion was overrun and wiped out. Another firebase held by an ARVN division was overrun and an ARVN brigade commander captured. Large caliber artillery fire from North Vietnamese Army guns increased markedly. Intense antiaircraft fire made heliborne movement in the area costly and dangerous. The North Vietnamese Army units stepped up tank and infantry assaults. Individual tanks were used as mobile gun platforms and antiaircraft weapons.

Complications of political influences in the South Vietnamese government compounded the incapacity of the ARVN commanders to effectively control their troops in Laos. Operations capabilities were degraded by inefficiencies in tactical air support from the U.S. Air Force. Due to the lack of on-ground forward air controllers, things became desperate. In an effort to reverse the trend of events during late February, the original goal, Tchepone, was redesignated. The Tchepone assault would be smaller sized, as the site of a limited but effective delaying action to prevent North Vietnamese forces from pursuing the South Vietnamese, who were retreating to Khe Sanh.

On March 3, the 71st Assault Helicopter Company, the

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Rattlers led a combat assault into Laos that was to be a "piece of cake." The 71st had been temporarily posted from Chu Lai to Quang Tri in late January or early February to support LAM SON 719. They had flown some missions into Laos, but none as far as Lolo. In fact, they should not have been there in the first place. The pilots were under the impression that the company was standing down, and the unit had a shortage of pilots. The unit did have some experience flying Combat Control North (CCN) missions for MACV-SOG across the border, but was unfamiliar with the Lolo area.

Regardless of those facts, they were chosen to lead the assault onto Lolo. Planning prior to the March 3 combat assault suggested that forty UH-1Hs were required for the initial combat assault to establish Fire Support Base (FSB) Lolo. The name Lolo was derived from the name of Italian movie actress, Gina Lolobrigida Lolo was on fairly level terrain, forty-two kilometers west of Khe Sanh on the escarpment in Laos, overlooking the Xe Pon River. The map coordinates were XD 422375. Elevation was 723 meters above sea level.

The South Vietnamese strategic plan was to secure mutually supporting fire support bases along the escarpment that was the east-west high ground overlooking Highway 9 and the Xe Pon River as far as the abandoned town of Tchepone, show a presence in the North Vietnamese base areas, and then withdraw.

On the third of March, the 3d ARVN Regiment executed a series of airborne assaults to the west, along the southern escarpment of hills south of QL9. The 1st Infantry Division (ARVN) units air assaulted to successive positions at Landing Zone Lolo on March 3, Landing Zone Liz on March 4, and Landing Zone Sophia on March 5. The 2d ARVN Regiment assault to Landing Zone Lolo was the first step of the plan to enter Tchepone, the core of the Ho Chi Minh trail network. Landing Zone Lolo was thirteen kilometers southeast of Tchepone. By March 3,

the assault had been postponed twice in two days because additional preparations (bombing by air force jets) was required to reduce the very strong antiaircraft defenses. Of course, the fact that the area had been prepped for combat assault for two days made clear to the North Vietnamese that a landing would be made there, so the antiaircraft network encircling the area was strengthened. Army aviation history would be made in the assault.

In the pilots' briefing the night before the assault on Landing Zone Lolo, the pilots were informed that a B-52 strike that night would prep the landing zone. They were also told that because of the B-52s' preparation of the landing zone, gunships would not prep the LZ. The crews from the 71st Assault Helicopter Company had so little experience in Laos that they even discussed the necessity of wearing the bulky chicken plates worn by all pilots active in I Corps. I Corps pilots "*never* left home without it." The men of the 71st AHC would soon learn the briefing was horrifyingly inaccurate. "Bogus" in the words of some young warrant officers. They would also learn they were the lead element simply because they were the largest unit remaining; everyone else had been simply shot to hell. Due to combat attrition, all the other companies were making do with from eight to twelve slicks instead of the usual twenty.

The helicopters assembled at Khe Sanh, then flew to pick up the ARVNs. From the pickup zone, they headed westward, deeper into Laos. Approaching the landing zone, still not in sight, the air mission commander directed them. The line of Hueys descended into the dust and smoke. The aftermath of the B-52 Arc Light strike reduced visibility to very poor visual flying conditions, less than a mile visibility.

Capt. Dan Grigsby, Rattler Two-six, was the lead ship, Chalk One, into the Landing Zone. On approach, all aircraft took continuous fire for at least two minutes prior to reaching the landing zone. One aircraft, a few miles

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behind the lead element, was shot down over LZ Brown. Before Chalk One even reached Lolo, other aircraft were taking hits. Two Charlie-model gunships were shot down just east of the LZ. Once in the landing zone, Grigsby took hits all over his aircraft from AK-47s, RPD machine guns, and mortar fragmentation. The fire was predominantly small arms, but also included 12.7mm antiaircraft slugs. Grigsby took off in a fusillade of fire and headed back to Khe Sanh. On departing the landing zone, he saw NVA running, crouched, to the left front of the aircraft. He also watched his copilot's head bobbing and weaving as if he were dodging bullets the way a boxer dodged punches. He called Red Oak, Dragon Two-zero, and told him the landing zone was surrounded and under heavy fire.

Clearly the landing zone had been compromised, and it should have been moved elsewhere or the assault canceled. Red Oak Dragon responded, "Negative, negative, keep putting 'em in, keep putting 'em in." All hell continued to break loose.

As Grigsby climbed out, he tried to light a cigarette, keeping the cyclic between his knees, but his hands were shaking so badly he couldn't, so he asked his copilot to take over. After lighting a cigarette, he took the controls back and started to decelerate airspeed from one hundred knots back to the normal cruise of eighty knots. When he pulled back on the cyclic, it wouldn't move. He then told the copilot something was binding the cyclic. Grigsby looked back and saw bloodstained bullet holes in his cargo floor, in the area of the Huey's control push-pull tubes. He knew then that he could lose aircraft control at any moment. Heading straight back for Khe Sanh, he informed them that he had an emergency and could not slow below ninety knots.

Khe Sanh tower replied, "Roger, Two-six. You'll be emergency number three following the aircraft burning on short final."

When Grigsby was on short final, another aircraft de-

clared a very frantic emergency. Grigsby then told the tower he could put his aircraft on the ground beside the runway. At ninety knots, that was not a wise decision.

The tower instructed him, "Two-six, put the fucking thing on the goddamn runway. That's what it's there for. We'll get you off." Patience hell, everyone had an emergency!

The Huey came to a sliding, screeching halt using a small portion of the runway. The instant it was stopped, an aircraft tug came over and hoisted the aircraft off with chains wrapped around the rotor mast. Grigsby found that a piece of shrapnel had lodged in the rotor system bell crank. In typical army aviator fashion, he got into another Huey and flew another seven hours of sorties into Laos.

Back at Lolo, Chalk Two, WO Gary Arne was call sign Rattler Two-five. He approached Landing Zone Lolo and also encountered the intense fire. Becoming low and slow in his final approach while waiting for Chalk One to clear the landing zone, he made an attractive target. In a hail of withering fire, Chalk Two had his tail rotor and hydraulics system shot out. The ship began spinning, and three ARVN passengers fell two hundred feet from the cargo bay to their deaths as other helicopter pilots watched in horror. The crew chief and door gunner frantically wrapped their microphone cords around the three remaining ARVN soldiers to stop them from falling to their deaths.

Arne departed the landing zone without dropping off his three remaining troops, but his engine was then shot out at one hundred feet above the ground. Then he watched his windshield explode as if in slow motion, while he took three rounds in his chest protector from an AK-47. Additional rounds continued impacting on the sliding armored plate at the side of his seat even as they crashed back into the landing zone. They evacuated the aircraft, and hid behind a log until things stabilized a few hours later.

* * *

WO Doug Womack, Chalk Three, watched the ARVNs falling from Arne's spinning Huey. To Womack, they looked like rag dolls falling from the sky. Grigsby was already on the radio telling command and control to call off the combat assault. Womack did a 360-degree turn and the aircraft behind him also commenced circling turns.

The command-and-control ship again refused to call off the combat assault. When asked by a fellow pilot if he was going in despite the carnage underway, Womack replied, "Yeah, I'm going in." Then, without hesitating, continued his turn and went directly into the landing zone, taking hits all over the aircraft during the run in, short final, on the ground, and during the climb out. The gunmount post stopped one round that would have killed his door gunner, and several rounds just cleared Womack's head. Several just missed the crew chief but found the main rotor transmission. Fragmentation from RPGs and mortars struck the sides of the aircraft while it was in the landing zone and both main rotor blades took hits.

To an army pilot, a "defined risk" is acceptable exposure to the enemy, and may be well planned as part of mission. However, risk without constraints, as in Landing Zone Lolo, is the ultimate, terrifying reality of control lost—naked exposure to enemy fire. Those who experienced the eerie sense of time expansion would later talk of time slowing to an unlifelike quality.

Womack entered the twilight zone of time expansion, mortal combat, in the presence of death.

With every revolution of the rotor blade, he could count the nicks and dents in the blades, while enemy tracers slowly wafted skyward at nine hundred feet per second. Words were spoken in syrupy slow voices. The question of mortality already understood, "Is this it, when time stops?"

In the heat of battle, Luck smiled on Chalk Three, if only for a moment.

On climbing out, Womack saw that his transmission pressure gauge was fluctuating wildly. He made a straight line for Khe Sanh and on final approach, lowered his collective to reduce power for descent. The transmission pressure plummeted to zero and the red warning light glowed "land now"! He barely made it back to Khe Sanh and safely landed. Suffering from shock, the young copilot was replaced by a copilot from another shot-up Huey, who'd lost his pilot and aircraft! In typical warrant officer fashion, Womack and his new copilot flew several more hours that day supporting the ARVNs.

The ship that followed Womack in was shot down in the landing zone and burned. Eleven of the next fifteen Hueys in the combat assault were shot down or shot up so bad they had to be replaced! One of the pilots in an aircraft shot down in the landing zone was killed by his own rotor blade while running from the burning helicopter under enemy fire.

Bob Morris was the aircraft commander of Chalk One-seven into Lolo. Seconds out from the landing zone, they started taking hits, and his crew chief called, "Uh, Mr. Morris, you do know we're on fire!" He then learned that it had gotten so hot in the crew chief's well that he had to move into the cargo compartment. There was no choice but to return to the landing zone. Morris landed in the landing zone, taking still more hits from small-arms fire as he touched down. They evacuated the burning helicopter and ran to a trench. Fortunately, Capt. Jerry Crews, a former Green Beret, now a pilot, had also been shot down on the landing zone. He borrowed a radio from the ARVN to direct air strikes. Morris was Commanchero Three-zero. He had plenty of experience on Special Forces missions in Laos. He knew exactly what the situation was and how critical it was.

Crews told the command and control to halt the assault until NVA on the south side of the landing zone could be

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removed. Crews pointed out that there was a fifty–fifty chance of any approaching Huey's getting shot down. Another Commanchero ship, piloted by Steve Diehl, did try to get in to pick up the air crewmen, but Diehl took so much fire he couldn't land. Command and control finally decided to halt the assault and put more firepower into the tree line to the south of the landing zone.

Nineteen Hueys flew in. Eight Hueys managed to fly home, but they, too, were shot to hell. Useless after the engagement.

With the assault temporarily halted, the Hueys returned to Khe Sanh to refuel and check out their aircraft. Some aircraft were swapped for undamaged aircraft. Maj. Bob Clewell, Commanchero Six, was one of several aircraft commanders from the four companies involved in the initial assault who assembled at Khe Sanh. An ashen-faced crowd of pilots quickly assembled. The Commancheros had last lost an entire crew on the eighteenth of February on a CCN mission. They were well-acquainted with the fact that the war was ending—except, apparently, in I Corps. There were arguments about what to do. What would be the best way to go back to LZ Lolo, how to put more ARVN in and get the aircrews out? They compared notes and estimated how many ARVN were on Lolo and how many Americans. Chalks Two-zero and higher still had ARVN soldiers on the aircraft.

Clewell and the Commancheros were determined to go after their downed crews, and asked how many would go with them. Everyone was scared shitless, but all knew they had to go. If they left the guys grounded in Laos for long, the NVA would have them. Everyone present volunteered—all fifteen ships left flyable out of the flight of forty-four helicopters. For them, it was a turning point in that particular battle. There were no northern units with more combat experience from I Corps, and they'd long been shot to hell. Many 101st companies had only one-

third strength at combat effectiveness. No one company and no one battalion could simply do it all themselves. There were only pieces of flight platoons, companies, and battalions left. The crews from down south quickly absorbed the experiences, and casualties, then they took their place at the lead. The northern I Corps helicopter units were then matched, loss for loss.

They reloaded the ARVNs, met up with the Cobras, and proceeded back to Lolo. All within less than two hours from the initial assault. They would approach low-level, between the trees, from the northeast, actually having to hover *up* to Landing Zone Lolo. The air strikes had helped suppress enemy fire, but the Hueys still took antiaircraft fire from entrenched positions. It began at the border of Laos and didn't stop until they reentered South Vietnam, west of Khe Sanh, courtesy of General Giap.

Two Charlie-model gunships had been shot down just outside the landing zone, and a total of eleven Hueys were shot down on Lolo or nearby. One was shot down over Landing Zone Brown, miles away. In all, forty-four helicopters took serious hits from antiaircraft fire. Chinooks bringing in two D-4 bulldozers dropped their loads from altitude under antiaircraft fire, destroying the bulldozers. It was not until the following day that the first regiment and second/1 Battalion had a battery of 105mm howitzers brought onto Lolo. At the end of the second day, Fire Support Base Lolo was established while a simultaneous operation created Landing Zone Liz six kilometers west/northwest of Lolo, near Tchepone. Next after Liz would be Landing Zone Sophia, four kilometers northeast of Tchepone, less than two miles from the announced objective.

But the helicopter crews were taking a beating. Everybody was taking hits, and it wasn't just one trip a day—for the lift birds it was eight to twelve trips daily into Laos, all under fire from twenty entrenched North Vietnamese Army antiaircraft battalions. In a three-day period

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in early March, 122 UH1s took serious battle damage, and many were DEROSed (shipped Stateside) as salvage. Twenty were destroyed.

Evening of March 3, 1971, Camp Evans, Phoenix Hootches

Door gunner Mike King finished a cassette-tape letter to his mother he'd begun three days earlier:

> This is a recording, Mother, and I just want to see how the sound effect's coming in and uh, I think it's a little bit loud right now, and I'll stop and play it back . . . Roger out.
>
> Like I'm saying, I'm trying to make a recording, and it's kind of hectic around here. You know, I don't ever have any real privacy, so I just kinda came outside here. It's near the flight line, anyways, Alpha Company, so, it's a flight line. Alpha Company flight line is, you know, right near our flight line. And, sun's just now going down. It's been a pretty nice day. Getting kind of hot over here though. Well, I'd say it's around one hundred today. But, you know, I'd rather have it hot like this than rain. I just thought I'd send you one of these tapes.
>
> I know listening to a tape is much better than just writing letters. There, it sounds better. But, things here lately have been pretty hot . . . But, uh, things really got hot around February twenty-first.
>
> On February twenty-first, my pilot got shot through the leg, and it got pretty bad. The crew chief and I managed to put him back in the back seat and, fortunately enough, he's not gonna lose his leg. He'll keep it. But he only had twenty days left in the army. That's the real bummer about the whole thing. He's as real fine person. And, we shouldn't even been going in that area,

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and he went back in. In this certain landing zone, they [the NVA] were mortaring the LZ at the time we went in, and it was really ridiculous. That damn colonel—you know the way colonels are. He was about six thousand feet above, in the air. He wasn't getting shot at, so he didn't really give a damn. He said, "Ah, you people go on back in there, and get your ass shot off," so we went back in, and we got hit. It was a real bummer. He's a real fine person.

And, let me see, what else. Oh, yeah, on February twenty-third, I got shot down. It was nothing more than a large piece of shrapnel, cut a fuel line, and we had to bring it in on an emergency landing at Firebase 31. Firebase 31 has really got a unique history. It didn't last but about a week. It was overrun by an NVA battalion of tanks and I think about five minutes after we left the ship there, on Firebase 31, our helicopter was destroyed by heavy artillery. But, this Laos thing is really a bummer. Really depressing. So many people getting killed.

Oh yeah, I sent you the door pin out of helicopter number 288, that got shot down on Firebase 31, and door pin [holds on] the door when you pull the door back . . . If you don't have that little pin in, [when] you get up high in the air, the wind will blow it off. . . .

You see, we got twenty helicopters, which is a normal strength of a Huey combat assault slick company. Right now, we don't have but six helicopters. You see . . . everyone is getting shot up, and pretty bad. Helicopters are really being damaged bad, and we have a lot of people over here to shoot at [us], but I think everything's gonna be all right. You know, you just gotta maintain my cool. And, you know, that's what I'm trying to tell you, Mom, just don't get worried. You know, this life's just a real sucker. I mean, you're gonna have the Green Machine on you, and sometimes you want to know what it'll finally evolve in to. This is no more

than a little economical conquest for some fools who want to make a lot of money or have their names in the paper. It's got me to where I think, as much I love my county, I hate my government with a hell of a passion, that's all I got to say about it. And, if you could've seen Firebase 30 and Firebase 31, you might have a little understanding of what I mean.

People think war is good. Hell, people think it's good when they're not in it. You get in it a while, and you see how good the war is.

Yesterday on Firebase 31, we hauled off enough damn dead people. They had 'em lined up out there like at a zoo. I've never seen anything like it. The ARVNs don't even know what they're doing. You CA 'em out into an area, and they're so damn scared, they won't even move. That's the reason they're all getting killed. They won't even move. And when we come to pick up, they hang on the damn skids to try to get out of there. They're like a human wave attack on your damn helicopter. You've got to kick 'em in the mouth, kick 'em in the head, kick 'em everywhere, to keep 'em off. A Huey slick won't carry but about nine ARVNs, and, hell, we have carried as many as twenty out, hanging on the slicks, grabbing 'em by the head and pulling them in to try to keep 'em from getting killed. But I still can't help but feel sorry for those people 'cause they really didn't want this thing to happen. Just minding their own business.

In fact, the people we CA'd in Laos didn't even know they were going there until we put 'em down on the damn ground. That's pretty bad in my book.

If you go into Laos, you have to do more than they're doing. I'm not saying it's the ARVNs fault as much as it is the command's fault. The command doesn't even know what the hell it's doing. I mean, it throws them out there on the damn mountaintop and expects them to do damn wonders. It's just like throwing a bunch of

dinks—eight hundred dinks—can you imagine eight hundred ARVNs being attacked by six thousand NVA. I mean, you can see why they're getting their asses kicked. It's just that plain and simple. It's the United States' advisers and the Vietnamese higher-ups who don't know what in the hell they're doing. They're just dicking around with people's lives . . .

I'm kind of tired of talking about this war. The whole thing just kind of gets me down. All I want to do is get out of Vietnam and live my life and be left alone . . . I sure do miss home a lot . . . Sure would be nice to be back, especially coming up springtime.

Tell everyone back home I really appreciate them writing me. I've gotten a lot of mail. I believe a lot more mail than I got when I first came over here, you know, and I really appreciate it. It really helps things to come in out of flying and get a letter . . . Just kind of brightens up the day. In fact, that's really the only thing I really look forward to each day.

But, I really like working with these helicopters. I learned a whole lot, you know. They're really weird machines. In fact, I even got to fly one a little the other day. I didn't know what I was doing, but you know, I was just sitting in the copilot's seat, and this other pilot, he's a real crazy joker . . . you know, he just said, "You got it?" And I said, "Yeah, I guess I got it." I don't know, I guess I had it. But, I just floated along there, and I made one or two turns. Wasn't nothing spectacular. Course, I sure as hell couldn't land one or pick one up, I guess. But, you really gotta think a lot about the guys that fly these helicopters. To me, they're really brave, fantastic people. I would like to come back to the States and go to crew chief school and on a Loach. Loaches look like a little spider or something. And they're real small. They are used mostly for carrying generals or colonels around on some kind of recon mission. Just real light stuff, you know. But, you know, I'm

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learning a lot. I've still got a lot more to learn, and I plan on doing that. But, enough for helicopters.

When I say I work eighteen hours a day, that means I've put in about eighteen hours a day. I'm usually out at the flight line about 6:00, and I get through cleaning my gun at night around 9:00 or 10:00. Oh, that's not eighteen is it? That's just fifteen. Oh, that's not too bad. Oh, correction there. But, Mom, if you're worrying, I want you to cut that out. Worrying never did no good about nothing. . . .

I'm gonna go on back to the hootch and finish taping. I don't know why, I just have trouble thinking these days. But, I'll see you later.

Here, we've got a young man here name Pineapple. We call him Magnet Man in our company. I think during the past week, Magnet Man was shot down once or shot up twice, three times. A total of three times.

Well, here I am again the next night, which is around March 3, and everything is going good, I guess. Didn't even have to fly today. Oh yeah, I flew an hour and a half. Flew to Khe Sanh with the major. Major Lloyd, he's an outside guy. He's not like the rest of the majors in the army. He's a Cobra pilot. Cobra gunship pilot. He had pretty tough people. They have a very hard job. They really risk their lives every day. And he's just the kind of guy that just don't take anything off of anyone . . . He does stick up for you [even when] he doesn't have to. In fact, he's just about the best man I've ever seen in the United States Army . . .

I'm gonna continue to tape so. you can hear my voice. I don't know if it's changed any or not. I guess I've changed in the short period since I've been gone . . . about a month and a half, two months ago. But, there's one thing. This crew chief I've got, Joel Hatley, he's from Iowa. He's a real good guy. He said there's one thing about life—no matter how bad it is. how bad the war is over here, you've always got to find something

good about it. No matter how bad things are, if you can find something good about it, then it is bearable. I've learned about life over here; to live in this world, even back in the States, a person's got to find something good about it. Even something real small. Got to have some little thing he takes pleasure in. [Even] if it is nothing more than just being yourself. And I guess that's just what I take pleasure in, is being myself. I don't know even what I'm gonna do when I get out of the army. I'm thinking about going back to school. I might take a [course in] computers. I'll take up something; I'm really not worried about it right now . . . War puts people in strange moods and makes 'em think completely different. You know, everybody has his own little world, and just kind of lives in it. And there are so many different worlds in the whole world that it's really strange. Two or three years ago, I was going to college, and I had it made. Then I'm over here, but I believe I'm a better person, maybe, then when I was just going to college, having it easy.

I tell ya, it's a great pleasure just to be able to have a place like the United States to come home to. Have a mother like you, Mother. You're one of the finest people I know. Sure did a good job raising me and keeping my brother up.

Time to finish this tape up. I don't have too far to go.

Mike King, three years earlier, had been in college, and like many his age, sought adventure and the honor of service to his country, just as his brother and friends had. As a volunteer, he'd asked for the long hours of duty as a helicopter door gunner. He also helped the crew chief, Joel Hatley, in the daily maintenance of their bird. His opinion of the ARVNs and the operation was based upon his firsthand experience. Other crewmen and pilots generally agreed with his observations. The crewmen of the helicopters were just as aware of the dangers as the pilots.

They were equally committed volunteers who kept the machines flying.

He'd talked of religion and personal fears with the men around him, including Joel Hatley, who'd also been raised in a Christian home. Mike King's tape home was a message of frustration, laced with anger over the conduct of the war. He maintained his composure; he'd accepted his responsibility to those around him, remaining calm in the most depressing circumstances. Mike's brother had served in the Marines in Vietnam, losing a lung to an AK-47 round. Mike had written his brother, saying he "wouldn't be coming home."

His tape home was a graphic, genuine report of his observations and a loving message to his mother. She received it in the mail, shortly after notification of his death. Elsie King, a Gold Star widow of World War II, became a Gold Star mother during Vietnam, an incomprehensible personal sacrifice.

March 5, 1971, Landing Zone Sophia, Laos

The combat assault into LZ Sophia was the final stepping stone toward the objective of Tchepone, Laos. Gunships conducted a preparation on the landing zone as forty Hueys carrying South Vietnamese troops beat their way to the landing zone. The slicks kept up the procession, dropping ARVNs and returning to Vietnam to refuel and pick up more troops. There was pandemonium on the radios. Constant calls of "Taking fire! Taking fire!." The lush green landscape was dotted with clouds of red smoke grenades, thrown to mark enemy antiaircraft locations. Heavy fire was coming up from the roadways and the creek beds out of heavily bunkered, concealed positions. Antiaircraft fire included 12.7mm, 23mm, 37mm, and 57mm. Even the C-and-C ship at altitude was taking flak.

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The slicks were taking fire even when they were twelve miles away from the hot landing zone. It was continuous antiaircraft fire from just inside Laos, all the way to the landing zone and after leaving it. Several helicopters were shot down with their ARVN passengers, and others were shot up so badly their passengers were wounded or killed. Nearly every one of the forty helicopters in the formation took hits. Fifteen more helicopters would be shot down combat assaulting Sophia.

The RP (release point) over which all helicopters turned to final approach was a river bend just west of a hill occupied by an NVA company of 23mm antiaircraft guns. They were nicknamed golden hoses because of their golden tracers and high rate of fire. Because of the very low visibility due to haze and smoke from nearby B-52 strikes, the lead aircraft missed the hairpin turn to final, so the other aircraft followed the lead over entrenched antiaircraft positions. The North Vietnamese Army gunners had a field day. The poor visibility meant that the lead Huey received no help in identifying the RP from the command-and-control bird above.

An air force pilot observing the action from above, understood the gravity of the events underway. The combat assault was a nut wringer. In a discussion of the events with an army command-and-control helicopter crew, he complimented the army pilots by saying "they must have brass balls."

Capt. Don Peterson, flying with the 174th Assault Helicopter Company, put a cassette tape recorder into his cockpit and wired it to the radios, picking up FM, VHF, and UHF radio traffic. It was a complex aviation environment where pilots were monitoring two or three simultaneous conversations. In the first wave of the second day into Landing Zone Sophia, the 174th Aviation Company was assigned the honor of being the lead platoon. The assault was to reinforce Fire Support Base Sophia. Late in

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the previous afternoon, troops had occupied the firebase with little opposition and Chinooks had been able to land the 105mm howitzers. But the North Vietnamese had regrouped and created a high intensity antiaircraft environment surrounding the flight path from the pickup zone near the Laotian/Vietnam border to Sophia, just northeast of Tchepone.

Peterson and his crew were in a Huey among the first ten birds making the combat assault reinforcement. The approach called for a flight path from the pickup zone, across A Luoi, Firebase Lolo, Landing Zone Liz to Landing Zone Sophia. The release point (RP) for the helicopters, requiring a turn from a north bound heading, southwestward for a two-mile final approach into Landing Zone Sophia. Chalks One and Three made it into the landing zone despite taking fire and hits west of the RP. However, they let their flight path drift too far to the west, where they were subjected to all the entrenched antiaircraft positions.

Chalk Two elected to make a go-around because of antiaircraft hits to the tail boom and fixed tail rotor pedals. He couldn't hover. The aircraft could make only one landing, to the ground.

Chalks Four and Five were shot down by 23mm antiaircraft fire whose explosive air bursts could easily destroy a Huey. It was the same type of weapon that had laced Paul Stewart's tail boom and caused his fatal crash.

As it turned out, the entire ridgeline west of the RP (release point) and ridgelines northwest of the landing zone were covered with 23mm antiaircraft weapons. "Red Dragon Two-zero," the air mission commander called, "Move your RP and flight path to the south. Move south of the RP." Chalks Four and Five, shot down, had crashed on a hill between the RP and the landing zone. One aircraft was burning, the other crashed next to it, but was not on fire.

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With consternation and calm, Peterson and his copilot continued their approach. There was a loud *pop-pop-pop*. Peterson spoke to his crew chief in a calm voice, "Uh, I'm supposed to tell you guys not to shoot until you see something definite to shoot at."

The crew chief screamed into the intercom in a stress-filled, very high pitched voice, "That wasn't me! That was them shooting at us! I just looked down and saw these huge, big red things coming at us. I didn't even have time to fire back!"

The copilot said, "Holy shit!"

"I've gotta get a camera for this," Peterson said calmly. Peterson then asked, "What was it?"

Crew chief, "I dunno! But these huge red things went by our tail boom!"

Peterson then calmly spoke to his copilot, "I noticed a fluctuation in the fuel pressure, sort of like the bump you get when the engine quits. But, we're stable now. I guess we'll have to check this out." By then other aircraft were calling out that they were taking hits. A well-concealed NVA 57mm antiaircraft weapon had fired at them from such close range they could hear it. The huge tracers had just missed them! They continued on into the landing zone, depositing their troops and returning for another run.

A short while later, the second wave was underway to Sophia. The release point had now been moved north-northeast of Sophia. The danger was that flying any farther west would put the flights in the heart of the most intense North Vietnamese Army antiaircraft capability. Hazards to the west included *heavier* antiaircraft fire, but there were also reports of enemy helicopters and fighter aircraft operating in the area. For that reason, there was a combat air patrol of air force F-4s above the operation.

Captain Dave Nelson was Auction Lead, heading a flight of ten Phoenix Hueys, with ARVN troops on board inbound for Sophia.

Dragon Lead called, "Auction Lead, what's your position?"

David Nelson replied, "Auction Lead, I'm about three minutes out at this time. I'm just coming down between the road and the river."

Dragon Lead, "Keep me posted."

Nelson, "Lead, Roger. Just abeam Liz." A few seconds later, Dave Nelson's Huey was ripped by airburst and direct hits from 23mm antiaircraft fire. The fuel cell was riddled, causing smoking leaks. The metal floor of the cargo bay in the Huey erupted in shrapnel, taking a heavy toll of the ARVN passengers. The door gunner on the right side of the aircraft, Mike King, suffered a mortal head wound. Lost fuel made a smoky white trail. The danger of a catastrophic explosion was instinctively understood by all. The stability of the flight controls was in question.

Nelson had just entered his turn to long final, to approach Sophia from the north. He'd followed the lead ship, which had flown too far west, drifting above a heavily fortified ridgeline that bristled with antiaircraft weapons. Nelson turned eastward, away from the area of greatest danger. In accordance with standard procedures, Chalk Two began the turn to final, assuming Lead; Nelson had already notified Two of his problems.

Chaos reigned. The formation dispersed in very loose trail (line formation) under fire but the other aircraft continued the assault. They weren't even at the LZ, but they were taking the most intense fire they had yet endured.

Command and control called, "Auction One-six, what's your status? Do you have the landing zone in sight?"

Nelson said, "Negative. I broke off the landing zone on long final. I'm heading in back to Kilo Sierra (Khe Sanh) at this time. I've got a gunner hit in the head, some of my troops are hit, and the aircraft's hit pretty hard. And I was losing fuel, but it stopped losing the fuel now. So I'm just heading back to Kilo Sierra."

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Command and control, "Okay, who have you designated as your . . . (replacement)." Chaos erupted on the radios!

CWO Mike Cataldo was Chalk Three. He'd also commenced the fishhook turn to final behind Chalk Two. Farther back in the formation WO Rick Scrugham was also commencing the turn to final. Constant calls of fire, constant calls of birds hit, and others reporting degrees of combat damage filled the radio. Cataldo, as he was turning final, thought he witnessed an SA-7 (a Soviet manportable antiaircraft missile) hit Nelson's aircraft, causing an explosion. It might have been an extremely lucky RPG-7. And SA-2 SAMS were definitely being fired at the jets above them. As Cataldo turned final, he began taking 23mm antiaircraft fire hits.

Scrugham, in his turn to final, with his peripheral vision, glimpsed a catastrophic explosion in the air but became distracted by fire at his aircraft and looked away. As he looked back, he saw a fireball in the sky where Nelson's aircraft had been, a flaming, smoking ball, tumbling to earth. Years later, I would listen as he described to Nelson's younger brother and sister, "It looked a lot like the Challenger explosion." Ralph Moreira, the copilot, Joel Hatley, the crew chief, and Mike King, the doorgunner, also died in the crash. King, had sent his taped letter home the day before.

The ARVN troops on board the Hueys were carrying all types of explosives, including plastic explosives in addition to normal grenades, light antitank rockets, and armament. Although the H-model Huey had a self-sealing fuel tank, it was not fireproof. But we can only speculate about what caused the explosion—antiaircraft fire, an SA-7 missile, an onboard fire, equipment among the ARVNs exploding, the fuel cell exploding. In seconds, they were just another smoking hole in Laos. As the helicopter assault proceeded, smoking holes began to mushroom in

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Laos. But the Huey's kept coming. Not for Americans, this time, but their allies, the ARVN, the South Vietnamese Army.

On final, the new lead aircraft, Chalk Two, took hits to the tail and fuel cell, which forced a go-around. Mike Cataldo, Chalk Three in the Phoenix formation, suddenly, found himself the lead ship. He couldn't see the landing zone, which was obscured by smoke, dust, and the debris of shell fire. Then he observed a heavy volume of 23mm golden tracers and green .51-caliber tracers coming right at him. He reflexively made an evasive hard turn and through luck, found the landing zone in front of him. Turning on final, decelerating to the landing zone, he took very heavy hits, rounds stitching his aircraft. He lost power and made an autorotation to the perimeter of the landing zone, but not to the top of the hill. In his powerless descent, he hit a tree and then stabilized the aircraft, crashing on the skids with a twenty-degree slope downward from the rear of the aircraft.

Crew chief Robert Vial watched in horror as his Huey fell to the ground among Vietnamese soldiers, striking so fast they couldn't get out of the way. Vial saw the left landing skid crush a soldier's head, blood erupting from the poor man's nose and ears.

Not realizing it had been shot down, other Vietnamese began scrambling aboard the powerless Huey, hoping it would fly them to safety. Chaos and confusion, smoke and explosions, overwhelmed the ARVNs.

Despite taking hits, another Phoenix bird landed, and the copilot and door gunner scrambled aboard it as it lifted off while being mobbed by Vietnamese.

Cataldo was amazed that his aircraft stayed upright. There was just enough angle and just enough gravity to keep the aircraft in place without its tumbling backward or over on its side. Again, he'd called for his copilot to shut off the fuel (as he once had with me), again without response. He hadn't even called Mayday because, in the few

seconds it took for him to go down, the radios were chaotic with calls of others "going down!" At the same time, a jet had been shot down above them, and a command-and-control ship had also been shot down as well as a gunship beside him, and the two aircraft in front of him had been shot down or badly damaged.

It took forty-five endless minutes for Cataldo and Vial to be rescued. The ARVNs in the landing zone were mobbing each ship that landed. They nearly trampled Cataldo and his crew as they exited his ship. Finally, Vial fired a burst from his M-60 machine gun into the ground in front of a landing Huey, which kept the ARVNs away from the next ship. Cataldo and Vial were then able to climb on and fly out. Heading back to Khe Sanh, Cataldo thought he would at least get the rest of the day off. Hell, he'd just had his bird shot out from under him. However, upon arrival at Khe Sanh, he found another helicopter waiting. Cataldo was upset that he'd lost his only flight jacket under the seat back on the LZ. With only thirty-five days left in country, he had been shot down. As he joked later, "That almost Laosed up my life!"

Phoenix bird 389, regarded by some crew chiefs as the best in the company, was destroyed by Cobra rocket fire. Kingsman Zero-nine, an aircraft in the following wave, called the C-and-C bird, "Dragon, you better get these people under control down here. It's out of control."

Maj. Jack Barker, commanding officer of the Kingsmen, called on departure from the landing zone, "I've got about fifteen ARVNs on board, two fell off my skids, and I've still got three on my skids. It's bad down there, we've got to get the situation stabilized."

It would not get better.

The loss of Dave Nelson, the most competent, the most capable pilot shook the men of the Phoenix. From that point forward, the Phoenix pilots understood how little control they had over their individual fates. Nelson's loss hit them hard, very, very hard.

That evening, Lt Bruce Updyke, of the Phoenix 1st Platoon, remembered a conversation with WO Ralph Moreira on February 9, the day after CW2 Paul Stewart and WO Tommy Doody were lost. Moreira had the duty of crew scheduling for the initial assault into Laos and he'd scheduled himself to fly with Paul Stewart, but the night before the mission, Doody came to Moreira and asked to fly with Stewart. Doody said "something didn't feel right" about the pending mission. Doody knew Moreira had a son he hadn't seen, and Doody was single. Moreira had told Updyke the day after the loss of Stewart and Doody, "That [his own survival] had been real close." Fate, however, had given him only twenty-five days. Whatever the loss meant to the Phoenix pilots and crews, Ralph Moreira's wife was left to raise Angelo, a son Ralph never got to hold.

March 6, 1971 Laos CWO John Hummel was piloting a AH-1G Cobra returning to Khe Sanh under instrument flight conditions. The aircraft crashed into a mountain, killing him and his copilot. Another WORWAC 70-3/70-5 class member died.

On the afternoon of March 6, Khe Sanh received twenty-two rounds of 122mm rockets and other artillery fire. Two U.S. troops were killed and ten wounded. This was the first major incidence of daytime artillery fire at Khe Sanh. A total of 120 U.S. helicopters were assembled at Khe Sanh to continue the assault to Tchepone. In addition, B-52s, U.S. tactical air strikes, and air-cover sorties were scheduled every ten minutes during the assault phase of the operation. Elements of the 2/17th Air Cavalry reconned targets and prepared landing zones and covered the assaults. The enemy attack by artillery fire on Khe Sanh had screwed things up, forcing the assemblage of U.S. helicopters to depart ninety minutes earlier than planned, but the assault continued, with slightly less disastrous results than Lolo.

* * *

I had twelve days and a wake-up call, until I left for R & R in Hawaii. I was about to go nuts. Time could not pass fast enough! I flew Lieutenant Colonel Rodolph, the engineer colonel, four and a half hours on March 6. We flew most of it along the eastern ridge of the A Shau Valley, visiting combat engineers working on the firebases. I had reacquired the simple pleasure of flying, something that had been missing since December.

March 7, 1971 Quang Tri A Blue Ghost AH-1G Cobra with WO Barry Port on board was operating five kilometers southwest of Quang Tri. The aircraft took fire climbing out of a gun run, and the main rotor separated. The Blue Ghost gunship fell to a fiery explosion on the valley floor. Another WORWAC 70-5 class member died.

Refuel Point Khe Sanh Combat Base

Capt. Don Davis was copilot in a Phoenix Huey being refueled after another mission in Laos. As he sat there, he noticed an aircraft from the 238th Helicopter Company, the Gunrunners. Norm Miller, his West Point roommate, was flying with the Gunrunners. Davis asked the door gunner to walk over to the aircraft and see if the pilot or copilot knew of Captain Miller.

A few moments later, an individual left the cockpit, came over to talk to him. He was carrying something in his left hand. It was Norm Miller who walked up to Davis's side and stuck out his hand for a shake. Miller then held up the head of a cyclic stick. Miller told Davis that the cyclic had been shot off between his legs while he was flying the previous day in Laos. They had a good laugh over it. It was proof of the environment they were flying in. Davis laughingly told Miller of his landing in a Laotian LZ where he took several hits on the upper console and greenhouse.

The AK-47 rounds impacted in the twenty-four inches separating his head from WO1 Butch Doan's, and one round cut the headset intercom wire. After that he could only shout to Doan. Davis recounted that Doan just cracked up laughing, as if it was nothing but a joke and kept on flying.

Camp Eagle

I was flying between Vandegrift and Khe Sanh when I heard the emergency call on UHF guard frequency: a Kiowa had been shot down in Laos. The initial call was made by a Charlie-model gunship, which had overflown the area and nearly gotten shot down.

An argument began about whose bird it was and why it was in Laos. The 1st Brigade of the 5th Mechanized Infantry Division had no ground troops across the river in Laos; a presidential order forbade that. I was dismayed to hear the arguing between a bird colonel and a subordinate in different aircraft as to who had gone down. There was an immediate call to insert a security team. Citing the presidential order, the colonel refused to provide U.S. troops. Even to save an American crew, he would not put American soldiers on the ground in Laos. The ARVN troops were not well enough organized that day to make an immediate response. It was a typical army cluster fuck. I [illegible] later learned that the pilot was WO Randy Ard from my hometown of Pensacola, Florida. He'd only been in country a short time. Once he had stumbled into the smoky haze near the border, North Vietnamese popped smoke to draw him down to a landing approach. Then, when he was low and slow, they shot him out of the sky. He'd made the fatal mistake of approaching a smoke marker without radio confirmation. Two of his passengers escaped and evaded to friendly forces. The third died with Ard at the hands of the North Vietnamese Army.

March 8, 1971

WO Tom Aldrich had just arrived in country as a brand-new warrant officer, grade one, assigned to fly Chinooks out of Phu Bai. It was his first week in country, copilot on a Chinook. Their preflight instructions were to pick up a sling load of fougasse at Dong Ha: ten fifty-five-gallon drums of jellied petroleum, a derivative of napalm, a six-ton mixture of napalm and jet fuel in steel drums. They were instructed to contact a Loach and a pair of Cobras at the Rock Pile, west of Camp Carroll, where they would meet up with two Chinooks dropping four loads of fougasse on the Rock Pile. Aldrich was thinking, What in the hell are we doing bombing with Chinooks?

At the same time, virtually all air force aircraft were being used in Laos, where the activity had gotten increasingly worse. Troop movements in Laos required not only helicopter gunship escorts, but fighter-bombers to strafe and bomb simultaneously with the Cobra gunships. For the first time in the war, B-52 Arc Light missions were being used as close air support. As a result, the action in the Rock Pile, Vandegrift, and the foothill areas went without air-strike support. They had to rely upon artillery or gunships and make do. The Chinooks were making do.

Aldrich sat nervously in his seat as his aircraft commander flew in only one hundred feet above the seven hundred-foot-high Rock Pile. As the pilot jettisoned the sling load, twelve thousand pounds of jellied gasoline and napalm splashed on the side of the Rock Pile, and the crew chief in the forward door window dropped white phosphorous grenades, igniting the mass in a roar of flame. Aldrich and his aircraft commander received Distinguished Flying Crosses for the mission. Aldrich had only been in country a few days.

I was flying command and control that day with Fitzgerald as a white team. We had a pair of Cobras on station

and a FAC overhead. After loads of fougasse were dropped, I flew over to Mai Loc and met with the lift platoon flight leaders who were preparing to CA onto the very top of the Rock Pile. The soldiers from the Americal Division were going to be inserted at the top of the Rock Pile and would walk their way to the bottom, hopefully clearing any observers or snipers.

As the line of Hueys approached the Rock Pile, we hovered our Loaches over the mountaintop, dropping smoke grenades to provide wind information for the Hueys. We then circled slowly around them, trying to draw enemy fire. Fortunately there was none. Two Cobras circled a thousand feet above us, watching, ready to pounce if we called.

I had my crew chief/door gunner take movies of the combat assault. It was an amazing sight. Once the wind direction was established, the slicks began their approach. It was like a ballet. The first slick came in and touched only the tip of the right front skid to the mountaintop. The troopers jumped off behind the copilot seat in single file. As soon as they were clear, the pilot made a beautiful, climbing, left turn, then a steep dive away from the mountain. Within seconds, the second aircraft repeated the maneuver. Eight lift ships inserted five troops each, a reconnaissance team in force to clear the Rock Pile. Later we found out they made no contact. They did not find snipers, but they did find plenty of evidence of snipers, who'd retreated into the depths of caves or escaped.

Remember the catch in *Catch 22*? Anyone sane enough to want to be grounded was sane enough to fly. And if that wasn't enough, there'd always be another rule! Well, *Catch 22* was alive and well in the 101st. They lifted the 140-hour monthly maximum per pilot because everyone would have been grounded if they hadn't. I was very happily going on R & R. It couldn't have been a better time to leave.

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March 10, 1971

Cobb and I continued to fly together on missions along the DMZ. We directed artillery fire and also marked positions that were later relayed by the forward air controllers to the jets. This time, I had my gunner take movies of the artillery fire and jets attacking the Razorback.

A major at Vandegrift was sick and tired of being shelled. He was convinced that the forward observers and some of the artillery launching positions for the 122mm rockets were located on the Razorback, a stone mountain outcropping northwest of the Rock Pile, running northwestward to the DMZ. A huge, granite-face, white rock wall denoted the south end of the Razorback. Cobb and I flew with our crew chief/door gunners, the major in the front seat with me, armed. Cobb also had another armed passenger with a radio for artillery fire and adjustment if necessary.

Starting at the south end, we went along the top of the Razorback at a fairly fast seventy knots, right level with the top. We saw a lot of evidence of past fights and bombings, and there were obvious paths that were used by NVA. And huge rock outcroppings concealed caves used by the NVA. On our second crisscross, purple smoke appeared near the south end of the Razorback. Since neither one of us had thrown it, and we knew no Americans to be on the mountain, I immediately dove off the west side of the mountain to avoid possible fire. The smoke had been a deliberate attempt to draw me down low and slow. Instead, I was then caught in a mountain-ridge downdraft. It took every ounce of power from the little turbine engine to bring me to a hover, just above dead trees, the kind of obstacle you can't see until it's too late. As I slowed to a hover with an overtemp and overtorque strain to the Loach, I'd nearly lost it! The reserve engine power of the Loach had saved my butt. I then exited to the south at ninety knots, which, in my opinion, was not fast

enough. I then told the FAC what happened, and he immediately called in air strikes. For an hour A-7s and A-4s dropped five hundred-pound bombs all over the Razorback. We were close enough to see one large bomb, a dud, glance off the side of the mountain onto the valley floor. Once they found it, it probably would be used for making mines by the North Vietnamese.

During a mine sweep on the road at Vandegrift, a minesweeping truck hit a very large mine. It was destroyed, killing one GI and four ARVNs. Minesweeping was tedious, boring work, interspersed with the horror of sudden losses of the kind that left the soldiers particularly frustrated because there was no one to attack in retribution.

We continued the day cruising along the DMZ to the east-northeast of an area known as Helicopter Valley, north of Firebase Fuller.

At one point, I heard a hair-raising call on UHF guard frequency: "God on Guard! SAM! SAM! Channel One-zero-three, (Dong Ha), two-eight-two Radial, two-two miles!" That was within three or four miles of where we were flying. Then I remembered that surface to air missiles weren't supposed to be a threat below two thousand feet. We were maybe twenty feet above ground level.

We flew into the DMZ northwest of Firebase Fuller and found a huge mortar base plate, which was obviously for a 120mm mortar. At that point, we marked the position and went back to Vandegrift and reported the location of the base plate. The major there believed that was the location some ground units were receiving heavy mortar fire from because the 120mm mortar had a four to five mile range. Eight-inch and 175mm artillery were used to blast the area.

Later that afternoon, we watched a line of eight Duster tanks with twin 40mm rapid-fire cannons as they sat on Purple Heart Ridge firing toward the Razorback, just lacing it with golden tracers and explosions. It looked like something I had seen in movies about Marines in World

War II at Iwo Jima. It made a lasting impression, the almost white, rock-face mountain, dense green vegetation, red clay, and golden streams of 40mm tracers.

On March 15, the troops based at Khe Sanh were introduced to the 122mm field guns of the North Vietnamese Army. The first of several consecutive artillery raids was conducted from concealed mountain tunnels, reportedly by railway mounted guns. Rumors were, the tunnels, impervious to air strikes or counterbattery fire, had been built by the Japanese during World War II. But the simple fact was the NVA had learned how to tunnel their artillery and antiaircraft into nearly invisible positions. They'd learned it fighting the French at Dong Khe, before Dien Bien Phu, twenty-one years earlier.

On the fifteenth, I ran into WO Pat McKeaney, a Phoenix pilot, at the division pad. A real likeable guy, he always had a smile on his face. With his first words, I froze. "Did you hear bout Nelson and Moreira's deaths?"

My mind reeling, "No!" I gasped.

"Yeh, they went down in Laos."

McKeaney's repeating the words, "They're dead," shattered any of my remaining expectations of justice from fate. I wanted to believe that a good man, a leader, should live. It was a *right*, earned in service and battle, to return home safely to loved ones. The death was so wrong, God wouldn't allow it!

Being body slammed to the ground could not have hammered me as badly as McKeaney's words. He then told me of Keith's being shot up and of his copilot being critically wounded. Another Phoenix pilot was horribly wounded in the leg, with only twenty-one days til he ended his time in service. I was plunged into shock, overwhelmed by grief, anger. I just shook my head. We didn't shake hands. I wished him well, then walked away, my mind spinning. That was when I stopped shaking hands with Phoenix. I didn't want to jinx them. Survivor's guilt

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set in. I had chosen to leave them. The senselessness of it all. I would remember it as the day I refused to allow my own tears. I'd not cry again for nineteen years. The deepening grief and shock would eventually subside; the demands of flying would drag my mind from them.

Nelson was a platoon leader you'd knowingly fly into hell with, a man of experience and focus. He was viewed by the warrants and commissioned officers alike as the most capable, the most likely to complete any mission. We'd all been aware of our vulnerability, but the Phoenix who flew with him were totally confident in his ability. I'd flown with him into North Vietnam and Laos, my life totally dependent on his skills and good luck.

Captain Nelson's death was a travesty of fate. We all knew he'd been a first-tour warrant. He'd accepted a direct commission as a RLO and trained to fly the CH-54 Skycrane. He was supposed to have been assigned to fly Skycranes in a unit at Da Nang. But the Green Machine shipped him to the Phoenix. He'd accepted his leadership role and duties with enthusiasm.

The days would drag on, but the word of Nelson and Moreira's deaths would resurface in my thoughts when the routine did not consume my attention. To me, Nelson was the most unlikely pilot to get killed: he was too experienced; too capable; too damn good! To me, Nelson had been the paragon of an army aviator.

For me, the missions suddenly reverted to REMF missions. Boring as hell, but very safe. It seemed as if there was no longer a war going on. That feeling would last for a short while. I had to carry a doughnut dolly (Red Cross worker) from Camp Eagle to Firebase Bastogne, where she would spend the day entertaining troops, playing games, bringing mail and Red Cross gifts. It was the first time I flew a woman passenger. During the flight out we took yellow tracers, .30-caliber machine-gun fire. That surprised the hell out of me because the firebase was only ten miles west of Camp Eagle. I was a single ship at two

thousand five hundred feet and must have made a tempting target, but the yellow tracers were way out in front of us. The girl in the left front seat didn't even notice, and I said nothing. Four hours later, I picked her up at the firebase and returned her to Camp Eagle. The return flight was uneventful, at a higher altitude.

March 17 was a long day of flying convoy escort and general support. I spent it cruising the area north of the Rock Pile around the DMZ with Fitzgerald. We came across a few bunkers north of Firebase Fuller and came to a hover to drop fragmentation and CS grenades into them, but didn't find any enemy. I guess they'd learned that Loaches were only part of their problem. The FAC overhead could really make them hurt with the jets he had on call.

The DMZ was an amazing landscape. It looked like what I'd expected to see on the Moon or Mars. For at least two miles there was nothing but pock-marked craters from the continuous bombing. Red clay, water, and the debris of war. While scouting the mountain hillsides in the area, we ran across huge monitor lizards between six and eight feet in length. Obviously, with them out sunning, the North Vietnamese were not around. It had been a tension-filled day of convoy escort but, luckily, without contact. That night, I returned to Camp Eagle to pack. It was time for my long awaited R & R week in Hawaii with my wife.

10

Rest and Relaxation

On March 18 I caught a flight in a Loach to Freedom Hill, the airbase at Da Nang where the jets came in from Hawaii and the States. I went through out-processing and had to spend the night there prior to my flight for Honolulu.

The flight from Da Nang to Honolulu was long, but relaxing. In Stateside khakis I hadn't worn in seven months, I was sitting next to a second-tour warrant officer who'd brought along his own flask of whiskey because alcohol was not served on the government-charter flights. He gave me a lot of good-natured kidding about our arrival at Honolulu. He said, "You haven't seen your wife in seven months. She's changed her hair, her weight is different, everything is gonna be different. You're not even gonna recognize her! It gets so confusing when everybody jumps off the bus and rushes to meet their wives and girlfriends. Some guys end up with the wrong girls. Doesn't slow down the festivities though." This is going to be crazy, I thought.

So it was with some trepidation (and intense excitement) that I stepped off the bus and saw the long line of women waiting at the R & R reception center. But I instantly picked out my lovely blonde wife. From then on, Heaven was on Earth. Since I only had a carry-on bag, we caught a cab to the Ilakai Hotel on Waikiki Beach. As we made our way up to our room, I was in a near state of shock. To touch my wife, hug and kiss her after not hav-

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ing seen or talked with her for seven months, was months of dreams come true. Less than forty-eight hours earlier, I'd been flying a Loach along the DMZ and the Rock Pile, dropping CS and fragmentation grenades, hunting the enemy. Two short days later, I was in a gorgeous hotel room on Waikiki Beach with my lovely wife.

Our personal reunion was as intense and joyous as one could dream, and was, I'm sure, simultaneously repeated by hundreds of other couples under the same wartime circumstances.

Later that evening, we had dinner in the rooftop restaurant of the Ilakai. Afterward, I called my parents to talk with them, the first time in seven months. The phone call was a very difficult time, at best, and not a whole lot could be said. The news reports obviously had them worried, and I still had five months to go in Vietnam. They did not understand the confidence and control I had over my risk. There was no way to convey how much safer I was now that I no longer flew with the Phoenix.

We spent the first night in Honolulu, saw the Don Ho show, listened to "Tiny bubbles." I was introduced to Mai Tais and Leilani Hawaiian Rum. Then we flew to Kauai and stayed at the Hanalei Bay Plantation, where *South Pacific* had been filmed. For a boy raised on the beaches of the Gulf of Mexico, it couldn't have been any more beautiful.

It was pure joy to have a room overlooking Hanalei Bay and the mountain waterfalls. The setting was perfectly romantic, but it stunned me when I realized that the mountains, which created the Waimea Canyon, the backdrop of Hanalei Bay, looked remarkably similar to the Razorback and Rock Pile. The same dark green vegetation, white-face mountain cliffs, and countless wispy waterfalls under cloud shrouded mountaintops. What was spectacular beauty in Hawaii was simply hell in Vietnam.

After the time at Hanalei Bay, we returned to Waikiki Beach and the SurfRider Hotel. Hanging over us was the

fact that the six nights would end shortly, and I would be returning to Vietnam for five more months, my wife, Stateside, alone. We talked of friends lost but spoke little of what I was actually doing though I tried to explain how different things were compared to December. I had as good a flying job as existed in I Corps. I wanted to mentally remove myself from Vietnam as much as possible, and she simply wanted the year to end quickly.

We spent the days walking the shopping areas and lying on the beach. I bought a T-shirt with a picture of a Phantom on the front. It had the words, Fly the friendly skies of Laos on the back.

We enjoyed our time together in a way that can only be made possible by seven months of separation, all the while living on the edge of hope, but knowing I was involved in a deadly endeavor. At the end of the week, we laughed when I reminded her of Captain Anderson's saying, "The reason they only give you six days of R & R? That's how long it takes to wear a couple out." However, the humor of his remark was overshadowed by Anderson's death in an instrument flight accident.

11

The Worst Pickup Zone: PZ Brown

By March 20, a horrible toll had been taken upon the aircraft from the units that had begun the Laotian invasion. Many, many aircraft had been damaged and were being repaired. The lack of aircraft availability, once again made necessary the transfer of assets, this time from the 116th and the 176th Aviation Companies from the lower part of South Vietnam. The veterans of LZ Lolo returned on the nineteenth to Quang Tri. They'd fly for three tragedy filled days in the evacuation of Pickup Zone Brown, enemy encircled, deep in Laos.

Fortune had turned so badly against the ARVNs that evacuation of their troops had begun in earnest. Pickup Zone Brown was the last major Laotian pickup zone still in ARVN hands. It was several miles west of the Laos/Quang Tri Province border. Brown was south of QL9, southwest of A Luoi, and east/southeast of Lolo. Lolo had been the site of the most devastating losses involved in a helicopter combat assault. The area west of A Luoi was still claiming aircraft on a daily basis.

But Pickup Zone Brown would assume it's place in army aviation history as worse than the Ia Drang, Khe Sanh, and Ripcord. It was the most costly PZ for U.S. Army helicopters extracting South Vietnamese troops from a one-sided battle. The aircraft from the 116th and 176th, the mainstay during the extractions from LZ Brown, were supplemented by ten 101st Aviation Battalion aircraft,

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seven from the Kingsmen (Bravo Company) and three crews from Black Widows (Charlie Company). The emergency extraction was, in the commanders eyes, to move out of danger an ARVN battalion in danger of being overrun at Fire Support Base Brown. Unknown to those in command, elements of other ARVN units were fighting their way onto FSB Brown in hopes of also being extracted. ARVN troops already there, were dropping their weapons in fear. For three days, the South Vietnamese forces had been under continuous contact, the enemy making repeated probes. Finally a command decision was made: extract all the forces left in the area. The remnants of *four* ARVN battalions located in and around Fire Support Base Brown would be taken out.

March 20, 1971, would be remembered by the Dolphins, Kingsmen, Black Widows, and Minutemen as the worst-ever day of army combat aviation. Pickup zones around FSB Brown were the day's objectives. And as ARVNs were dropping their weapons, too panicked to fight, the North Vietnamese carefully hugged the perimeters, waiting for a shot at the army helicopters attempting to evacuate the ARVNs. It was a shooting gallery for the NVA, who were just yards from the landing zones. When a Huey came to a low hover, the ARVNs clambered aboard, many becoming casualties of AK-47 fire. It was a nightmarish, very real rout under direct enemy fire.

CWO Al Fischer, Kingsmen One-eight, had only a month left in county, of his twelve-month tour of duty. He'd flown many CCN missions in support of Special Forces, as well as many missions supporting Ranger teams throughout I Corps. Like most young warrant officers, he felt risking U. S. aircrew lives repeatedly for the ARVN forces was not justified because the ARVN were dropping their weapons and refusing to fight, which only made the PZs more dangerous for the air crews. Terrified of dying at the hands of the NVA, the ARVNs crowded aboard the helicopters as as they landed, creating a volatile, lethal envi-

ronment; an overloaded Huey could easily be stuck on the ground if too many troops leapt aboard. The Huey's single turbine engine had a carefully measured weight capacity.

Maj. Jack Barker, commanding officer of the Kingsmen, and Capt. John Dugan were flying the lead ship of the third ten-ship element of the morning rescue flight. Everyone was aware that all three pickup zones had been surrounded by enemy troops with antiaircraft weapons. There was no access or approach that could be used to avoid enemy ground fire. The pilots knew that they'd take fire on the approach to landing and while sitting in the pickup zone. And that enemy fire wouldn't stop until they reentered South Vietnam's air space.

Shortly after they launched and headed toward the pickup zone, radio calls informed them that the first five aircraft of the first wave had been hit by enemy fire. Six aircraft out of the first twenty had been shot down, and others completed forced landings after severe antiaircraft damage in the vicinity of the pickup zone.

To the south of the pickup zone, low-level visibility was less than one mile because of smoke and dust created by a nearby B-52 strike. Haze from the bombings mixed with the dust and fires from heavy combat underway on the pickup zones. In addition, in an attempt to mask the approach of the Hueys, there had been extensive use of white phosphorous smoke. But the smoke only added to the confusion. The reduced visibility created an instrument-flight-rules (IFR) environment where Hueys could only operate under visual flight conditions. It soon became apparent that anyone descending below two thousand five hundred feet was in deadly visual flight conditions.

Major Barker and copilot Capt. John Dugan led their element through the white phosphorous smoke in an attempt to conceal themselves from the enemy's numerous .51-caliber and 23mm positions dispersed throughout the area. Even worse, there were 37mm positions bunkered

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nearby. But as the Hueys broke through the smoke on descent to the pickup zone, they came under heavy automatic-weapons fire. As they came closer to the pickup zone, the antiaircraft fire became so intense they were forced to make a go-around. While they attempted a climb to a safer altitude, they confirmed that all aircraft in their element were still flying. Barker's aircraft received a round through the heater compartment and out the tail rotor drive shaft. A second round struck Captain Dugan's seat armor as they continued to approach, another hit the cockpit, leaving a hole just above the major's head and damaging one of the structural beams of the airframe. Due to the intense fire and damage, the aircraft was rendered unsafe to fly, but uncertain of the severity of damage to their Huey, they'd made a go-around and rejoined the flight.

Amazingly, Major Barker, Captain Dugan, and their enlisted crew members were unhurt. But the second attempt into the pickup zone was equally hot and unsuccessful. Another Huey had been rendered unsafe to fly.

Behind them during the first attempt CWO Al Fischer was flying as Chalk Two, the second helicopter in formation. Fischer was thinking during the flight into Laos that the operation had to be ending: it seemed as if every pickup zone was hot, but some had heavier caliber weapons around them than others. The flight was very tense and very serious. On the flight in, smoke from a B-52 Arc Light bombing attack obscured the ground. As the element approached the pickup zone, the ships spread out into a loose trail formation, to keep a one minute separation between aircraft. They would not sit the aircraft on the ground, but come to a five-foot hover above the PZ. The crew chief and the door gunner would then pull aboard enough ARVNs for a safe full load. They knew that if they set down on the ground they would be swamped by panicked ARVNs and would not be able to take off.

Fischer

Fischer watched as Major Barker rolled in left off the smoke. It was hard for Fischer to keep him in sight. Fischer tried to maintain a one minute separation, but visibility was less than a mile. Barker had taken heavy fire and hits on short final. He executed a go-around without picking up troops. Sixty seconds had expired with no word from Barker. Fischer dropped his collective and skirted along the smoke screen, descending to the pickup zone. He dived low, keeping his Huey's air speed at 120 knots, nearly 150 miles per hour. As he approached the ground, the landscape around the pickup zone was sparkling. Little gold muzzle flashes from AK-47s were everywhere.

Barker did not report his taking fire or hits in the pickup zone; he was too busy trying to keep his aircraft flyable through the go-around. Unaware that Barker had taken heavy hits, Fischer continued his approach, taking his own hits as he crossed the perimeter of the pickup zone. Because he was coming hot and fast, he stood the bird on its tail and pulled in all the power he could to stop it. As he leveled the Huey to hover, his first sight was ARVN soldiers. Through his chin bubble, he saw them crouching in the middle of the pickup zone. It was a demoralizing, disgusting sight to Fischer: none had weapons.

At the same time, all hell opened up inside the Huey as AK-47 rounds turned the Huey's underside into a magnesium Swiss cheese.

Fischer's copilot, WO Ed Cash, jerked back as both greenhouse windows above the pilots heads were shattered. Through his flight suit leg, Cash then took a round that just missed his skin. A former Green Beret with two tours prior to his aviation tour as a warrant officer, Cash had an M-16 with a scope slung over his seat. But an AK-47 round had entered the eye piece and exited the side of the scope. More AK 47 rounds flew through the radio controls and instrument control panel.

The crew chief, Sp4. Lyle Smith, and door gunner Sp4. Roger Perales were shooting their M-60 machine guns while hollering to Fischer to "Keep moving! Keep moving! Still taking hits." Pulling in maximum power, Fisher rolled the nose over and climbed out. He radioed Chalk Three to take a different path. By this time, North Vietnamese were waiting on the very edge of the PZ. His climb out was made to the east under continuous fire.

To immediately assess the battle damage, Smith and Perales climbed onto the Huey's skids as it climbed out. They reported to Fischer that they'd suffered multiple hits through the tail boom. Some rounds had come through the critical tail rotor drive shaft housing. They were also streaming a white trail of vaporizing jet fuel, an explosive fire hazard.

Fischer called lead, Major Barker, and reported that he was climbing to altitude and heading back to Khe Sanh with the wounded bird. It would be unflyable on landing. Barker did not answer the call. It was simply more bad news. Barker had also suffered similar hits.

Fischer's VHF and UHF radios were shot up and unuseable. For a Huey pilot, that is as close as a round can physically get, without hitting him. Chalk Three's aircraft commander, Gene Haag, and Chalk Four's aircraft commander, WO Tom Hill, safely flew in low level after Fischer's warning. They were both able to pick up troops and got out with amazingly minor damage. The young warrant officer's of the Kingsmen, aided by three Black Widows continued the extraction. All were under constant fire in the landing zone, taking hits. A few minutes passed, then Chalk Five, commanded by WO Bruce Sibley, was hit by something larger than a rocket-propelled grenade, perhaps a 57mm antiaircraft gun. Though wounded, Sibley and his crew survived a crash just short of the pickup zone. The crew was rescued by Capt. Willis Wulf, flying the Kingsmen's recovery ship. For Fischer, all of the excitement down below was not enough to distract him

from the immediate problems on his bird: he had a mortally wounded helicopter. He continued to climb to altitude and picked up Route 9, the dusty, one-lane road that ran from Tchepone to Khe Sanh. He could fly right at the base of the overhead cloud ceiling and follow the road to Khe Sanh because visibility had greatly improved after he'd climbed above the low-level smoke and haze of ground combat.

Fischer reached the cloud base at four-thousand-five-hundred feet above ground level. In South Vietnam that would have been a totally safe altitude, above the range of small-arms fire. But Fischer intuitively sensed that was not the case in Laos. But to some North Vietnamese antiaircraft artillery gunner, he was a prominent silhouette. Just another expensive, slow, target, just below the clouds.

In a blinding instant, Fischer felt as if someone had punched him between the eyes. He was momentarily knocked unconscious. Although, it was widely known there were 37mm radar-controlled weapons in the area, the pilots did not know that 57mm and even 120mm weapons were being used as antiaircraft weapons.

Moments later Fischer awoke. He was looking through the open front end of his Huey's cockpit. The helicopter's nose, pilots' windshields, and canopies had been blown away and the Huey was screaming towards the ground, nearly vertical, at 120 knots. In three or four seconds more the aircraft would have exceeded it's design-to-load limits and broken apart in mid-air, but Fischer had recovered soon enough to pull back on the cyclic and add power. He then realized most of the instrument panel was gone and the engine would only run at flight-idle; it produced *no* useable flying power. He was then in an autorotation, in a combat-damaged aircraft, still a target of antiaircraft fire.

Fischer's copilot, Ed Cash, was slumped over in his seat. Fischer feared he was dead.

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Whatever hit them had been very powerful. Even the center metal post that separated the pilot and copilot windshields was gone. Wires were dangling and sparking from the overhead control panel. Fischer tried to talk to Smith and Perales but heard no results. The intercom was dead. He turned around to look at Smith. Smith was staring back wide-eyed and talking. Fischer motioned, pointing to his ears, he could not hear Smith. With the radios out, shouting was the only way to communicate. Fischer then looked back again and noticed a hole the size of a football in the transmission wall. That alone was a fatal wound to the Huey. Fischer then wondered if it would hold together long enough to successfully autorotate.

Perales had also been knocked out by the blast. Smith had been forced back against the wall and could not get forward during the dive. Below, in front of them, Fischer saw where they were going to crash. In a powerless helicopter, you can only look down and see where you're gonna land. Fortunately, it happened to be a hilltop that was also a fire support base, Delta 1. Unfortunately, Fischer confused it with Fire Support Base Delta. The confusion between Delta and Delta 1 would later cause a problem in their rescue because Fire Support Base Delta was being attacked by the North Vietnamese. There were only four hundred ARVNs on it. Later in the day it would be overrun by Russian-made tanks.

Fischer was autorotating with only enough power to provide hydraulics and electricity for his now useless radios. Perales came to as they approached the firebase. As Fischer crossed over the perimeter of FSB Delta, he started taking heavy small-arms fire. It was just as bad as PZ Brown. Once again, a base was totally surrounded by NVA, who were right up against the perimeter wires. As soon as the skids touched down, Fischer bottomed the collective pitch, slamming the bird to the ground. He didn't want any chance of being a slow-moving target.

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The aircraft slid some, but the surface was level, and the bird quickly ground to a stop. They continued taking heavy fire from the right side. Cash and Smith got out very quickly. Suddenly, Fischer heard a burst from an M-16 right behind his head: ARVNs had rushed the bird from a bunker, onto the left side, and they were pinning Perales in the bird, but he was able to get them to back off by firing toward them, well over their heads. Cash had gotten around and helped Perales take as much M-60 ammo as they could carry.

The four of them headed to a bulldozed trench some thirty yards from the center of the fire base. While Fischer was crawling toward the trench, he remembered he hadn't pulled the self-destruction handle on the FM digital scrambler radio. He turned back to the bird and fired four or five times into the KY-28 radio with his M-16 then crawled for the trench. Under fire, he rolled in on top of a wounded ARVN soldier with a bandaged, bloody leg. The wounded man let out a horrifying yell. Cash had already gotten the crew chief and gunner set up with the M-60 on the western edge of the fifteen-yard-long trench. They began suppressing fire closest to the perimeter.

Fischer had his survival vest on with a portable emergency transceiver. He extended the antennae and the radio began to beep on guard frequency. But when he listened, all he could hear was the beeps from many other aircraft shot down. Of course, some of the beeps may have been jamming and deception from the NVA. The trench had fifteen to twenty ARVNs, none with weapons except for an ARVN officer who had a pistol and the only PRC-25 radio in sight. They had given up fighting and were simply waiting to be withdrawn by the helicopters or to die at the hands of the North Vietnamese. Even though Fischer did not speak Vietnamese, he convinced the ARVN officer that he was going to use the radio. Fischer thought he should take the officer's pistol too. The ARVN officer gave Fischer the impression he might use the

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pistol to get his radio back. Allies hell. Fischer called on the Kingsmen company FM frequency, but got no response. Then mortars started walking across the landing zone. It was easy to see they were working the hilltop, trying to destroy Fischer's Huey. It seemed a perfectly good target sitting there; the North Vietnamese didn't know it was unflyable.

After a few nervous minutes, Fischer received a response on the PRC-25 from Kingsmen Six-nine, CWO Bill Singletary, who was Chalk 6. He had crew members WO Joe. St. John, with crew chief Bill Dillender, and door gunner PFC John Chubb. Singletary's bird had also been badly hit and could not make the pickup zone. Then Singletary and St. John learned that Fischer was down on Fire Support Base Delta, but they couldn't see the helicopter on the ground. Singletary asked for a radio line count and homed in on Fischer, finally locating him at Delta 1. The mistake was understandable considering the conditions. Fischer had been confused, having been knocked unconscious by antiaircraft fire, awakening in a near fatal dive.

Singletary and St. John decided, despite the damage to their aircraft, they would pick up Fischer and his crew. Fischer radioed Singletary and told him that Fire Support Base Delta 1 was very hot, was surrounded, and that he should not come in.

Defiant of the obvious dangers, Singletary chuckled. "I'll be coming in low-level from the north. Give me a mark." Singletary and St. John approached low-level, 120 knots, in the trees. As the Huey approached the edge of Delta 1, Fischer distinctly heard both the increasing sound of the Huey with the crescendo of AK-47s and .51-calibers. Just before Singletary broke over the edge of the firebase, Smith jumped out of the trench onto his knees then held his M-16 above his head to mark a T for Singletary. He'd also become a perfect, motionless target for the NVA. Smith could not have been in that position

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for more than two or three seconds when the dirt around him exploded from AK-47 fire.

Fischer saw Smith fall to the ground in the fusillade. Thinking the worst, he sank into the trench floor. He believed Smith was dead or critically wounded. Fischer entered the mental zone shared by combatants facing imminent mortality. Time slowed as events around him unfolded. A sense of personal calm, emerged from a spiritual presence. Fischer sensed this was not the end, regardless of the outcome. The calm empowered him to look up again.

Amazed, he saw that Smith had only fallen to the ground. Smith was again in a prone position holding his M-16 above his head. He hadn't been hit, but bullets were still flying.

Thank God! Fischer then believed guardian angels were working overtime. Lying in the trench under fire, he'd sensed a spiritual presence. He'd experienced the surreal peace that comes over many preparing to accept the inevitable end. It had empowered him to take the necessary steps to save himself.

St. John called the mark. As the Huey flared, shuddering in a violent deceleration, Fischer and the others sprinted to the center of the pickup zone, anticipating the Huey's touchdown spot. It was a twenty or thirty yard run at a crouch, weapons firing from the hip. Fischer would later recall it as a scene from a John Wayne movie.

in a "John Wayne moment"

Singletary stood his Huey nose-high, it's tail stinger furrowing into the ground. He had decelerated from one-hundred thirty miles an hour to a slow hover, in less than fifty yards.

Simultaneously, Fischer and the others were running to the touchdown spot, firing underneath the flaring Huey at North Vietnamese on the far perimeter, trying to suppress fire. Singletary never had to stop the Huey as the four men jumped on. Fischer was the last one pulled aboard. They

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accelerated away from the landing zone as mortars were closely impacting on both sides of their flight path.

Fischer's chest had hit the floor of the bird, knocking the wind out of him. The very next thing he felt was crew chief Dillender grabbing his back and literally throwing him across the floor of the Huey. Fischer reached out his arm, luckily catching the back of Singletary's seat. He'd almost slid out the other side of the accelerating Huey. As Singletary pulled in all the power he had and nosed it over, staying at ground level and accelerated away from the North Vietnamese. The four passengers in the back of the Huey were firing M-16s as the crew chief and the door gunner fired their M-60s.

Emotionally spent, they returned to Khe Sanh. They landed at the pad where other Kingsmen birds were sitting. After landing, Singletary's bird was red x'd for combat damage. Kingsmen Huey 492, the one flown by Fischer was destroyed by Cobra gunships on Firebase Delta 1. Later in the day, Singletary's bird, tail number 185, would be claimed by Maj. Jack Barker to make one more attempt into Pick-up Zone Brown because 185 had sustained fewer fatal hits than Barker's bird.

At Khe Sanh, Fischer learned that Chalks Three and Four had numerous hits on short final into PZ Brown, but elected to take the aircraft into the pickup zone. They each loaded troops but received severe automatic weapons fire on departure. They were able to evacuate the troops, but their passengers were wounded.

Chalk Five came on short final and, one hundred meters from the PZ, was hit by something larger than a rocket-propelled grenade and crashed in the trees short of the pickup zone. Amazingly, the pilot and copilot were the only casualties.

Chalks Seven, Eight, and Nine were forced to abort the landing due to antiaircraft hits prior to entering final approach. Battle damaged, they all returned, to Khe Sanh.

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Chalk Ten was orbiting around Fire Support Base Delta 1 and went to the aid of Chalk Five.

Like the others, Chalk Ten received the same heavy automatic weapons fire on final, but another desperate rescue was needed. Wulf hovered over the side of Sibley's Huey, which was resting on its side after a violent crash. The copilot and crewmen managed to get aboard the rescue Huey. They didn't know that Sibley had been wounded and could not help himself.

Then Wulf spotted Sibley motioning him to leave! Wulf was simultaneously taking AK-47 hits, and he could see North Vietnamese troops running toward them. In desperation, Wulf asked his crew chief to climb down onto the crashed Huey and retrieve Sibley. The crew chief succeeded in getting Sibley on board. Wulf had managed to pick up the entire downed aircraft crew, which had been surrounded by enemy forces. Chalk Ten successfully departed with the crew aboard but took heavy damage from automatic weapons fire on departure. They made it back to Khe Sanh with badly wounded crew members. CWO Bill Singletary and Capt. Willis Wulf received Silver Stars for the heroic efforts that saved the crews of CWO Bruce Sibley and Fischer.

That afternoon, the evacuations continued. The morning flight of the Kingsmen had consisted of seven Kingsmen aircraft flyable, with three Black Widows from C Company, 101st Aviation Battalion. What had been a horrifying morning of close calls was going to culminate in an afternoon of courage, death, and heroism beyond the call of duty. Virtually all of the birds that participated in the Pickup Zone Brown affair were red x'd because of enemy antiaircraft hits. They were determined by maintenance to be unflyable without major repairs.

That afternoon, under the orders of Lieutenant Colonel Peachy, the company commanders assembled the remaining "flyable" birds. The evacuation of Fire Support Base Brown had been declared a tactical emergency, and they

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were to finish removing ARVNs from Laos by sunset. The Kingsmen had just one bird left that could fly, Huey 185. The survivor of Fischer's rescue, Singletary's bird.

Fischer had survived the attempted rescue of ARVN from Pickup Zone Brown. He'd survived having his aircraft mortally wounded hovering in the pickup zone. He'd even survived the airburst over Delta 1 that blown the nose off his Huey. Then he'd successfully completed a powerless autorotation onto an enemy encircled landing zone, taking more antiaircraft fire during the descent. There he'd narrowly escaped under enemy fire after participating in infantry ground combat. Having been knocked temporarily unconscious by an airburst was grounds for an automatic medical grounding. But he was ordered to take another Huey to PZ Brown. With one month left in country, Fischer had lost friends and seen far too many wounded. Fischer told Major Barker it was worthless to try again; the pickup zone was totally encircled. The NVA were using the ARVN as bait so that they could shoot Hueys out of the sky. The ARVNs needed to find another way out. His disgust was driven by his observation that the ARVNs had simply dropped their weapons and were just awaiting the encircling NVA.

By that point. Fischer had tested the limits of luck and fate. He was disgusted with the entire operation. He refused to be a target over PZ Brown, again. He'd risked his life on behalf of the ARVNs in the morning and nearly died four times CWO Singletary shared Fischer's feelings. At different times, both were called before Lieutenant Colonel Peachey.

First, Peachey threatened Fischer, to no avail. Fischer told Lieutenant Colonel Peachey of the ARVNs', cowering on Brown and Delta-1. Fischer told Lieutenant Colonel Peachey that he wouldn't go just to extract ARVNs. Without them fighting, trying to defend their pickup zones, it was simply suicide. Fischer then told Lieutenant Colone Peachey, that "If one American was

stranded on the ground, I'd go get him, and the sooner the better." After the day Fischer had endured, he'd not go back for the ARVNs. Lieutenant Colonel Peachey promised him a court-martial, to no avail.

Sometime later, CWO Singletary was ordered to an audience before Lieutenant Colonel Peachey. In separate interviews, the same conversation was repeated. Another flight would be a waste of American lives. Both men had pleaded with Peachey not to send more aircraft into PZ Brown. Peachey was adamant that the operation continue.

Fischer and Singletary were equally adamant that it would continue without their participation. For both men, it was the only time either had refused an order. It was an emotionally charged, gut-wrenching experience. Neither man had ever dreamed he'd be faced with an order to certain death. Fischer and Singletary knew any further attempt would be suicide, not only for themselves, but their crewmen as well.

Maj. Jack Barker, the Kingsmen commanding officer, was not rated as an aircraft commander. Neither was his copilot, Capt. John Dugan. Prior to going through aviation training and returning for his second tour in Vietnam as an aviator, Barker had served a first tour on the ground. Barker told Singletary and Fischer that he and Dugan would take the mission, with Singletary's flyable bird. With crewmen Dillender and Chubb aboard, they'd join the other remnants of helicopter companies, continuing the evacuation of PZ Brown. Singletary went to Dugan and begged him not to go. He said "You're not only gonna get yourself killed, but the others with you." Fischer also pleaded with Dugan. Begging him not to go. Dugan simply replied that "duty called" and continued preparing for the mission. Fischer then begged Major Barker, his commanding officer, not to go. It would cost them their lives. Major Barker and John Dugan were adamant. Dillender and Chubb had no reluctance to go

back with them despite what they had gone through in the morning.

That afternoon they flew to a briefing for a final attempt at PZ Brown. Leading a flight of only three aircraft, at 3:00 in the afternoon they again flew to the besieged pickup zone.

The commander of the Kingsmen (Bravo Company), Maj. Jack Barker and Capt. John Dugan began their third attempted sortie into Pickup Zone Brown to extract allies on the ground.

As Barker began his short final approach to the landing zone, the Huey was struck by a rocket-propelled grenade, losing its tail boom. The main rotor then separated from the aircraft, the fuselage nosed over and plummeted in an uncontrollable dive to the ground. It exploded in a ball of flames, killing all aboard. Sp4. William Dillender, the crew chief and PFC John Chubb, door gunner, had also volunteered for the mission, at the cost of their lives.

Maj. Bob Clewell was flying in extended trail formation behind Barker. Clewell listened in horror as another pilot reported Barker's loss.

Sickened by the tragic and useless loss of Dugan, Barker, Dillender, and Chubb, Fischer and Singletary returned to Camp Eagle that night. They had shared a wretched experience, and it was the only time either would refuse an order. They'd understood that Barker and Dugan were career soldiers whose careers were ended if they refused a mission. Singletary and Fischer believed the mission to be suicide not only for themselves but also for their enlisted crew members. Considering the day's experiences, Singletary and Fischer believed they'd made the only sane choice. Even so, they'd find no solace in surviving the day.

Singletary and Fischer did not know what would face them the next morning, but after defying Lieutenant Colonel Peachey's threat of a court-martial, they had no illu-

sions about making the army a career. Both young pilots were dazed. It had been unbelievably difficult just to stay alive. With the simple exception of not dying, it had been the worst of days.

The other combat experienced pilots were also sadly relieved, to simply be alive.

At the five AM wake-up call the next morning, Singletary and Fischer were each given a Huey with an ash and trash mission list, resupply missions for U. S. troops in the beautiful, but deadly A Shau Valley. After the previous day in Laos, it was as easy as a day could be for a slick driver. Neither heard any mention of a court-martial, and each attributed that to the deaths of Major Barker and his crew. Fischer and Singletary would not discuss the events until 1986. Only then, would they learn of each other's being called before Lieutenant Colonel Peachey.

On the following day, attempts to lift out ARVNs continued, but the panicked soldiers swamped any aircraft that approached the pickup zone, packing twenty to thirty men into a Huey designed to carry no more than ten. This horrified the pilots and crew members, who knew the load limits of the aircraft.

The enemy fire continued to take a toll. On the afternoon of March 21, Major Bunting, commanding officer of the 48th Assault Helicopter Company, knew his men were physically exhausted, emotionally shot. All the remaining flyable aircraft were battle damaged. But the withdrawal was a trial of resolve and honor of the kind few ever experience in a lifetime. Major Bunting didn't climb up to altitude like some commanders, but flew the lead helicopter, down in the dirt, leading the army's charge. His leadership by example, with disregard for his own personal safety, had already gotten him shot down on two prior occasions. Knowing of Major Barker's loss the preceding day only added to the gravity of his decision.

During the evening briefing the night before, Bunting

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had told his men of the mission. Warning them it would likely be a repeat of the disastrous one of March 20, he informed the men he needed ten aircrews, all volunteers. His leadership by example, with disregard for his own personal safety, had already gotten him shot down on two prior occasions. Knowing of Major Barker's loss only added to the gravity of his decision.

In the morning mission, Major Bunting led his flight of ten Blue Stars as the final string behind thirty other Hueys. When they entered Laos, antiaircraft fire took its toll. As Bunting listened to those ahead of him, he heard horrifying commentaries of hits taken, wounded crewmen, and constant calls of "Going down!" *Every* aircraft in the first three flights of ten Hueys each was either shot down or damaged so badly it wouldn't fly again.

The debacle of panicked, unarmed ARVNs scrambling hovering Hueys while NVA took target practice was lunacy. Bunting realized that the pickup zone had to be moved. He called Lieutenant Colonel Peachey and asked Peachey to call it off until the PZ could be moved a short distance. Peachey was adamant. The extraction would continue.

For Major Bunting, combat risk had observable, carefully measured limits. Sanity had to set a limit. A month earlier, Bunting had been told by General Sutherland that a lift company was an acceptable sacrifice to maintain the diplomacy of the army support of the ARVN effort.

But Bunting had reached a rational limit. There would be no senseless sacrifice of his Blue Stars. He radioed Peachey, telling him they would not go in until the pickup zone was moved. Infuriated, Peachey ordered him to proceed. Again, Bunting requested that he move the PZ. A General of the 101st Airborne Division circling above, callsign Right Guard, overheard the conversation. He ordered Peachey and Bunting to meet him at the log pad at Khe Sanh.

Bunting ordered his Blue Sars back to Khe Sanh and

headed for the log pad. Was he going to be relieved of command or worse? Bunting was hoping the general might back him up against Peachey, but thought that was highly unlikely. After all, it was Peachey who had ordered the continuation of the assault onto Lolo at the cost of seventeen Hueys. Then, in a moment of divine intervention or poetic justice, Lieutenant Colonel Peachey was shot down in Laos!

Bunting waited at the log pad, but neither one showed up. He returned to his Blue Stars and was informed the PZ was being moved. They were on standby for the afternoon. He then learned of Peachey's being shot down.

A short while later, another urgent call for evacuation was received. The Blue Star pilots were convinced the ARVN were cowards, adding to the enemy threat by not defending their PZ. Most pilots said they'd not fly the mission. Major Bunting, instead of displaying emotion or threatening the young warrant officers, simply declared that he understood. In fact, he even agreed with the pilots' observations of the situation. However, as commander, he had his duty; he felt he had no choice but to go.

The gravity of the moment was no less serious than when Colonel Travis drew a line in the sand at the Alamo. Bunting walked away from the pilots and began the engine-starting sequence in his Huey. A wave of passion swept through the young pilots. There were disbelief and profanity. It ended when someone shouted, "He can't fucking go alone!" The Blue Stars swarmed to their Hueys, saddled up, and followed Major Bunting back into hell over Laos.

Bunting led the Blue Stars through the antiaircraft fire, and the NVA threw everything at them. A few took hits to their Hueys. The Blue Stars, combat veterans with a highly experienced leader, came in at altitude. When they neared the pickup zone, they made a rapid descent to the treetops.

The final approach was an in-your-face treetop assault

to the new pickup zone. Amazingly, though antiaircraft fire from bunkered emplacements was fierce, the NVA infantry were absent; moving the pickup zone had denied the bunkered NVA their fields of fire. In the worst mission, the last assault onto Brown, the Blue Stars prevailed victorious and extracted the beleaguered ARVNs. Unbelievably, by the mission's end no Blue Star had been wounded or killed!

Major Bunting never heard a word from either Lieutenant Colonel Peachey or the 101st Airborne general.

March 22, 1971, Laos A Minuteman UH-1H was flying at five thousand feet over Laos. At what would have been a very safe altitude in South Vietnam, the aircraft took heavy antiaircraft artillery fire and blew up. The flaming pieces slowly floated to the ground. Witnesses would remember the event, mentally replaying the haunting melody of James Taylor's classic, "I've Seen Fire and Rain." The words "Sweet dreams and flying machines, in pieces on the ground" was a refrain never to be forgotten. Another WORWAC Class 70-3/70-5 member, Reginald Cleve died. Our wives had been good friends during flight school.

On March 23, daily artillery raids continued at Khe Sanh. Each time the first rounds fell, sirens wailed and aircraft scrambled into the air. At 2:30 A.M. on March 23, Troop D, 2d Squadron, 17th Cavalry, received a ground attack by commandos (sappers) of the 2d Company, 15th North Vietnamese Army Engineer Battalion. Forty men infiltrated to the perimeter. Then, under cover of 60mm mortar fire and RPGs, in an attempt to reach the helicopter refuel and rearm points, they penetrated the 3d Platoon night position.

The fighting, vicious hand-to-hand combat, lasted until 6:45 A.M. Fourteen NVA sappers died in the attack, and one NVA prisoner was taken, along with nine AK-47s, three RPG launchers, and one 9mm pistol.

U.S. losses were 3 killed in action, 5 with major wounds, and 123 minor wounded. Wounds were called minor if it wasn't you, and you didn't need hospitalization. Four days later, D Troop returned to its much more secure base at Quang Tri. One Medal of Honor was awarded as a result of the action.

March 23, 1971, White House, Washington, D.C.

President Richard Nixon had a busy day with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. At the midday meeting, H. R. Haldeman sat listening to a review of the action in Laos. As Henry Kissinger wrapped up his presentation to the President, he concluded with the statement, "It comes out as clearly not a success, but still a worthwhile operation."

Kissinger and the president both felt they had been mislead by army general Creighton Abrams. The original evaluation of what might have been accomplished had obviously not been attained. Abrams continued with the plan to assault Tchepone, even though it was clear that the original plan wasn't working. Kissinger felt strongly that they should have followed Westmoreland's advice and gone south to cut off the Ho Chi Minh trail. Instead, they'd gone on to capture Tchepone. In the politician's eyes, the westward move toward Tchepone had turned out to be a disaster.

Had they asked the pilots who'd flown LZ Sophia and PZ Brown, the conclusions would've been far more certain. Secretary Kissinger then discussed with President Nixon the possibility of pulling Abrams out, of firing him.

The president thought for a moment. Pensively, he made a point. The Laotian invasion was the end of offensive military operations involving U.S. forces. In the words of President Nixon, "So what difference would it make?"

Abrams kept his job.

March 24, 1971. In Vietnam, Echo Troop, 1st of the 9th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, supporting the 25th Infantry Division, fielded a normal daily operation, visual reconnaissance in an OH-6. The pilot, Steve Larrabee was a warrant officer, of Class 70-5. Ground fire claimed his life.

On the morning of March 26, my wife and I left the hotel for the Honolulu International Airport. She would return to the States alone, and I would return to my unit in Vietnam. Looking around us, we saw many other couples in a similar predicament. There were few dry eyes in the room. The coming five months would seem like five years. I could not imagine how difficult it would have been to have taken a two-week leave, gone home to the States, and then have to return to Vietnam.

On the evening of March 27, I returned to my hootch, dropping my bags. I then walked over to the company officers club. I was surprised to see everyone enjoying themselves, sitting around, BSing. Few people had been around the club during the past two months due to the high hours of flying with long mission days.

I then heard the story of Mumby's being shot down while carrying a Vietnamese general, but without injuries. Fitzgerald had hit a tree, narrowly avoiding a mid-air collision with another helicopter, nearly losing his transmission/rotor system as a result. He barely made it back safely, but his aircraft DEROSed. Several other aircraft in the company had taken serious hits during the past week, but Khe Sanh had been closed. Mercifully, the missions in Laos had ended.

The demands and pressure had eased dramatically. I sat with Jim Saunders and others, laughing about all that had transpired in the previous two weeks. Saunders said, "You should have seen it. On the twenty-third, we had artillery shelling at Khe Sanh. Two hundred aircraft on the ground, and then the 122mm and 155mm artillery

started hitting. It wasn't rockets because it was slow, constant fire. The kid in the tower told all aircraft to evacuate the base, and he was evacuating the tower. His last radio transmission was, "This is fucking ridiculous!" Saunders continued, "As I took off, I saw the control tower exploding." Of the more than two hundred aircraft on the ground at Khe Sanh, all had departed during the artillery bombardment with no damage. Amazingly, there were no accidents in the melee. We joked about how we'd seen movies of C-130s being blown up in Khe Sanh during 1968. The only reason one wasn't blown up this time was that a C-130 had ripped up the steel planking runway during a very hard landing about March 9, and the runway was not back in service so there were no C-130s going in and out to make big targets.

For Saunders, the admiral's son who'd nearly lost his life being shot down on Ripcord the previous July, the convoy escort duty was the last of his high-risk missions. His capture of the NVA machine gun was a memorable event.

Then everyone started ragging Mumby, a really likeable fellow, who reminded me of Tommy Doody, who'd been killed with the Phoenix. Mumby was flying General Phu, the top Vietnamese general in I Corps. They were at five thousand feet, flying command and control over a combat assault in Laos. Mumby simply couldn't believe he was flying so high he could barely be seen, yet he was taking flak, just like that in movies of World War II. Shot out of the sky, they successfully autorotated to a crash landing, without further damage or injury. Another aircraft picked them up immediately. They spent but a few seconds on the ground and immediately returned to Camp Eagle, got another aircraft and went back out on station.

I was shocked to hear that Mumby had even taken fire, not to mention his being shot down. It turned out that several other aircraft in the 163d Aviation Company had also taken hits. Virtually everyone had numerous instances of

taking fire, this in a rear-echelon outfit! All the Loach pilots had alternated missions flying VIPs one day, Loach white teams the next. They routinely flew aggressive reconnaissance missions, with an overhead escort of an O-2 forward air controller and a pair of Cobra gunships. The C-and-C Birds took their hits over Laos at altitude. Saunders remarked that the North Vietnamese Army never returned to the bunker I found with Cobb. We'd made it far too costly to use. We proudly discussed the fact no convoys were ever ambushed, with us overhead. In fact, no one even took fire there after Cobb and I had directed air strikes on February 14.

April 5, 1971, Camp Eagle

For me, April 5 was a zero of a day. I had the day down from flying. Didn't get mail from home. I calculated that I had one large tube of toothpaste and it would last until I derosed.

When I got bored, I went to the division officers club and started an early afternoon of drinking. I ran into a tall, white-haired kid from a slick company. We started swapping war stories. I made the near fatal mistake of telling him I'd flown CCN quite a bit with the Phoenix and had enjoyed my experiences. His mouth dropped, looking at me in absolute disbelief. His face flushed red, angrily. He said, (I can't believe) "you fucking *enjoyed* it!". I say, you're a rear echelon mother fucker who never did it." A pissing contest was on.

I replied, "Well, we always had good missions, never had anything (bad) happen."

"I've had my ass shot down on CCN," he retorted. "We had four slicks go in, all shot down . . . lucky enough to be picked up by an air force CH 53, you fucking REMF!" At that point, I knew better than to argue. He was a man who'd experienced the absolute worst and lived to tell

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about it. He also had to continue flying those missions despite his personal awareness of mortality and fear. I'd experienced it, only seven straight weeks on CCN, which was the equivalent four to six months normal rotation and exposure for some lift companies. He had been rotating on it for months and had months to go. I had chosen to leave it. He had no choice. The amount of risk servicemen faced in Vietnam was not balanced or fair. What your job was, coupled with where you were, determined heavy burdens for some, and very little for others.

For the moment, I was a convicted REMF. I was beginning to question my own sense of integrity. My friends in the Phoenix Company were still flying combat assaults in the A Shau and [illegible] missions into North Vietnam and Laos. I rotated between moderate risk, direct support of the combat engineers battalion along the A Shau Valley and convoy escort duties, to virtually no-risk courier trips to the land of freedom birds in Da Nang.

The work only made me appreciate more my decision to move to the 163d but I was gaining an even deeper respect for those who served their entire tours with the Phoenix and the other assault helicopter companies. I'd keep my mouth shut and opinions to myself around the pilots in the clubs. I had plenty of combat experience. Not as much as those spending a year in the 158th or 101st Aviation Battalions, but a good deal more than pilots in areas south of Hue. From time to time, I'd witness angry pissing contests between pilots about their flying skills and degree of combat experience. Who got shot up most often or who'd been shot down the most was a truly ridiculous argument, when most people removed from the circumstances would agree once was too often!

I'd recover quickly from the insult. It did, however, increase my understanding of others' feelings, and remind me how damn good I had it. Would I have changed places with him! Hell no! I'd been there and done that! I knew better!

* * *

The following night, we had a Canadian show. Took movies of it. Vietnam style. Just a couple of dancers with their clothes . . . almost on.

The American band backing them up had two excellent singers. One girl sang Janis Joplin's, "A Piece of My Heart." It brought a complete silence to our rowdy, raucous drunks. But, when the next girl sang James Taylor's song, "I've Seen Fire and Rain," the words, "sweet dreams and flying machines, in pieces on the ground," were met with a stunned appreciation, a whole new meaning to the song.

I was officially promoted to chief warrant officer, grade 2 (CW2). My indefinite status (lifer) was accepted. I'd have thirty-one months of duty remaining when I returned stateside.

On the twelfth, I flew three hours, carried two American Red Cross girls out to Firebase Bastogne. Second time I'd carried women on my aircraft. In a letter home I wrote my wife, "Now, aren't you glad it takes both hands and both feet to fly a helicopter?"

I finally killed the big damn rat that made daily visits to my room. I baited a trap with C-ration chocolate (John Wayne candy bars). The big atomic rat trap didn't kill him, just stuck around his neck but he couldn't get away. I held him by the tip of his nasty hairless tail, while he squirmed to get away, trying to bite me. I doused him in jet fuel and lit him. Guess I'm killing one large one a day. When you wake up in the middle of the night with them crawling on you, it's worse than a nightmare. The little black presents they left were proof it wasn't a bad dream.

When I first moved into the 163d Aviation Company, I had a cubicle assigned to me while another warrant officer was on leave in Taiwan. The first night there, I woke up with a large rat sitting on my chest, licking my chin. As I threw him off, he left a few round black presents on my bed and me. I loathed them ever since.

The next day, Bill Gordy came walking in. I told him "I've had another rat in my cubicle. Have you killed the one after your food?"

"Yeah," he replied, "but I think we still need to do something. Why don't we use some mogas (gasoline) and clean out the graves around us, and the drainpipes? They're either living in those graves, or they're coming in through the drainpipe by the bunker."

"Okay, let's do it." So, out we marched. We picked up a five-gallon jerrican and filled it with gasoline at the maintenance hangar just below our hootch. Only a few feet from our back door, there was a large, round Buddhist grave, which was recessed about two and a half to three feet deep. It had a small mound in the middle, and was completely overgrown with weeds. We spread the five gallons of gas around it and a rat ran out. Then we lit the gas. To our amazement, we were then singed by a huge orange-black mushroom cloud. It billowed into the air, high above our hootch rooftop! It was an awesome sight.

At the same time, having dropped off General Phu and returning home for the night, Mumby was on final in his Huey. When he saw the orange-black mushroom cloud at Snoopy's Pad, he called Camp Eagle tower, "Eagle," it appears you have incoming at Snoopy's Pad. Executing go-round." Mumby initiated a flyby rather than come to a hover and stop. He thought he had just witnessed a rocket or mortar attack. Gordy and I were singed by the flames but we were laughing hysterically. It got more silly as we flashed peace signs as Mumby flew by. We understood that he'd done the go-around because of us. As the fire continued, we heard popping sounds, and after it burned down, we found the remnants of probably twenty glass vials that had contained cocaine.

With that outstanding moment of success, we then took the jerrican and filled it with fuel again. This time, however, we went back to the drainage pipes that allowed the

flow of rain water out of our company living quarters. We doused as much gas as we could and then lit the drain pipes, and almost immediately, about twenty rats ran out on fire. However, there was a muffled explosion about twenty yards down hill at the adjacent company where people had been sitting around just talking and drinking brewskies until the drain pipe at their feet suddenly exploded in flames. Then rats on fire ran wildly among them. It was a scene from some comedic Dante's *Inferno!* Then a couple of officers came running up, demanding to know "Who did that?" Gordy replied, "Swamp gas," and I collapsed in cramps from laughing. A short while later, Mumby came walking up asking, "Where's the barbeque?"

In a letter from home, it sounded like my brother Steve had made his high school graduation party a memorable one. My wife told me his favorite saying is "draft beer, not students!" I'll second that!

The Recon Team of the 3d Battalion (Airmobile) 187th Infantry, operating south of Firebase Fury was attacked by the NVA. While attempting a hot-string extraction, a Huey of the 101st Aviation Battalion was shot down on top of them. One Ranger survived the disaster and left to make contact with other U.S. forces nearby. After telling them of the situation, he returned to help his friends. He would, however, not return. He would later be listed MIA. Nearly three years later, he'd return as a former POW, unwilling to discuss his capture or the loss of his friends.

B Company, 2d Battalion Airmobile, 502d Infantry, was inserted to help in locating the downed UH-1. The company met fierce resistance from the NVA. Then A Company, 1st Battalion (Airmobile) was air assaulted in for additional strength. The aircraft was found. The wounded were recovered at a high cost, ten U.S. killed, twenty U.S. wounded, and three missing in action.

The Kingsmen Company was just across the hover pad from our company area, and several of our pilots had transferred in from the Kingsmen. But there were personal friendships that didn't end simply because acquaintances transferred to a nearby unit.

Cobb was a very good friend of one pilot killed. Cobb had personally survived our daylong engagement north of the Rock Pile, cruising the DMZ in a Loach, and countless other risks flying convoy escort between Vandegrift and Khe Sanh.

Fitzgerald had flown similar missions with me in the DMZ. He nearly died hitting a tree in a Loach, while trying to avoid a midair collision with a Huey outside of Vandegrift. He flew it back to Quang Tri, but the aircraft was DEROSed.

A 101st pilot was drinking with us last night. Only had three months left in his tour. Today, he's dead, his Huey shot down by an NVA .51-caliber while inserting ARVNs on the east side of the A Shau Valley, near O'Reilley. Fitzgerald and Cobb were both sickened. They were close friends. Some complain, "What's the point? We're leaving." The fucking war really was over, for some.

We had been celebrating the end of DEWEY CANYON and LAM SON 719. For us, the closing of Khe Sanh was the end of high-risk missions. Their deaths jerked us back into the grim awareness and admiration of the assault helicopter companies who continued combat assaults until the units DEROSed.

April 29, 1971. CW2 Ronald Evans, serving with Bravo Troop, 7th of the 17th Cavalry, became the next casualty by enemy fire for Warrant Officer Rotary Wing Aviator Class 70-5.

CW2 William Busselman was working with the 155th Assault Helicopter Company at Da Nang. During a maintenance post-flight inspection, he walked into the tail rotor

of a Huey and was killed. Another WORWAC 70-3/70-5 class member was dead.

On April 29, I got my pay slip. Two other guys and I downed a quart of gin and two quarts of lemonade during the movie *Love Your Wife* with Elliott Gould. I'm told it was a real funny show, watching us lead the movie.

May 3, 1971, A Shau Valley

Special Forces Recon Team Asp consisted of staff sergeants Klaus Bingham, James Luttrell, Lewis Walton, and three Montagnards. They were dropped into the jungle near the big valley's north end to investigate NVA road-building activity. Ten minutes after they were on the ground, they radioed a "Team okay." It was their last transmission. They were believed captured since no call for air support was made. They would be listed as missing in action.

May 4, 1971, Stateside

Police and military units were used to arrest twelve thousand antiwar protestors who tried to shut down the Pentagon and Capitol. They were detailed at the Washington Redskins practice field.

May 10, 1971

Ninety-eight days to go. Still a long time but sure sounded better than three hundred. Army Secretary Resor came to Eagle, and I didn't even know it. VIPs were commonplace because the 101st Airborne was the largest combat division remaining in Vietnam and with them

came hordes of newsmen. After what I'd seen of newsmen I felt it would be hard to find a network I would believe. The ones I crossed paths with appeared out to make a fast buck on a big war story. I thought most of them were prohippie, antiwar. I felt I could be called antiwar, but certainly not in the same way.

12

Recon Team Alaska and the Phoenix Vow

May 17, 1971

May 17 would never be forgotten by Capt. Skip Butler (Redskin One-five) and Capt. Don Davis with the Phoenix Company (Phoenix Two-six), as well as others involved.

Butler was to provide gunship support for UH-1 companies in the 158th Aviation Battalion, which were supporting SOG's CCN. Butler had trained as a Green Beret prior to going to flight school, so he was specifically requested by SOG personnel to support their missions.

Don Davis began what he thought would be a normal day of flying. As a platoon leader in the Phoenix Company, he was monitoring the flying assignments for his platoon. Early that morning, one pilot, WO Dale Pearce, was sick and unable to fly, so Davis took his logistics mission to support one of the brigades in the field. The aircraft commander was WO David P. Soyland, who was also the platoon's standardization instructor pilot (SIP). Soyland was unhappy that the assigned pilot was unable to fly. Phoenix pilots were expected to fly with anything short of *very* serious illnesses. Pearce, however, was one of the new Phoenix and was still learning the ropes.

Soyland's day was supposed to be a routine day of ash and trash resupply, a piece of cake.

Due to the mission report time and change in crews, Soyland had to wait and learn the reason later. So between

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the hours of 7:00 A.M. and 3:30 in the afternoon, Warrant Officer Soyland and Captain Davis flew several resupply missions in the flatlands east of the mountains between Camp Eagle and Camp Evans.

Butler, in the meantime, had been monitoring the efforts of Special Forces Team Alaska, which had been inserted west of the A Shau Valley along the Laotian border. The team had reported numerous NVA in the area. Butler suspected that the team would be discovered by the enemy. That afternoon, upon return from the resupply missions, Soyland's aircraft was put on standby, and the crew went to wait in their hootches at the Phoenix Nest at Camp Evans. In the meantime, Soyland met with Pearce, who said he would be able to fly if the aircraft was recalled. Davis agreed and proceeded with another flight that was on standby for an infantry extraction.

Butler was busy leading a team of two Cobra light-fire teams to assist in the insertion of another eight-man reconnaissance team. While the first insertion had been successful, the team already in the field had been compromised. Butler received a call that the CNN eight-man team was in contact, pinned down. They quickly suffered two dead and several wounded. He immediately scrambled four guns, and CCN control launched the lift aircraft, Comancheros from Alpha Company, 101st Assault Helicopter Battalion at Camp Eagle. During the flight out, the forward air controller, in an air force plane overhead, briefed them of what to expect.

Butler decided that it would be best to extract the dead and wounded with one slick and the remainder with a second lift ship. Butler directed guns three and four to put a heavy prep on the wood line to the north and northeast where the concentrated enemy fire was coming from. The pickup zone, which had been predesignated, was slightly below the top of the highest point in the area. Butler held everybody three kilometers to the northeast at an altitude of five thousand feet to avoid small-arms fire.

Enemy fire was so heavy, they decided to make low-level approaches following a river into a valley draw where they could fly level straight into the pickup zone. It was, however, going to be below the enemy antiaircraft positions on the hilltop. As they approached the pickup zone, decelerating to fifty knots, Cobras were flying beside the Hueys to provide protection. They were so low and slow that to fire a rocket, Butler had to dump the nose and then readjust his aircraft to resume his position alongside the slick. The first Comanchero approached the pickup zone and began flaring to the approach when a heavy volume of enemy fire hit the ship, wounding two crew members. He aborted the approach, dumping the aircraft nose to gain speed quickly, and exited the area.

The second Comanchero Huey, thirty seconds behind him circled so gunships three and four could put heavy fire on the enemy fire. The second Comanchero then commenced his approach and quickly aborted after several hits by enemy fire. His hydraulics system was shot out, critical instruments in the cockpit were destroyed, and two crewmen were wounded. He went on to Quang Tri where he made a successful running landing. By then the gunships were out of ammunition and needed to refuel. They also had to rethink how they would attempt to get reconnaissance team Alaska out.

It was obvious that the team was in deep shit. They'd unknowingly been deposited near the North Vietnamese Army 66th Regiment Base Area, a heavily developed supply dump with underground living facilities. The North Vietnamese Army troops in the area had been strengthened by a *Binh Tran*, a logistical unit, comprised of twelve hundred combat engineers with their own 12.7mm antiaircraft company. The odds against the eight men of the Special Forces team were beyond comprehension.

In Quang Tri, Butler and the others met up with the two remaining Comanchero slicks. Additional slicks were called

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in, along with two more gunships. On the third attempt, the second set of guns made two passes on the enemy location as the Huey began his approach. With four remaining guns ready for heavy suppression, it did no good.

The VNA then shot up the next slick, wounded the copilot and badly damaged the aircraft. The Comancheros thought they were having a bad day, but it would get worse for the Phoenix. As the Comanchero Huey was climbing out, white smoke was pouring out of the belly. Capt. Steve Cook flew beside it in his Cobra and saw that it was fuel. Although there was an immediate danger of a catastrophic explosion and fire, the pilot elected to continue flying back to the forward combat base, Mai Loc, where he could at least land in the safety of friendly troops.

The forward air controller then called jets into the area to drop snake-eye bombs and napalm. A second flight of F-4 Phantoms was used to saturate the enemy with cluster bombs. Then the gunships continued putting rockets as close as they could in the vicinity of the team. One of the team members on the ground called, "Some of the stuff is exploding at the top of the trees, falling on us, but keep it coming!" While the fast movers were working over the area, the helicopters returned for fuel. At Quang Tri, Butler requested an additional fire team of two Cobras from the Redskins.

A call was then made by the Redskins for any available slicks to assist in a Prairie Fire (hot extraction). It was a chilling term understood by those with CCN experience: An American team had been compromised and was in immediate danger of being overrun. WO1 David Soyland of the Phoenix, with WO1 Dale Pearce as his copilot, were called by Phoenix operations to respond. The Redskins would have a total of eight Cobras. They rearmed and headed back to the area and were joined by another set of guns from the Redskins and three slicks from

Charlie Company. David Soyland was in the lead Phoenix with WO1 Dale Pearce. What had been a long day of ash and trash now turned into a hot extraction of Green Berets in a running battle. It had already been a long day, yet Soyland was in the lead. Americans were on the ground.

With the air strikes' ending, Soyland commenced his approach. He'd been carefully briefed on the flight path, altitude, and enemy fire. With Cobras flying beside him, Soyland called, "I think I can get in there!" Of course, Soyland knew of the three aircraft that had been badly shot up with wounded crews prior to his attempt. He also knew how desperate the Special Forces team had to be to ask for a hot extraction: they would die if he couldn't get them out!

During the approach, the team on the ground asked that the crew chief and door gunner be prepared to get out and help load the bodies if necessary. The pickup would be made on a mountain slope, one skid on the ground, the other held in midair at a hover. The door gunner, Sp4. Gary Allcorn, unclasped his safety harness, in anticipation. Soyland commenced his approach flying low level up the valley while two Cobras with aerial rockets were prepping the area. Two Redskins were flying alongside him at the same speed. It was the best possible cover. With guns blazing, Phoenix Two-two commenced the hot hovering extraction.

Soyland brought the Phoenix bird to a hover above the recon team. Allcorn saw the camouflaged Special Forces team holding white palms upward to reveal their locations in the dark jungle of the pickup zone. He told Soyland the team was at their 6:30 position, i.e., behind them. Simultaneously, the Phoenix took heavy antiaircraft fire. An NVA antiaircraft company with 12.7mm machine guns was located on the hillside above them, and at least two of its heavy machine guns were shooting the hell out of the helicopter. The instant it came to a hover just above the team, the 12.7mm rounds began destroying the air-

craft. The canopies were exploding, the engine cowlings were shot off, the rotor blades were disintegrating.

Rounds flashed through the cockpit windshield and door. Allcorn, saw Pearce's hands jerk upward to the skylight as he was hit. The aircraft shuddered and died. Allcorn, the door gunner, was ejected as the Huey rolled violently on its side to the right, rolling, bouncing, and grinding down a steep hill. In that tangled mass of metal, Dale Pearce was crushed to death. The crew chief had been knocked unconscious, held within the wreckage by his seatbelt.

As Skip Butler and Steve Cook broke off their Cobra passes, two other Cobras joined up right behind them. Just as Butler began his break, he saw Soyland come to a hover and simultaneously heard him call, "Taking fire, heavy, heavy fire!" Butler saw pieces of the Huey flying through the air, and the aircraft began to roll to the right.

Steve Cook, Redskin One-six, Butler's Cobra wingman, watched as it happened. He observed enemy rounds impacting and pieces of the aircraft being torn off. The aircraft yawed violently to the right. Hit by an RPG, the entire tail boom separated from the fuselage, the aircraft inverted, rolling to its right, impacting on the side of the ridge. It then slid and bumped down one hundred feet of ridgeline and came to rest in a deeply vegetated area.

CW2 Ricky Scrugham was circling, watching Soyland "go in." The euphemism exploded him into unthinking reflexive action! He peeled in, diving to retrieve Soyland and his crew. He did it without a call to the command-and-control ship, which was not a Phoenix bird. The others above Scrugham understood his selfless bravery. It was a defining moment of personal character. They all intently watched, wondering if they'd be next.

Srugham had less than two weeks left in country, the end of his tour. An hour earlier, Scrugham had thought to himself Americans on the ground is the only acceptable reason for this mission. His copilot, a newbie, grabbed

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Scrugham's arm and shouted into the intercom "Control said call it off! Listen to your radio!" He was horrified but relieved.

Jerked backed into the moment, Scrugham aborted the approach and climbed away. At that point he realized there was nothing he or anyone else could do for Soyland. A personal friend. A Nam buddy. Another hootchmate gone.

The two Redskin gunships dove into the target area, circling low and slow. They reported that Soyland's aircraft was immersed in thick vegetation and couldn't be seen. Due to critically low fuel, all of the gunships expended their ordnance and returned to Quang Tri for fuel and rearming.

While the gunships and other Phoenix birds returned to refuel, a SOG Bright Light team was inserted nearby in an attempt to link up with the reconnaissance team and reinforce them in their ground fight. The NVA discovered suddenly found the Bright Light team attacking them. The Redskins had departed the area to refuel and rearm. Gunships from the 101st Aviation Battalion now supported the team. With a kilometer (.62 mile) separating the Bright Light response team from the team pinned down, the Cobras were called to support them.

The Cobras placed rockets as close as possible to the team. Butler and Cook quickly returned, observing the other Cobras working out. Suddenly he heard screams on the radio. "Check fire! Check fire! You're hitting us!" The Cobras broke off.

The report from the ground was one U.S. killed by friendly fire, Sgt. Dale Dehnke, who died coming to the aid of Lt. Danny Entrican. Sp4. Gary Hollingsworth, and the other Special Forces RT Alaska members. The link-up did not occur due to darkness. A first-light extraction was scheduled for the following morning.

Special Forces officers with multiple tours on CCN,

would later speculate on how events happened. David Soyland had been stunned by the crash and wandered semiconscious out of it. Soyland was believed captured shortly afterward by the North Vietnamese as they swarmed over their conquest. He was marched up the hill and told if he tried to escape, he would be hunted down and executed. They then took his boots and socks off, along with his green Nomex shirt, leaving him barefoot in his Nomex green pants and white T-shirt. The T-shirt left him an excellent target in the shadowy jungle.

Sometime later, just before darkness, Gary Allcorn slowly regained consciousness. He became aware that he was lying on a very sharply sloping hillside, his head pointed downhill. He couldn't see out of his right eye. His weapon and helicopter were nowhere to be seen. Needing to conceal himself, he crawled over to a dense stand of brush. Along the way, he found a flashlight from the helicopter. It would be his only survival tool for the next twenty-four hours.

The North Vietnamese were noisily working on the ridgeline above him. The noise and level of activity was scary. Swarms of NVA were searching the hillside around him between air strikes.

Later that night, after dark, he heard an AC-130 gunship and helicopters overhead. He took a banana palm leaf and wrapped it around his flashlight, trying to focus it upward like a strobe. He pointed it toward the AC-130, which saw it just as an SOG team at the downed helicopter was also signaling. Luckily, he stopped the signaling because the AC-130 thought he was NVA and was preparing to shoot him up.

Lapsing in and out of consciousness, Allcorn again concealed himself in the jungle vegetation. He awoke at first light and decided to attempt to find the Huey. As he

climbed up the hill, he heard noises on the opposite ridgeline. He saw a figure in a white T-shirt running as fast as possible, down a hillside, using palm trees to propel him faster down the hill. He was astonished to see large numbers of NVA on the ridge. Moments later, he heard a burst of automatic-weapons fire. Shortly after that, a single shot echoed through the valley.

Allcorn then moved downhill until rockets started impacting in front of him. He then went down the mountainside, half jumping, half flying, to a stream below. Rockets and bombs exploded nearby as he ran from the explosions, down the stream to a large open field of elephant grass where very tall blades of grass formed a natural tunnel for him to run through.

As he struggled to get away from the firing, an air force B-57 Canberra jet came by at eye level, dropping napalm. A wall of flames approached him but stopped short of engulfing him.

Exhausted, having suffered a concussion and loss of blood, he sank to his knees in the elephant grass, sobbing a final prayer. Then he clearly heard the voice of his grandmother, "It'll be all right." Unbelievingly, he heard it a second time, "It'll be all right." With those words, he regained his composure and moved away from the flames. His grandmother had been dead two years.

He ran farther across the field and climbed into a tree to escape the onrushing grass fire. Then Vietnamese Air Force A1-E Skyraiders dropping bombs ahead of the wall of flames passed by him at eye level without seeing him. In an effort to attract their attention, he ripped off his white boxer shorts and waved them at the planes, to no avail.

Exhausted, he climbed down the tree, hopped through the passing wall of fire, and collapsed on the hillside. Staring into the sky, he wondered if everything was going to turn out all right. As he stared into the sky, an O-2 Skymaster with a forward air controller began to dive at him.

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Startled, he waved the shorts again and the plane banked away. A few minutes later, a Huey picked him up and flew to the Quang Tri hospital.

During the night before, the rescue force, which had been inserted late the previous evening, was struck by enemy rocket-propelled grenades. One Special Forces soldier was killed, and several others were wounded. Shortly afterward, they found the remains of the original ground force, Team Alaska, which had been in contact and overrun by enemy forces.

Later that day at 12:45, there were three more air strikes and a second rescue team was inserted to sweep through the area of the contact and crash. Receiving sporadic enemy fire, the second rescue force succeeded in locating two survivors of the aircraft. Specialist Five Parker, the crew chief, and Specialist Four Allcorn, the door gunner were recovered. The recovery team also found three bodies of the ground force. The leader of the second rescue team informed the commanding officer that there was another body in the downed aircraft, but he was unable to extract it. From the rescue team's description, the casualty appeared to be heavier than Soyland and was believed to be Dale Pearce. The body was otherwise unidentifiable due to injuries sustained in the crushing of the cabin.

The downed helicopter was upside down and pointing uphill from the bottom of the steep ravine. The tail boom was broken off, as were both of the rotors. The side of the aircraft was badly damaged, and the right front seat had been almost completely ripped out of the aircraft. The seatbelt and shoulder harness had been completely ripped out. However, the left seat (Soyland's) was intact, as was the left side of the Huey. The armor plate on the left side of the aircraft was moved back and no blood was found on the pilot's side. All indications were that the pilot

exited the aircraft under his own power. There were footprints in the mud on the left side of the aircraft where someone had exited or entered the aircraft.

At that point, all that was certain was the crew chief Spec Five Parker, was alive and being treated for a wound in the upper leg, along with a fracture. Spec Four Allcorn would recover quickly. The unidentifiable body was believed to be that of copilot, Warrant Officer-1 Pearce.

Based on the physical evidence of and around the wreckage, and on Spec Four Allcorn's description of an apparent chase, Special Forces officers later surmised that David Soyland had attempted an escape, was hunted down, wounded, then executed. In the penultimate fraud of war, as with the case of over two thousand other Americans, the truth would never be known. Team Alaska's Lt. Danny Entrican was believed captured; he was never heard from again.

The next day, I ran into Rick Scrugham at the division pad. It was good to see him. He had survived everything in Laos. We briefly discussed those who were killed. I was still finding it hard to believe that Nelson has been killed. He then told me of Soyland and Pearce's being shot down near the Laotian border. I didn't know Pearce, but I knew Soyland. He read J. R. R. Tolkein and science fiction. He'd been meticulous. He'd stored his nomex flying gloves in their original plastic bag.

The word of Soyland down and believed killed was another kick in the gut. It was pain piled on the pain of Stewart, Doody, Nelson, Moreira, Baldwin, and Finn. But, if it could happen to Dave Nelson, it could happen to anyone. I couldn't believe that the Phoenix were still having aircrew casualties in combat; the fucking war was over at Camp Eagle.

I wished Ricky well. He was a quietly courageous man who'd endured the worst. But, he was a Phoenix, and I

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would not shake his hand. He was DEROSing shortly, and I simply didn't want to jinx him.

More Phoenix casualties, when the "war was over" elsewhere. The final Phoenix casualties came from the Phoenix 1st Platoon, where I'd been. Including Stewart and Doody in February, Nelson and Moreira. All preceded by Finn and Baldwin in the preceding September. Eight Phoenix pilots (seven in 1st Platoon), had died in nine months. Three had slept in the same cubicle I'd lived in. The worst imaginable events that I'd feared in December 1970 had culminated in a series of horrifying accidents and combat losses. Soyland and Pearce had the unwanted honor of being the last Phoenix combat casualties.

I could only shake my head, sadly, thankfully. It hadn't been me.

May 26, 1971, Phoenix 1st Platoon
Hootch Camp Evans

The hopeless search for David Soyland and Dale Pearce had ended. All search operations were pulled out, and no further attempt would be made. The air cavalry unit that normally worked the area would remain vigilant.

Soyland's and Pearce's effects had been carefully gathered, organized, and prepared for shipment home. The most abhorred duty for officers who knew them was completed: the letters to relatives, their survivors.

Soyland's cubicle was then nailed shut, never again to contain a living 1st Platoon pilot. Soyland's call sign, Two-two, would not be used again by Phoenix.

It had been Paul Stewart's call sign also before his loss in Laos. WO Dean Grau accompanied Soyland to their instructor pilot course earlier that spring, and Grau had asked Soyland about his intention to reuse the call sign Two-two. Soyland told Grau he wasn't superstitious and

had no reservations using it. Two-two, double deuce, no slack! The call sign had rolled rhythmically from the lips of many in the Nam, as easily as drinking water. In the Phoenix it had evolved to a totally different understanding. Three Phoenix pilots with the call sign "Two-two," all in first platoon, had died in combat action.

Nineteen years later, Skip Butler still wore a POW-MIA bracelet with Soyland's name on it. Dean Grau, the other instructor pilot in the Phoenix, also wore one with Soyland's name. Crew chief Larry Frazier would also remember. There were men who'd not forget him or Dale Pearce in their lifetimes.

In terms of combat casualties, the Phoenix earned the reputation of being the hard luck company in the 101st Airborne Division, but its record simply reflected the danger of the missions its helicopter and crews flew. The 158th Aviation Battalion earned the reputation of being the Flying Cross Battalion because of their combat awards.

May 29, 1971 Camp Evans

WO Phil Rutledge had just arrived a day earlier in the Phoenix. He was lounging in his bunk, slowly assimilating the environment. He'd already seen the company mission board, where Soyland and Pearce were listed as missing in action. That was an ominous sign to a newbie. He'd also endured CWO Butch Doan's DEROS party the night before. Some said it was Doan's 364th such party, in country.

A ground shaking *KA-BAAM!* threw Rutledge to his feet as dust rose in the air. Butch Doan came running by, grabbed Rutledge by the shirt, "Come on, Newbie!" They dove into the bunker just outside the door of the hootch.

After several seconds, there were no more 122mm rockets. Doan stood up, dusted off the orange-red clay of

I Corps, then without speaking to Rutledge, went inside the hootch and picked up his bags. Doan then headed down to the flight line, catching a flight to DEROS. Doan returned to the States after an action-filled, heavily decorated tour. He'd served in the last two major actions in I Corps and was one of very few who'd flown both the Ripcord evacuation and the LAM SON 719 invasion. Rutledge, as all newbies to the Phoenix, could only shake his head in wonderment.

13

June 1971

June 1, 1971

CW2 Don Wan and 1st Lt. Jerry Majors were piloting a Cobra gunship for the Redskins. A combat assault was being attempted on Hill 1051, west-northwest of Khe Sanh. Nearby Special Forces Outpost Hickory overlooked it from one thousand meters away. Sp. John Caviani, a Green Beret on Hickory, was commanding the outpost, monitoring communications with Green Beret teams in Laos and North Vietnam. Caviani had been reporting seeing one thousand NVA soldiers a day. He'd been calling in helicopters to shoot them up. However, the intelligence staffs in the 101st Airborne and areas south did not fully believe him. They had been setting up a network of electronic sensors all across the northern part of South Vietnam and Laos, and those sensors weren't indicating the level of enemy activity that Caviani was seeing. To Caviani, it was obvious that the North Vietnamese were manipulating the sensors and were knowledgeable of the impact that would have on command decisions. Caviani kept hearing from intelligence that "Our assets don't show anything out there." Caviani's retort was "You don't have any assets out there."

As helicopters of the 101st Airborne tried to land on the top of Hill 1051. Caviani sat on top of Hickory, watching the gunships work out and the Hueys making their

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approach. As the Hueys left under fire, the gunships began another run.

High above Hill 1051, CW2 Don Wan and his gunner, 1st Lt. Jerry Majors, began a dive, and Caviani watched the Huey Cobra diving. He also saw a single North Vietnamese kid stand up with a rocket-propelled grenade launcher, slowly put it up to his shoulder, taking very careful aim. Caviani was amazed as he watched the ground exploding around the kid, torn up by the minigun fire. But the kid simply stood there, taking even more careful aim, while 12.7mm machine guns were also firing at the Cobra.

Caviani grabbed for his rifle, hoping to take a shot at the kid. He was right at the sniping range of one thousand meters. But before he could get the rifle up, the RPG flashed upward, into the cockpit of the diving Cobra. Both crewmen probably dead, the cobra continued its dive, exploding on impact with the mountain.

Caviani had only two more days before he would nearly lose his life when Outpost Hickory was overrun by the North Vietnamese. Then he'd have to endure the horrors of living as a POW for twenty-two months.

Wan and Majors were the last losses of a Redskin crew and aircraft. There would be one more tragic fatality as the war ended, but it was the last Redskin Cobra lost.

I spent June 16 carrying combat engineer officers to firebases southwest of Eagle, near the A Shau Valley. Tricky flying, in and out of the fog on mountaintops. Got six hours despite rain. I realized I'd have over one thousand hours flight time in the Nam. I continued carrying a paperback book in my lower leg pocket. I finished *The Frail Ocean* and *The Pyramid Climbers*. I was halfway through *The Andromeda Strain*. I'd read anything to get my mind Stateside.

It had been just like the monsoons for the past three

days, but I was happy knowing I'd never have to go through another knock-on-wood period flying CCN or reconning the Rock Pile AO. I was happy to receive orders for Fort Rucker, Alabama. They could as easily have been for Fort Bragg, North Carolina, or Fort Hood, Texas. But, I got 120 copies of my orders that said Fort Rucker. That did make it official.

Camp Evans I Corps

WO Dean Grau had been thinking of his friend, WO Randy Hines who was an O-1 Bird-dog pilot down south in III Corps. Grau had the day down from flying, and he wanted to call his basic training buddy who was also a friend of Tommy Doody who'd been killed in February. It was a personal call to a friend with a deceased common friend.

Grau went to Phoenix headquarters and had the call placed on the cumbersome landline telephone system. After a couple of hours passed, with the usual mixed-up landline connections, a duty sergeant answered the phone at 221st Aviation Company. Grau identified himself and asked to speak to WO Randy Hines.

The NCO responded, "Sir, Shotgun One-two died this morning (19 June) in a jeep wreck on the flight line." Grau was hammered with emotion, in disbelief, said, "What?"

The NCO repeated himself. Continuing with "An ARVN deuce and a half (two-and-a-half-ton) hit his jeep on the flight line."

Of three buddies who shared time together in basic training and flight school, Grau had become the survivor, with two months left on his tour. Shaken by word of his friend's death, he quietly tried to assimilate it all.

The survivor's club had another member.

June 25, 1971 Camp Evans

On June 25, a Redskin Cobra crew responded to a call for support below Firebase Fuller, overlooking the DMZ. In the rush to launch, the captain serving as the gunner in the front seat of the Cobra gunship for some reason left his chicken-plate chest armor positioned behind his seat.

The Cobra team departed Camp Evans and twenty minutes later was in contact with ARVN ground elements, directing them toward the same enemy fire.

Once in the area, the pair of Cobras began their cycle, one diving, firing rockets and minigun at the target. As the first turned away from the target, the second commenced his dive, also firing.

In the mountainous terrain below, an NVA cut loose with his AK-47 rifle in the direction of the Cobra diving toward him. Then ducked below ground. Unknown to him, he'd accomplished a one in a million shot. One AK-47 round ripped through the Plexiglas canopy of the Cobra and pierced the heart of the gunner.

Sickened by the loss of his gunner, Redskin One-six, Capt. Steve Cook, flew the Cobra gunship directly to the Quang Tri hospital pad. Cook was angry at ~~him~~ his gunner for not wearing his chicken plate, disgusted at himself for not having forced him to wear it. The armor still hung behind the dead gunner's seat. The gunner had only been in country since June 10.

Two hours later, Sp. David Carline was cleaning up the blood and mess of the fatality. He had also been instructed to find the bullet that killed the copilot. After cleaning the copilot's area without finding it, he decided to check the weapons bay below the seat. As he searched under the copilot area for the bullet, he shifted a panel and, as he was looking up into the bay, what seemed like a quart of the dead pilot's blood flooded into his face.

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July 1971

On July 14, I flew seven hours for the engineers. Told my wife to stop writing on the fifth. That made me feel short. I only had twenty-five flying days left. I would leave the division three days prior to DEROS, and I'd have to quit flying a week before that. I thought the worst part of leaving would be the wait for the plane at Cam Ranh Bay.

As the 101st began to stand down, more and more missions were oriented towards the Da Nang area. WO Mike Goodman had transferred into the unit and finished his in-country check out. I took him on his orientation ride around the area of operations, and we flew out near Vandegrift and the Rock Pile. He told me of his best buddy, Steve Hansen, who was a warrant officer with a unit at Quang Tri. Hansen had gotten married just before he came to Vietnam. His wife, Eleanor, and Mike's fiancée, Carol Burdeshaw, were best friends. Mike had been best man in their wedding.

That night, Mike and I did more than a little drinking; we both got pretty messed up. The guy who slept in the room next to him was a second tour CW2, new to the company. I took a big cement-filled sandbag and threw it on the corrugated metal roof above him. When hit by a large rock, the sheet-metal roof sounded like a 122mm rocket going off. We then stumbled in his room and found the guy hiding under his bed waiting for the next one to hit. I hadn't laughed so hard in six months. I was a short-

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timer, so I messed with everyone; my turtle (my own personal replacement) was in, Capt. Tony Moorehead.

A few days later, Captain Moorehead, my brand-new platoon leader decided I was too short to fly. He decided I needed to spend my last month in Vietnam, safely sitting on my ass in the company motor pool as assistant motor pool officer. I was furious. I pleaded with him. Anything but that! I knew nothing about jeeps or trucks.

I had no experience in mechanical repairs and didn't want any. My attitude may have been bad, but I knew I had no business in a motor pool. I told him I'd rather fly *any* mission the company had to offer than sit on my ass in the motor pool. Moorehead was a second-tour officer, an infantry captain who'd served in the infantry his first tour. Even so, his platoon-management attitude was unacceptable to a short warrant officer. He wanted to run the flight platoon like a Ranger unit. It was his way or nothing. He ordered me to accompany him to the CO's office.

We met the CO in his office. I pleaded to the CO to let me fly or just work on my college correspondence course. The routine for short warrants had been simply to skate their last two or three weeks in country. Earlier the CO had depended on me alone for the five-minute standby for G-3 (operations) at the division headquarters. Some lazier warrant officers were slow in responding to those missions, resulting in a general's chewing out the major. I had been the one he relied upon to prevent those problems. I had been totally dependable for six months, with no complaints, accidents, or incidents. Not to mention seriously kicking some NVA ass north of the Rock Pile. That in mind, the major conceded, permitting me to fly up to seven days prior to DEROS.

Moorehead was not happy with the CO's overriding him. As we walked out of headquarters, he smiled, "Mr. Marshall, if that's what you want, that's what you'll get. Tomorrow, you'll get the mission in the Ruong Ruong

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Valley, south of Firebase Pistol. There's a recon team out of contact with their operations. You get to find them."

Of course, Morehead knew it might be a simple emergency resupply of radio batteries was needed, but the team might have been overrun by NVA who'd set up an ambush for me or anyone else who came calling.

"Check in with operations at 7:00 A.M., and they'll give you your gunship escort frequency."

Smiling. I thought, Well, hell. Beats sitting in the motor pool.

The following morning I woke up and completed preflight inspection. Then I went to operations and picked up my gunship escort frequencies. I returned to my Loach, placed an M-16 with ammunition bandolier next to my seat, cranked up, and departed Snoopy's Pad. I met a pair of Hawk gunships en route, heading south from Camp Eagle down to the Ruong Ruong Valley. The platoon was out of contact deep in the bush. A very unfriendly place, the area south of Firebase Pistol. It was in the middle of Indian country, northwest of the Hai Van Pass, southeast of the terminus of the A Shau Valley.

With an artillery observer in the front seat and my crew chief in the back with an M-60 machine gun, we began the search. We were given the last known map coordinates of the platoon. We had a radio and fresh batteries to drop off. Luckily, they heard us coming and fired a pen flare to get our attention. As we flew by, I mentally marked their location. The gunships high behind me also saw them. Determined to be a fast moving, low-level target, I was zipping between the treetops, lightly zigzagging at eighty knots (100 miles per hour).

As I continued past them, decelerating, just over the next ridgeline, I passed twenty feet above a huge, tiger with a vivid pattern of gold, red, black, and white stripes. It was the most beautiful animal I had ever seen in the wild.

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I called the Hawk gunships, "Hey you guys, wanta see a lion?"

One of the Cobra pilots came back laughing. "You've been here too long if you're seeing lions. They're only in Africa."

I said, "Whoops! I think you're right. What are those big gold and yellow things?" I turned back and hovered over the tiger. He just walked slowly, stopped once, looked up at me and my door gunner. Then slowly, deliberately, walked on.

He looked as big as my Loach.

I said, "If you guys want to see him, he's right below me." So the Cobras made low, slow passes. One of them wanted to shoot him, but I told him to leave it alone. No need to bother him. Besides, if he was casually walking around, there probably weren't any NVA in the area. We then dropped off the radios with the unit on the ground and returned home. The team was able to establish contact and get resupplied. I think they were pulled out later that day without incident.

All the way back, I was laughing at Moorehead. The worst mission the 163d Aviation Company could give me. It was fun, memorable, and I had a photograph of a tiger in the wild.

Short! . . . and still lucky!

August 2, 1971

August finally arrived.

At lunch in division headquarters, I met WO Steve Hansen, Mike Goodman's buddy. Mike was best man in his wedding before he came to Nam. Steve told me about his wife and Mike's girlfriend being best friends in Dothan, Alabama. His father was an army chaplain, and Steve asked me to look them up when I got back.

On August 16, I finally out-processed the 163d Aviation Company. The big event that week involved an eight-foot tall treelike shrub in front of the entrance to the headquarters administrative office. Over the months, I had noticed enlisted men walking up, picking a leaf, and walking away, chewing them in good humor. It was meticulously cared for while the rest of the company area was littered with ancient Vietnamese graves that were routinely ignored and overgrown with weeds. Then a new second-tour officer had come into the company, studied the shrub carefully, and pronounced that the tree was simply a marijuana plant which had been nurtured to tree-like size. Everyone had a good laugh. It was chopped down and ceremoniously burned. The officers got to stand downwind in the smoke.

After a two-day out-processing wait at Qui Nhon, a beautiful Boeing 707, appropriately from American Airlines, was taking me home.

On the morning of the eighteenth, I boarded and sat next to another warrant officer. The plane was filled. It was stone quiet until we taxied out onto the runway. Then, the instant the nose wheel lifted off, there were cheers and shouts. Sheer jubilation! Most of the passengers on board were enlisted men, a large percentage were draftees who had never wanted to be in Vietnam in the first place. They had successfully ended their year, i.e., they were alive. On the other hand, I was a volunteer from the first day of military service. I'd eagerly wanted to serve, flying helicopters in the war.

For me, there was an odd sense of calm as we lifted off the runway. I did not shout or cheer. I simply felt as if there was a lot of unfinished business. Although I was personally satisfied with my service and combat experience, we were withdrawing, without victory. That understanding raised questions about the last years of the entire operation, our military command, and our political leaders. The public attitude we were returning home to was "who

cares, it's over." I felt that surviving, even enjoying parts of my tour of duty, was a monumental achievement. However, I was already aware of the equally monumental indifference I'd face in the world.

Thoughts of those who'd died, some I'd known well, and even flown with, would not be forgotten. The memories of specific actions had been burned indelibly into my mind. As the jet climbed out, I began to understand how people could come back to the States and then, within a few months, request a second or third tour in Vietnam. I thought of Jimmy Thornburgh, who as a Green Beret had served five and a half years in South Vietnam before becoming a warrant officer to fly Cobras. I began to understand his attitude.

I realized one very important accomplishment of flight school. My army aviation training had been more than adequate for the task. During the twelve-month tour, all of the emergency procedures I'd been taught had successfully been put to use by me or my aircraft commanders. As an army aviator, I personally felt I'd had an undistinguished tour. But, I'd crossed paths with heroes, and participated in history. In my missions on CCN, I'd experienced duty and honor as I'd never have guessed it could be. In the Loach mission with Cobb north of the Rock Pile, I'd experienced a sense of personal accomplishment I could never have equaled outside of war.

On the evening of August 19, I arrived Stateside at Seattle-Tacoma Airport. I'd been through customs and checked my baggage for my flight to New Orleans, where I would meet my wife, Pat. That evening, I got on a Continental flight, a multiple stop red-eye from Seattle-Tacoma to New Orleans. There were three intermediate stops.

I arrived in New Orleans at 9:00 A.M. the next morning. As I rushed to get off the plane, five nuns paraded in front of me. All had heavy handbags and were taking their slow, deliberate time getting off.

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Pat was waiting at the gangway. I watched for an eternity, maybe three minutes, as the nuns slowly made their way forward, blocking my way. Then I rushed off the gangway into her arms! We embraced, together again, after one very long year over. We claimed my luggage and took a cab to the Royal Orleans Hotel. Late that afternoon, I called my parents, assuring them I was really back, safely. Later, we began to enjoy the sights, sounds, and a taste of New Orleans. I found very quickly that I was not used to real food. The stores along Canal Street were really interesting to me. Double knit clothing was the fad. I had never seen anything quite like that before and promptly bought casual clothes and a sports coat, since I had none. After three days in New Orleans, we continued on to Pensacola. Then we rented a beach cottage on Santa Rosa Sound for a week's leave, with a lot of family activities.

During that week, I realized not much had physically changed, but dramatic changes had occurred within me. It would take quite a while to sort them out. I had longed for a sense of return to the world that was before I left. But I soon realized that would never be and decided to get on with the business of the rest of my life. That meant getting into a new flying job at Fort Rucker, which would allow college night school.

September 24, 1971

In September, we moved into a rental trailer in Enterprise, Alabama. Eleanor Hansen and Mike Goodman's fiancée, Carol, came to visit us after a POW/MIA rally on post at Fort Rucker one Friday night. Eleanor was very concerned about her husband Steve, and the job he was doing. Carol's fiancé was Mike Goodman, whom I'd given an orientation ride two months earlier. Although I wanted to reassure Eleanor, I sensed something wrong.

Then she asked me if what he was doing was dangerous. When she said he was flying a Loach in Quang Tri Province, I knew he was hunting the enemy on a daily basis.

I wanted to say something encouraging, but how do you tell a man's wife how unbelievably dangerous his work is? Before I spoke, the chill hit, don't lie to her! I wanted to say no, that he was safe. Jolted by the chill, I then said "He does dangerous things, but he is with the best people and has the best possible support assets. Everywhere he goes, he has people with him." That was the truth, but it gave her little comfort. I'd unthinkingly reverted to the very words Ken Mayberry had used with me, conceding the danger of Phoenix missions, the previous November at Camp Evans.

They returned home to Dothan late that Friday night.

Twelve hours later, on Saturday morning, I answered the phone, only to hear Carol choking back sobs. Then she took a breath and, momentarily composed, continued. Eleanor had just been visited by an army chaplain. Her husband Steve was dead. He'd died while trying to escape the enemy after his helicopter had been shot down in Quang Tri Province. In a desperate attempt to extract him, a rope was thrown from a Chinook. He tried to hold on as he was lifted from the jungle, but the rope broke and Steve fell to his death. Carol then asked if I'd serve as a pallbearer.

I instinctively replied, "I'd be happy to help in any way possible." Moments later, I put the phone down, cursing myself for the unthinking use of "happy." Why couldn't I have used a more appropriate word! I'd had no training or experience for this! But I was sadly relieved I'd not lied about Steve's duties, the night before.

The funeral was five days later. Escorting Steve's body, Mike Goodman came back on emergency leave. The funeral parlor was in Dothan, Alabama, the church just a short distance down the street. The funeral ceremony was

a place and a time I didn't want to experience. As a pallbearer, I sat next to Mike Goodman. We were both in dress uniform. A girl sang a beautiful rendition of "To Dream the Impossible Dream," the theme music from the *A Man from La Mancha*. My mind kept bouncing back to the day I'd met Steve at lunch in the division mess hall at Camp Eagle. It had been less than two months. Mike was holding back tears as I was. Then he began to cry. I gripped his knee in an effort to help him restrain the tears. The words of the minister passed by unheard; we did not want to hear them. I felt as if a well-known foe, Death, had followed from a war on the opposite side of the earth to taunt me in Dothan, Alabama.

The burial, with full military honors, was completed at a small cemetery several miles north of Dothan. Steve was buried in an area reserved for military veterans who would not be joined by their wives. Everyone hoped that eventually Eleanor would remarry. A reception was held by Eleanor's mother after the ceremony. There I met Steve's mother, father, and his younger brother. I found it hard to believe that an army chaplain, who had officiated so many funerals during his life, now had to endue his son's.

Eleanor's mother made an exaggerated performance of how pretty Steve's Purple Heart was. I was filled with revulsion, bordering on rage. The way the women carried on about the medal, as if it was a piece of jewelry! My wife didn't understand my feelings. She had no real understanding of what I'd done during my tour. She was working at a bank where most of the men had joined the Alabama National Guard or air force reserve to avoid service in Vietnam.

The indifference to lives lost in military service was found even in Dothan, Alabama. Those who'd joined the army and air force reserve or National Guard made no apologies. They'd gladly serve six years as weekend warriors to avoid one year of duty in Vietnam. People

working with Pat told jokes ridiculing Vietnam vets. I'd hear them repeated to me at home, without revealing my disgust.

At the end of the reception, Mike and Carol came to us and said they wanted to get married immediately. They asked us to drive them to Georgia. That evening, we drove them to Bainbridge, some forty miles southwest of Dothan. There they applied for their marriage license and took the required blood test. The next day they were married. Two days later, Mike returned to the 163d Aviation Company at Camp Eagle.

Mike's return to South Vietnam had to be hell. After burying his best friend, getting married, and returning to South Vietnam from Stateside, he had to be bouncing between the widest emotions.

October 1971

When I'd reported into the warrant officers' personnel branch at Fort Rucker, I spent a few minutes with my placement officer, who asked me if I was staying in the army for twenty years or what plans I had. I replied, "I'd like to try and finish as much college as possible, at night. I'd really like to finish a degree during the three-year tour." He said, "I've got just the place for you! Flying OH-58s in the Rotary Wing Qualification Course. You have in-country 58 time, which is a plus. You'll be transitioning fixed-wing rated pilots into helicopters. It's the easiest job for a college-minded young man." I said thanks and waited outside his office while my orders were cut for instructor pilot training in the little Jet Ranger.

A few days later, I reported to instructor training. In ground school, I learned that two 58s had had fatal crashes over the previous three months, caused by the tail boom's buckling and falling off. What I'd known as a

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very safe aircraft had since been revealed to have an engineering weakness. The downed aircraft were suspected of having hard tail stinger strikes during practice autorotations. These had supposedly caused the crashes. While engineering studies were nearing completion to cure the problem, I began instructor pilot training without touchdown autorotations.

A test pilot had interviewed the very lucky survivor of one of the accidents. The pilot's practiced response, when an aircraft begins spinning to the right, was to attempt a left-compensating pedal or a coordinated left-cyclic turn. However, when the tail boom buckled, the standard response merely accelerated the departure of the tail boom, inverting and destroying the helicopter. Helicopters were incapable of going upside down without catastrophic destruction. We were then taught that if the tail boom or rotor was damaged, we would have to override trained reflexes, and turn in to (with) the right turn of the aircraft, flying it to the ground in a descending, accelerating left spiral.

Just one more thing for a highly experienced helicopter pilot to brood about! Preparation H was heavily used for the next month, until the pilots were convinced the engineering and training modifications worked. In November, we were permitted to continue autorotations to the ground.

I finished my transition as an instructor pilot in the Rotary Wing Qualification Course for previously rated (airplane) aviators. I'd also begun studying at Troy State University at night. I had a very full schedule flying at 6:00 A.M. until noon, then relaxing, studying, and going to school from 4:00 to 9:00 at night.

My call sign was Recon Six-one at Fort Rucker. My first student in Rotary Wing Qualification Course (RWQC) was Endashaw Endiri, an Ethiopian flight student with an excellent command of the English language. Unlike most of our students, who were jet-rated air force or army fixed-

wing aviators transitioning into helicopters, Endiri had only 450 hours in a Cessna 172. I had my hands full, but it turned out to be a successful transition for him and me.

There was an interesting group of pilots in the RWQC course. Maj. William L. Robertson, our commanding officer, was from Mississippi. He was a good commanding officer, but subject of a lot of humor because of his southern attitudes. He once described his time taking master's courses at Mississippi State University. There, he observed all those thousands of students just walking around daily, with "no one in command."

I knew I was getting out of the army, it was just a matter of finishing college as quickly as possible. Chief warrant officers Dennis Patterson and Bob Williamson were good buddies, who had flown Charlie-model Huey gunships together in Vietnam. A number of very fine aviators, all combat experienced, were in the company. The Rotary Wing Qualification Course instructors provided the core of pilots for the army's Silver Wings flight demonstration team, which performed at the Paris Air Show in 1973.

I Corps, Da Nang, South Vietnam

In late September and early October 1971, the Chu Lai PX started to have some glaring shortages. Because of the impending stand down, the logisticians decided to use everything up through intentional shortages. Fresca was everywhere, but not a Coke could be found for miles.

The 174th Aviation Company, with Capt. Mike Sloniker, was assigned CAs near Da Nang. At the end of a combat assault, Sloniker made a run on the PX at Freedom Hill. He landed at a penaprime pad at the base of the mountain, near two Chinooks. One was from the 159th ASHB, 101st Abn Div, the other from the 178th ASHB, Boxcars, 23d Inf Div (Americal) from Chu Lai.

Mike had to bum a truck ride to the PX; walking had been banned due to drug sellers and pimps. Mike found his way into the USO, which was staffed by a doughnut dolly selling tacos.

There were two aviators, one from the 101st, sitting at the adjacent table in the USO. They were two young warrant officers, Chinook pilots, who had either attended flight school or the CH-47 transition course together, and had not seen each other in quite a while. A serious conversation was underway. The one from the 101st mentioned how pilots in their unit were damned if they did, and damned if they didn't.

The somber discussion regarded a CH-47 aircraft commander who'd responded to an emergency call from a downed Loach pilot, west of Quang Tri. He heard on the radio an emergency beacon activated on UHF guard frequency. He responded, "Beeper, Beeper, come up voice." Apparently, the Chinook was the first one on the scene. The pilot had been shot down, was alone and heard NVA pursuing him. The Chinook pilot instinctively understood that he had to get the Loach pilot out by any means possible or the fellow would quickly be dead. The Chinook pilot instructed the crew chief to extract the downed pilot by securing a rope to the aircraft floor. The crew chief dropped it down through the hole in the center of the Chinook floor. But as they were lifting the CH-47 to clear the pilot out of the trees, the rope broke and WO Steve Hansen fell to his death.

The young 101st warrant officer was particularly upset. There was open discussion that the Chinook aircraft commander would be court-martialed for his attempted rescue. Mike's first reaction was disgust. Then he began thinking of the heavy responsibility an aircraft commander has in a combat environment. Damned if you do and damned if you don't. Having spent a year on the ground in a prior tour, he would always respond to a call

for help, damn the rules. Ask any pilot who served in I Corps. Ninety-nine point nine percent would have taken the rope, accepting whatever risk, in light of the very certain option at the hands of NVA. Damn!

November 29, 1971, Camp Evans Combat Base, I Corps, Republic of Vietnam

The Phoenix Company, Charlie Company, 158th Aviation Battalion, 101st Airborne Division, Airmobile, was being stood down. The unit was being deactivated, and the pilots were being transferred into other units or shipped home. Some would eventually leave Vietnam earlier than their scheduled twelve-month tour. The retreat from I Corps was nearing its end, and Camp Evans would soon be turned over to the ARVN. There was an uneasy feeling among those at Camp Evans, the last Americans north of Phu Bai. The North Vietnamese Army was out there, still making its presence known with 122mm rockets and 82mm mortars. A "Corregidor mentality," that of the last American outpost in a collapsing effort, was obvious in the conversations of the young warrant officers.

In the Phoenix officers club, a small group of pilots gathered around the Phoenix Company emblem, a wooden plaque that had adorned the stage since 1969, a large, three-feet-by-three-feet, carved wooden plaque with a Vietnamese Phoenix that had been carved into it by an early Phoenix veteran in 1969. The base was being evacuated in days. A decision had to be made: what to do with the Phoenix emblem? WO Phil Rutledge and several others began discussing what to do. Individual officers wanted to keep it themselves, but they were booed down. In short order, one of the Phoenix recommended the mythological answer—flames!

Rutledge and the others decided a slight change was

appropriate. The warrant officers began to write on the back of the emblem the names of all the Phoenix pilots they could remember. When they ran out of names, they continued writing Phoenix call signs. Phoenix six and others were added in succession. There were more drinks, toasts in remembrance of those lost, peppered with stories of actions unbelievably survived. The plaque was then carried outside.

The group included Warrant Officer Rutledge, Lieutenant Brea, Lt. Eddie Stafire, and several others. They irreverently offered a profane toast, as the Phoenix emblem was set ablaze in in the time-honored warrior tradition, with lighter fluid.

Mythology blended with reality.

In the twilight landscape of Camp Evans Combat Base,

the Phoenix ascended,

resurrected in a swirling ascension,

flames, ash, and smoke,

freed from the tribulations of I Corps . . . the rite completed.

So ended the Phoenix presence at Camp Evans . . .

and the Republic of South Fucking Vietnam.

One year after the Laotian Invasion, Lee Fairchild, a former doorgunner, was once again a civilian.

15

1972

March 1, 1972

It had been one year earlier,

On the first day of LAM SON 719, ~~on~~ February 8, 1971, WO Bobby Gentry and copilot Warrant Officer Burch flew the combat assault into Landing Zone Hotel. As the aircraft lifted off the landing zone, a two-man NVA machine-gun team at the left front of the aircraft fired. Several rounds impacted the cockpit, hitting Gentry and destroying his cyclic and the radios, and severing the hydraulic lines. Crew chief Pat Wade killed the two NVA with his M-60 machine gun. Meanwhile, an instant before crashing, Burch was just able to regain control of the ship. Luckily the aircraft was over a very steep incline and took no more fire. Pat Wade and the gunner, Lee Fairchild lowered Gentry's seatback then pulled him to the floor of the Huey's cargo bay. They administered first aid. Then Fairchild ~~stay~~ stayed with Gentry, while Wade crawled back into Gentry's seat to assist Burch with the pedals. Gentry lost a lot of blood during the short flight back to Khe Sanh, ~~and~~ B because of the destroyed radio, Burch had no contact with the Khe Sanh tower or other aircraft. After avoiding several near midair collisions over Khe Sanh, Burch was able to put the aircraft down at POL, a major accomplishment for a young pilot without hydraulics. Near death, Gentry was placed on another aircraft and flown to the Quang Tri Hospital. After the crew secured the damaged

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aircraft, they were flown to Quang Tri, where they learned that Bobby had died. Another 70-3/70-5 casualty.

The young door gunner, Lee Fairchild, could not forget WO Bobby Gentry. One year after the Laotian invasion, the former door gunner, who'd cradled the dying Bobby Gentry in his lap, was still troubled. Having served his nation, Fairchild was once again a civilian. But the tragedy of Gentry's death haunted him. On his personal trek, to sort some meaning from the event, Lee Fairchild reached that way point in life. After several months of wandering, he sat on a roadside with pen and paper, allowing the anguish and frustration to flow from him, into a poem of loving memory.

Writing the poem allowed Lee to place the memory of Bobby Gentry at rest in his mind. It would not be until the summer of 1989 that Lee Fairchild would meet Bobby Gentry's father, sharing the poem with him. A federal building would be named after Gentry in his hometown of Orlando, Florida.

A Song for Mr. Gentry
Lee Fairchild
1972

The wind screamed loud, that one fateful day.
When your Bobby Gentry went walking away.
Young flying warrior of the sky
Strong as the lion's roar
quiet like the snowfall.
Flew in from the west
to that green grass valley,
to a flowery field, landing
in a strange foreign battle.
Then the lightning flashed
and God had his say
as the flowers turned red
and the valley went grey,

and young Bobby Gentry
went walking away.
Like a warrior of the skies
he was too proud to cry
as he looked to the heavens
and quietly slipped away
to the land where slain warriors
of battles do play.
Oh, I heard his mother cry
and his father drop to his knees,
his brothers and sisters
all screamed toward the sky
cursing the wind
that one fateful day
when young Bobby Gentry
went walking away.

Fort Rucker

In 1972, I continued taking college courses. I had constantly sought a sense of normalcy after my return from Vietnam. In late 1972, the army required all aviators to have a standard instrument ticket. In addition to flying as an instructor pilot, I had to fly as a student pilot in the afternoon to earn my standard instrument ticket. I continued finishing college at night. I was obsessed with finishing college as quickly as possible and getting out of the army.

I successfully completed requirements for the army's standard helicopter instrument ticket and then, using my VA benefits, continued flying as a student in civilian aircraft. I finished a bachelor of science degree in business administration at Troy State University, paying for it with the army tuition assistance plan. While I was on active duty, the army paid 75 percent of my tuition. By 1973, I'd

completed a fixed-wing, commercial, multiengine instrument rating using VA benefits as well. I'd tried to obtain the maximum educational benefits from my enlistment.

In March 1972, I watched on television the fall of such familiar places as Camp Carroll, Mai Loc, and Quang Tri City. Phil Rutledge, then out of the army and back home in Bakersfield, California, also watched the evening news in amazement as Camp Evans was destroyed by North Vietnamese Army artillery. He'd only been home three months. In the previous November, he'd discussed with others at Camp Evans the Corregidor mentality that pervaded daily activities. They knew the NVA were capable, and would choose when. The Easter Offensive in March 1972 was when. Fortunately, it was well after the departure of the 101st Airborne Division.

16

Exit

From 1965 to 1968, the U.S. Navy and Air Force lost ninety-seven aircraft unsuccessfully attempting to bring down the bridge at Thanh Hoa, the primary rail connector to China, which was the source of supplies and safe havens then just as it had been against the French. The Thanh Hoa was destroyed on the first run in December 1972 by a single, "smart" two thousand pound bomb. At the time, the effectiveness of the smart bomb was noticed only by those in the service, but it would change the way wars would be fought many years later. The American public would understand them after the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

In the bombing period of December 18 to December 29, 1972, the air force and navy flew 724 B-52 sorties, and 640 fighter-bomber sorties, dropping some twenty thousand tons of bombs. In addition, there were 1,384 sorties in support of attacking aircraft (chaff flights, refueling flights, fighter cover, SAM suppression, and electronic countermeasures).

On December 29, 1972, 150 U.S. aircraft roamed the Red River Valley at will, virtually unopposed. It was the first and last time of the war that American air power held supremacy. Just twenty-three unguided surface-to-air missiles were fired at the attackers, and none of the missiles were even close to constituting a threat. The SAM guidance facilities had mostly been destroyed. There was little

left of the North Vietnamese stockpile. Of 150 U.S. aircraft attacking, all returned safely.

At the completion of the twelve-day campaign, North Vietnam's military potential, its industry, and economy lay in ruins. Finally, the United States' unrestricted raids had destroyed North Vietnam's ability to defend itself against further attacks from the air. Its airfields had been destroyed, and it had expended all of its surface-to-air missiles. During the last three days, United States aircraft were virtually not fired on.

Unrecognized by the uncaring American voting public, a semblance of military victory had finally been attained by the air force. At the time, only 24,200 American troops remained in South Vietnam.

In response to the North Vietnamese Army Easter attacks, B-52 bombers had been first used in North Vietnam during 1972. By year's end, approximately 20 percent of South Vietnam had been conceded to the North Vietnamese Army. However, the round-the-clock bombings of North Vietnam in December 1972, forced the North Vietnamese leaders to agree to an American withdrawal and repatriation of prisoners. Until then, they'd had no need to negotiate anything. The air force bombing and President Nixon had finally accomplished the goal of getting North Vietnam's undivided attention.

On December 30, 1972, President Nixon halted the bombings.

On January 23, 1973, an agreement was signed permitting repatriation of American prisoners of war.

Lyndon Johnson's decision not to run for a second presidential term represented a tragic watershed. Years later, former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara would reveal his purported belief that Vietnam was an unwinnable war. More U.S. servicemen and women died in the war after Johnson's decision, than before it.

On March 29, 1973, President Nixon, then reeling

under Watergate pressures, announced that "no American Prisoners of War" remained in Southeast Asia.

Five hundred ninety-one prisoners of war were released by North Vietnam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government. However, the families of 2,383 Americans still listed as MIA were stunned. Included among the relatives refusing to give up hope, were families of men I knew. In their minds, their loved ones either remained in captivity in Southeast Asia, under the worst of circumstances, or were dead. The phrase "Killed in action, body not recovered" left gaping wounds in the hearts and minds of thousands of loved ones, as well as those who served with them.

In the words of Neal Pointer on the Texas Vietnam Veterans Memorial Monument, "In the harsh reality of war, the wounds that run deepest are the wounds of uncertainty. . . . These are the wounds that cannot heal." The emotional wounds over MIAs would fester for years not only in the hearts of their loved ones but also with many who'd served with them.

The stories of NVA not taking prisoners of war in Laos would eventually be proven fact. The army helicopter crews, as well as air force, navy, and Marine aircrews supporting operations in Laos, knew the risks. The extra personal weapons and ammunition carried by Phoenix crewmen on CCN missions reflected that understanding. However, the worst fears were no longer nightmares, simply proven fact. And there would be no retaliation, no vengeance, no payback.

The Defense Intelligence Agency listed 354 missing in action in Laos, pilots and crewmen *known* to have survived their crashes in Laos. On March 10, 1973, seven military prisoners and three civilian prisoners were repatriated from Laos. The North Vietnamese offered no explanation or comment concerning the other 344. A "grieving nation" could simply conclude that they had

been executed, died of injuries, or killed during escape and evasion.

The French had lost 36,979 men as prisoners during the Dien Bien Phu defeat. Only 10,754 were returned alive. Over sixty percent of French Legionnaires and Union Forces died in Viet Minh captivity. Starvation, brutal treatment, disease, and executions were the rule, rather than the exception. The Viet Minh had learned the methods of their Japanese captors during World War II. and ratcheted atrocities to an even higher level. Even the infamous atrocities worked on the American Lost Battalion early in 1942, cost "only" 40 percent killed at the hands of Japanese captors.

The B-52 bombings, jet fighter attacks, artillery raids and Special Forces booby traps gave them no reason for mercy or compassion. The rules of war had been simply kill or be killed, just as we were briefed prior to our first CCN mission. The little bastards simply killed those they captured in Laos. Years later, the North Vietnamese would blame the Communist Pathet Lao. But Americans knew who occupied, controlled, and operated the Ho Chi Minh trail . . . the North Vietnamese Army.

The South Vietnamese government did not collapse until two years after the prisoner release, not until April 30, 1975. General Phu, whom I'd flown as copilot for in 1971, killed himself with a hand grenade as the North Vietnamese Army overran Saigon. Swarms of South Vietnamese attempted to reach American ships and escape. Most did not succeed. The panic and anarchy were well documented on television.

On May 17, 1975, the American freighter *Mayaguez* was captured by Communists off a Cambodian island. One of the fifteen Americans killed in the combat assault to free it was a former army warrant officer with Vietnam experience, piloting an air force CH-53 helicopter. A rocket-propelled grenade killed him as he touched down

on the beach during the combat assault. His second tour of duty claimed him, just as it had Capt. David Nelson and so many others.

News reports would remark those as the last casualties of the Vietnam War, not mentioning the deaths of twenty-three other Americans whose CH-53 exploded midflight over Thailand, en route to the *Mayaguez*.

The *Mayaguez* rescue operation was a bizarre ending to our losses in Vietnam. The last casualties tragically dying in Marine and air force H-53 helicopters. Of fifteen Marine and air force CH-53 and HH-53 aircraft taking part in the operation, four were destroyed and nine were badly damaged. The one that exploded in midair over Thailand, while en route to the operation, killed more men than were lost in the combat assault. The other helicopters were destroyed by enemy fire after touchdown in the hot landing zone.

Although the *Mayaguez* action was a military victory, it had taken a far greater cost in lives than expected. Twenty-three deaths by accident exceeded the fifteen killed in combat. The merchant ship and its crew were freed.

The tragedy of the Vietnam War experience had been replayed in the last major combat assault. It was on an island off the coast of Cambodia. A military victory, retaking the Mayaguez, was achieved at far too great a cost. The Vietnam war had sapped the national spirit, leaving too many desperately wanting to forget.

The feelings of futility, shattered beliefs and abandonment of virtue were accurately abridged in Don McLain's popular song of the time, "American Pie". In quadraphonic stereo, we'd sing along with the passage, "the Father, Son and the Holy Ghost, caught the last train . . . to the coast . . . the day . . . the music . . . died."

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17

Veteran

I ended my time in service with the army in April 1973. As I reentered civilian life, I had a distinct feeling of accomplishment, as if I'd already completed one lifetime and career. In June, I graduated Troy State University with a B.S. in business administration. I then entered the real estate appraisal business in Dothan, Alabama, and began a program to attain membership in the American Institute of Real Estate Appraisers. From time to time, I would run into people I served with. On May 8, 1978, I achieved my Membership, Appraisal Institute (MAI) designation after five years of long hard work and political opposition. Achieving the designation in the minimum time, five years, and at the minimum age of twenty-eight years was my personal and business goal. I was one of less than fifty members under the age of thirty of over five thousand members nationwide. The week of that momentous professional accomplishment, I received a POW/MIA request for donations from a retired major. In his letter he'd cited David Nelson as a surviving POW, still missing in action. The unwanted but intimately familiar metallic chill wracked my body.

What had been a singular accomplishment in my business life was suddenly overshadowed by the possibility that Dave Nelson had survived his crash in Laos, languishing in a filthy bamboo cage for seven years.

The difficulties of personal business accomplishments, or unhappiness in a questionable marriage, were nothing

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compared to the rage I held for my government. I, too, perceived the government as uncaring, for not seeking men like Nelson, to free them after years of a living hell. I was equally disgusted with myself for not having done anything to help. It was an attitude and perception shared by many veterans. But it was one based upon the deepest emotions, not facts.

The following Thursday night, I went to a Sertoma civic club party at Seville Quarter in Pensacola. I drank until I crashed and burned. I attempted to drive home, but succeeded only in wrapping my car around a telephone pole, narrowly escaping my old enemy, Death.

Later, carefully unconfirmed television news reports continued. Dave Nelson had been reported on national television, as seen by refugees. Alive. In Laos.

The stories would not end, . . . until October, 1990.

In 1988, Lt. Col. Mike Sloniker, then assigned to the Pentagon, attended his first Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association reunion at Fort Worth, Texas. Sloniker met veterans of one unit he'd served with during his second tour as an aviator in 1971, the 174th Assault Helicopter Company, the Dolphins and Sharks. When he'd joined the unit in July 1971, many LAM SON 719 veterans were there, and they passed on their cockpit experiences. In the spring of 1972, during the Easter Offensive of 1972 he'd successfully put their teachings to test. His company from the 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion, 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, supported the South Vietnamese defense of Loc Ninh and An Loc. Like Laos, it was a "mid-intensity" antiaircraft environment. But this time replete with *Strela* (Russian for "arrow") shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles used against helicopters. For helicopter pilots it was as bad as Laos had been, but with a more-effective helicopter-killer. And it seemed as if every private in the North Vietnamese army had at least one *Strela*.

A year after his first VHPA reunion in June 1989, after

exercising in the Pentagon Officers Athletic Club (POAC), Sloniker met Col. Joe Schlatter, then-director of the Defense Intelligence Agency's POW/MIA office.

Sloniker learned the DIA was still working on Vietnam-era cases, some over twenty years old. He was impressed with the professionalism they displayed in a totally thankless, highly stressful job. The office was constantly responding to congressional inquiries, investigations, and highly emotional allegations. But, as far as Sloniker could tell, each case was handed professionally, utilizing every resource available.

Sloniker mentioned that he had served with the 174th Aviation Company from June to October 1971 before transferring to the 1st Cavalry Division to finish his tour. Schlatter then invited Sloniker down to review documents they had regarding that era, mentioning two Cobra pilots' remains had been recovered. They'd been shot down on April 5, 1972, south of Loc Ninh. The aircraft commander was CW2 Joe Windler and the gunner was Capt. Hank Spengler. A memorial service at Arlington was being planned for the family of Captain Spengler in August 1989.

Sloniker had flown Huey's with the First Air Cavalry in combat during those times. In 1972, Mike lived and carefully observed the toll of stress endured by Huey pilots assigned missions into An Loc. Some army pilots had to puke by the tail boom before saddling up. Others drank themselves into oblivion each night, after surviving horrifying missions. Some calmly accepted the missions and quietly endured. All performed their missions, admirably, under the worst of combat and political environments.

Mike Sloniker decided to attend the funeral service at Arlington in honor of the men who'd provided his gunship cover. He'd known them by their call sign, the Blue Max. Sloniker knew he'd survived his tour of duty not merely because of his personal skills and good luck but because of the gunship support getting him in and out of

some horrifying landing zones. The skills, courage, and professionalism of Blue Max pilots were unquestionably part of his survival equation.

Sloniker attended the Arlington funeral for Captain Spengler. There was a family reception afterward at the welcome center of the national cemetery. Spengler was a 1968 West Point graduate, and thirty or so of his classmates attended in uniform. When Sloniker was introduced to Spengler's mother, she mentioned that she did not remember his name in her son's class. He responded that he wasn't a West Point graduate, but was there paying personal respects, representing those who'd been protected by the Blue Max. She immediately introduced him to the other family members.

Sloniker attended the VHPA convention in Chicago during the July 4 weekend, 1989. There, he chanced upon a Phoenix minireunion where thirty Phoenix pilots had a well-organized meeting under way. It was obvious a great deal of personal effort was made to organize and get veterans there. They had their own meeting room with a slide show, movies, and beer. Obviously, many were extremely close even after eighteen years. The camaraderie impressed him.

Mike returned to his job at the Pentagon, where he worked in the office of the secretary of defense, special operations staff and was involved in special operations aircraft acquisition. He continued his discussions with Col. Joe Schlatter. The fact that the Phoenix had been very active on CCN missions, to the point of even being requested specifically for some missions, was not lost on Mike. Those were formulative missions of the Green Berets, evolving to the Special Operations Forces of today.

He then began reviewing documents concerning Phoenix KIAs. Mike realized that the Phoenix had sustained one of the heaviest tolls of those killed in action of the lift companies in the 101st Airborne Division. In November 1989, in an effort to assist the DIA in locating some of the

remains, Mike spent time reviewing the tapes provided to him by Capt. Don Peterson in 1971. The tapes described the action involving the loss of Paul Stewart and Tom Doody, near A Luoi. They also described the downing of David Nelson and Ralph Moreira, southeast of Sophia. Both were commonly misinterpreted as at other locations in after-action reports. While going over these documents, he also came across the report on CWO David Soyland, a Phoenix pilot still listed as missing in action in 1989.

Colonel Schlatter's staff asked Mike to contact Lt. Col. Skip Butler, a former Redskin Cobra pilot, in hopes he would meet with the DIA staff. Butler's witness statements to the Soyland incident were kept on file in hopes of eventual resolution of his case. The keeper of the files asked Sloniker if he could persuade Butler to visit with them so they could update as much of the data as possible. DIA recovery teams had been searching for the crash site since early 1989, without locating it.

On November 27, 1989, Butler, coincidently working in the Pentagon labyrinth, came to the Defense Intelligence office. He sat down with retired CWO Bob Destatt, an intelligence analyst in the Defense Intelligence Agency's Prisoner of War/Missing in Action Office. Destatt had been personally touched as he studied the after-action reports describing the heroism of the army air crews, attempting to rescue Special Forces Team Alaska. It was during the end of America's involvement, with many units withdrawn, returning Stateside. Destatt questioned Butler in a very careful manner, intentionally not showing Butler's own hand-written statements of 1971 to him. Those present were awed by the detail of his recall. On December 16, 1989, Butler had not seen his statements since he wrote them. He recalled every minute detail from May 17, 1971. The aircraft armament, the weather, the sources of ground fire, types of fire, the terrain features they flew around, the names of the Special Forces team on

the ground, the approaches by the different aircraft. He also recalled the direction of attack and the effect of the air strikes called by the FAC. He even recalled the make-up of the flight crews that poured in around him. Butler's personal flight records recorded thirty-one hours on May 17 and 18. Pilots and crew members understood the gravity of those numbers. Butler's memories enabled the American recovery team to return and confirm the crash site in early 1990. All that remained were tiny pieces of the aircraft. They could not possibly identify it as the particular Huey, but the fragments were pieces of a Huey. Obviously a crash scene, but most of the metal and fiberglass of the Huey had been salvaged and removed by the mountain people living nearby.

Sloniker understood Butler was sharing very personal memories of the failed rescue attempt. Butler had been an experienced Redskin who had lived the I Corps school of bad weather, the unforgiving mountain terrain, and deadly combat environment.

Trying to cover Soyland during the unsuccessful rescue attempt, Butler had hovered his Cobra up a long, enemy-controlled valley. Eighteen years later, he still wore the POW/MIA bracelet with David Soyland's name. Despite all the successful actions in his career, the tragedy of Soyland and Pearce's loss was the one thing that hung in his mind. Butler, like most helicopter veterans, had reluctance to discuss the stories without someone in attendance who understood their meaning and gravity. The fears, frustrations, and vulnerabilities learned in one's combat tour are not easily shared with those who have not acquired the proper vocabulary.

shared combat experience

un D

June 1989

The December 1986 Federal Income Tax Laws initiated by President Reagan had dramatically changed real

estate investment taxation, beginning a decline in demand for real estate services, including mine. The October 1987 stock market crash, Black Monday, further worsened matters by extending losses into the savings and banking business, culminating in nationwide banking closures. My appraisal business reflected the national trend. It was down, way down.

In June 1989, a year and a half after my divorce was final, my business hit rock bottom. Emotionally and financially, I was at an all time low. While driving in Pensacola, I saw a billboard advertisement for the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association reunion in Chicago. Jim Cronley, a successful contractor and developer had encouraged me to join. Jim had been a warrant officer a few years ahead of me. Jim had also introduced me to Robert Mason's book *Chickenhawk*. I decided to go to Chicago as a gift to myself.

I'd saved enough frequent flyer miles to trade in on a round-trip, first-class ticket to Chicago. Not knowing what to expect in my first VHPA reunion, I arrived at the Hyatt Hotel and cautiously observed the festivities underway.

I quickly discovered a patriotic fourth of July setting. Any sense of decorum was destroyed by the gregarious reunions. Flight jackets, T-shirts. cavalry hats, and beer were everywhere. Any somber or subtle feelings were instantly swept away in the color and camaraderie.

When I entered the lobby of the Hyatt Hotel, I realized there was a Charlie Company, 158th Aviation Battalion, mini-reunion. I remembered vaguely of having served with them. I had my book of photographs underarm. Eighteen years after my service, I walked slowly into the room. I was instantly dumfounded to recognize the names and some of the faces. I then met Ken Mayberry and Pat McKeaney, who both denied I'd ever been in Charlie Company since they did not remember me. I pulled out my photographs and showed them a picture of me sitting

below the Phoenix 2d Platoon flag, with the bra on the wall in the hootch. They nearly passed out in disbelief!

Those of us attending our first reunion were in an absolute, profound, state of shock. It was amazing to me that after eighteen years, the events which had been such an important part of my psyche, were reaffirmed in common experiences. A week rarely passed that I did not think of something that happened during that long year. The memories were not just dreams or nightmares. They had been real events, which could again be shared with living people.

In the Phoenix minireunion with Charlie Company, 158th Aviation Battalion, I found myself reacquainting with Mayberry, McKeany, and Scrugham. We had shared the experiences and emotions during a very difficult time in our nation's history. It was with a sense of pride that I left for home from Chicago. On the flight out from Chicago, Sean Moore, a Phoenix pilot from Houston, came on the plane and shook my hand as he passed by. A minute later, he walked back and asked me, "Were you there, really there in that deep extraction in Laos, where we took flak?!"

"Yes, I was." Another shared experience and memory that was so unreal, we mentally questioned ourselves whether we'd truly experienced it. The affirmation of those experiences made the trip worth it.

In the unspoken terms of personal honor and patriotic duty, the Phoenix veterans understood where you'd been, what you'd done. For most of us, few chose to talk about combat experiences. People in the World simply did not understand and could not relate to our experiences when we returned.

We were men who had chosen to serve, a rational, conscious choice made during a period in our nation's history that saw a reversal of a war and a withdrawal begun. All done in the face of political opposition at home. We'd

shared fear, fatigue, and exhaustion, yet experienced together the sense of being alive that can only be realized in the eerie time-expansion of combat. However, a very small corner of my mind reminded me of "unfinished business," just as I'd felt in the American Airlines jet lifting me back to the world, many years earlier.

The weekend of July 4, 1990, was another Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association convention. The Sheraton Hotel in New Orleans was the scene. New Orleans was an appropriate location for a bunch of heavy drinking pilots. On Saturday morning, the minireunion for the Phoenix Company was held in two adjoining rooms, consolidated into a party room. David Wolfe, from California, showed up with his wife and sons. Dave Rayburn again made it in from Atlanta. Ken Mayberry and Dean Grau were in attendance, along with a dozen other former Phoenix.

The celebrity at the event was Layne Heath, who'd recently finished a novel, *CW2*, and was autographing copies of it. Those present were autographing each other's copies of *CW-2* and *Into Laos*, just like high school or college class yearbooks!

Heath's novel involved a character, Billy Roark, a warrant officer who'd served with the Phoenix in his first tour of duty. Roark then returned for a second tour of duty, during the wind-down of the war, at An Khe in 1972. I discussed with Layne the striking reversed sequence of my one-year tour, beginning with the stand-down at An Khe, then moving to the Phoenix. I gave him movies of the An Khe golf course described in his character's second tour.

He signed a copy of his book, *CW2*, "To Tom Marshall—who traveled the same ground, but backwards!"

I'd enjoyed reading *CW2*, which intensely described the actions and frustrations of a warrant officer aviator in Vietnam during the ending of the war. I quietly wondered why Heath had written a novel since most of the book

Except for the last chapter, which accurately depicted the internal rage and sense of unfinished business, was based upon fact.

My girlfriend, LuAnne, was startled by the anti-Jane Fonda bumper stickers (We're Not Fonda Jane) and T-shirts in abundance at the meeting. Although they were not apparent among the Phoenix pilots, they were prominently displayed throughout the convention sales floor. In LuAnne's eyes, Jane Fonda was the idol of a liberated woman. At twenty-eight years of age, highly successful in communications marketing, she could not understand the resentment many veterans held toward Fonda. But we remembered Jane Fonda's visiting, with former Attorney General Ramsey Clark, prisoners of war in Hanoi during the antiwar demonstrations of 1968 and 1969. They'd caused additional torment for those she visited and even worse treatment of those who'd refused her. Fonda even posed sitting behind a 12.7mm machine gun, after calling the POWs war criminals. To those of us who'd been on the receiving end of an NVA heavy machine gun, that was unpardonable.

When Dave Wolfe came into the Phoenix party room, I immediately recognized him and introduced myself. He said he didn't remember me and didn't believe I was a Phoenix. I instantly told him that I remembered a Christmas present he had received while I was in his hootch at Camp Evans. Wolfe, typical of vets at their first reunion, was somewhat bewildered and amazed at our minireunion.

At the meeting in New Orleans, I finally began to have the sense of being part of the Phoenix again. I'd begun the slow process of unlocking the mental compartments where so many vivid images were kept. I made the commitment to myself to continue the process.

18

Hail and Farewell

In late 1989, the remains of a Phoenix crew lost on March 5, 1971, were returned to the United States for the tedious task of forensic identification. They were definitely from a Charlie Company, 158 Aviation Battalion, aircraft. The wedding band of the copilot, WO Ralph Moreira, was found with his name on the inside. Pictures of the crash site showed the exactness of the archaeological excavation. The area was cleared of brush, the dirt was sifted, and the bone fragments and teeth were returned. Then the remains were reviewed by numerous agencies so that multiple sources could provide their opinions. The process took a year.

Lt. Col. Mike Sloniker retired after twenty-three years of active duty on October 1, 1990. He continued to work out in the Pentagon Officers Athletic Center, and on October second, he ran into Colonel Schlatter, who'd returned from a lengthy trip. Schlatter told Mike that a Phoenix crew was going to be buried at 10:00 A.M. on Friday the fifth. That one informal comment, among acquaintances in the Pentagon Officers Athletic Club, became a call to honor comrades missing for over nineteen years.

Forensic investigators had confirmed the remains. It was a C Company, 158th Assault Helicopter Battalion Phoenix flight crew. It had been shot down in Laos southeast of Landing Zone Sophia on March 5, 1971. Auction

Lead Capt. David Nelson, aircraft commander, WO1 Ralph Moreira, pilot, Sp4. Joel Hatley, crew chief, and Sp4. Mike King, gunner, were finally coming home.

Having gotten to know Phoenix veterans in Chicago and New Orleans, Mike had a couple of phone calls to make. He immediately called Phoenix veterans Jack Glennon in Virginia Beach and Don Davis in Chicago. Their phone chain was so thorough that by 9:00 P.M. that evening, Mike had himself been called by at least two Phoenix to tell him about the pending services.

At 2:00 P.M., October 4, 1990, Jack Glennon called my Pensacola office from Norfolk, Virginia. Glennon asked me if I knew David Nelson and Ralph Moreira. I instantly responded, "Yes. My first CCN mission was with Nelson." He then told me of the burial ceremony scheduled at Arlington; the next morning, for Nelson, Moreira, Hatley, and King. The chill hit, hammering my body. My mind reeled back to the hot string extraction in North Vietnam with Nelson. Without a moment's hesitation, I told Glennon I would be there. I immediately called my travel agent to get an airline ticket from Pensacola, Florida, to Washington, D.C.

Mike Sloniker had remembered the Phoenix. With his two phone calls, Phoenix from across America assembled to honor one of their crews. He met them at 9:00 P.M. on October fourth at the Sheraton Hotel in Arlington, Virginia. Within forty-eight hours of notification, Dean Grau and family arrived from Minnesota. Ken Mayberry, traveling unaccompanied in a wheelchair, flew in from Nebraska. Bruce Updyke came from Indiana. Chuck Doty drove down from Maryland. After being notified at 2:00 P.M. that day, I flew in from Florida. Rick Scrugham flew in from Tennessee. He'd been notified at 10:00 A.M. that day. Don Davis from Chicago and Jack Glennon from Virginia were present. The next morning Tom Cullen would arrive from Connecticut.

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Pat McKeaney could not make it from the west coast in time. But we all talked to him on the phone, very late that night.

The next morning, we assembled at breakfast and went in convoy to the National Cemetery, Arlington. We proceeded to a small chapel on the hill. At the entrance, were the names of Hatley, King, Moreira, and Nelson, in alphabetical order without rank. A caisson pulled up a single flag-draped coffin which held the bone fragments excavated from the crash site in Laos. A formal U.S. Army color guard and marching band accompanied it. The coffin was carefully removed and carried into the sanctuary.

We filed inside and sat on the pews. Included among the mourners were several generals, senior officers, and numerous Special Forces and Ranger NCOs. A chaplain opened the service with an invocation. Eyes closed, I began thinking back to the service for Steve Hansen, and his father. a chaplain. We sang the National Hymn and were addressed by an army chaplain who introduced Mrs. Evelyn Hatley. Then, her son, Joel Hatley, the crew chief on Nelson's ship, was remembered by his mother. She had written a poem. She explained how she came to writing it through her grief and sorrow.

The tone of the chapel service was set immediately by Joel Hatley's mother. She began telling us the exact hour and minute that Joel had been born, and paid tribute to the blessing of his short life by reading the poem that she wrote. It had been her attempt to overcome grief. Although her voice remained steady throughout her reading, the emotion of the words gripped those who filled chapel.

A Picture, A Flag and a Gold Star Pin
Evelyn Laton Hatley

In memory of
SP4. JOEL C. HATLEY
Co. C, 158th Avn Bn
101st Airborne Div.
A.P.O San Francisco, CA 96383

That night I kissed my son Good-bye, and watched his plane soar to the sky.
Little did I know as he held my hand, that soon he'd lie in some strange land.
I still can see his smiling face, and feel his arms in last embrace.
His quiet voice and tender touch, his loving ways all meant so much.
He said, "Mother please don't cry tonight". I said, "I won't", I promised with throat so tight.
I held him close; I loved him so, and it hurt so much to see him go.
I'll be alright and I luv ya'll, were his last words going down the hall.
He waved goodbye going to the plane, and suddenly I felt so strange.
I thought—he's going where he's never been, tho 'Nam was his destination again.
I didn't know why—couldn't understand—but "Heaven" flashed through my mind then.
I felt we had really said good-bye, and he truly was gone to the sky.
I felt strange peace and calm within, and I felt I'd never see him again.
I watched his plane go out of sight, as he was lost in the still, dark night.
I love my son. Why must he go? My heart cried out, now it ached so.
He went to 'Nam, but I soon learned, he really was lost, never to return.

MISSING IN ACTION . . . the telegram read, but
inside I knew our Joel was dead.
He'd been shot down, the helicopter lost . . . Dear
Lord! My son! Oh, what a cost!
And then we wait and wait and pray, and hope we'll
hear that he's okay.
The time was short, tho it seemed long. The grief was
great but love was strong.
Each day seemed like a million years, as time was
washed away with tears.
At last word came, and what I knew within my heart,
was finally true.
KILLED IN ACTION . . . this telegram read, crashed
in flames . . . no survivors it said.
KILLED . . . NOT MISSING NOW it read, My Joel!
My Joel! Our Joel was dead!
Oh Lord! Oh Lord! Oh no, no please! And then I fell on
bended knee.
Dear God! I cried in unbelief, my heart exploded then
in grief.
The tears then like a river did flow; our Joel! Oh Lord!
What a way to go!

In crushed remembrance of his love, I bowed my head
to God above;
to thank Him for that life so sweet, and prayed
someday again we'd meet.
I felt his hand and tender touch, his last good-bye all
meant so much.
Just then I saw his face, his smile, and my heart raced
across the miles.
To join his heart in that last breath, to share his fate, to
share his death.
To die with him in burning flames, to leave with me
only his name.
There's no remains, no grave to be, nothing except
sweet memories.

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A picture of him is left instead, and a folded flag to show he's dead.
Always I'll look at the smiling face, of the picture I hold here in his place.
Always I'll hold in grief and strife, this flag as if it were my life.
Always a Gold Star Pin I'll wear, in memory of a life so sweet and fair.
A Picture, A Flag, and a Gold Star Pin, I'll always hold in the place of him.

After the memorial service, while families rode to the burial site, the Phoenix veterans assembled behind the horse-drawn caisson, army band, firing party, and funeral detail. The soldiers were from the 3d Infantry Old Guard, an army ceremonial unit, so visible at the Tombs of the Unknown Soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery.

We watched as the coffin was gently placed back on the horse-drawn caisson. Led by a formal honor guard and military band, we walked behind the caisson as it was drawn approximately a mile and a quarter down the hill to the burial site. Ken Mayberry was in his wheelchair. Halfway down the hill, he had a flat tire due to a National Defense Service Medal falling off one of the soldiers in the procession. It punctured his inner tube. Phoenix kept jostling Dean Grau for the honor of assisting Mayberry along, who now endured MS.

After the flag presentations to the families, Don Davis, who'd rescued Dave Nelson off of Ranger South in February 1971, placed a pair of shined jump boots alongside the casket in memory of Dave's being the only person who could walk around Camp Evans in the monsoons without getting his highly shined boots muddy. Mike Sloniker had worn the boots in Vietnam during his first tour of duty with the 101st Airborne Division.

With TV cameras rolling, some family members present

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and a large crowd of onlookers, Nelson, Moreira, Hatley, and King were finally laid to rest in the one coffin.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, Karla Carter, Dave Nelson's younger sister walked over to the group of former pilots and tearfully asked, "Did you guys fly with my brother?" Don Davis responded that all the men present had flown with him. There were no dry eyes in the group. She then showed us all a cherished picture of her big brother, and pictures of his boots.

Afterward, we met briefly with the families at the reception hall of the hotel where they had stayed the night before. Dave Nelson's younger sister and brother were there, nice, genuine, Americans. Ralph Moreira's mother, Patsy, and her husband were there, along with Ralph, Jr. I was in shock at seeing Angelo, Ralph's son. I couldn't even speak to him. He was a taller and heavier version of his dad. I related my memories of Ralph in the few minutes with Patsy and gave her a picture of him in the CCN deer hunt, southeast of Khe Sanh. Of course, she instantly picked him out in the unfocused photograph.

I listened as Rick Scrugham explained to Karla how he'd seen Dave's Huey explode in midair, confirming that there was no possibility of Nelson having survived the crash. At that point, I was finally relieved of the guilt I'd felt since 1978, when a retired major who'd been a POW erroneously reported that Nelson had been alive and died in Laos, in 1978.

When Karla asked, "How come the government didn't tell me about you guys?" we had no explanation. Words cannot describe the sadness and relief one sees in a family member's face, as an eyewitness tearfully recounts the aircraft exploding, like the Challenger. At that very moment, after nineteen years of prayerful waiting, the Nelson family finally knew and accepted Dave's death. Our meeting with the families was heartwarming but tense, and none of the families knew the others. Any of the family members present would have easily fit into a Mar-

shall or Compton family reunion (my families) in Virginia. Ralph Moreira's son had a ponytail. My two sons had equally long hair and probably enjoyed the same music he did.

The family members were definitely surprised at our presence at the ceremony, and some suspected the Department of the Army had set it up. The families were still very resentful about their treatment, and they divided that resentment between the government and the news media, which had certainly not uncovered any additional facts, but continued to print credulous stories written in haste and carefully unconfirmed. The Department of the Army, with institutional, bureaucratic indifference, had not put any of the families in touch with the other families or with those of us who the families unexpectedly encountered at the ceremony.

I left Washington with the feeling that I had come for Americans, friends, on the ground, in need.

October 12, 1990, Arlington National Cemetery

One week, to the day, following the ceremony for Dave Nelson and his crew, a much larger procession of relatives, friends, and media followed another military funeral procession. A horse-drawn caisson carried the body, not of a military veteran, but a POW/MIA veteran.

Twenty-five years earlier, on April 29, 1965, Capt. Charles Shelton had been shot down over the skies of Laos. As there was no word of his death or survival, he was simply listed as missing in action, and Marian Shelton, his wife, returned from Okinawa to the United States to raise the couple's five children. The youngest was just over a year old when Charles was shot down. Each year that passed, she lived in anticipation of a knock on the door that would bring word of her husband.

With the end of American involvement in the war in

early 1973, Charles Shelton was not among the fewer than six hundred POWs returned. Even so Marian could not believe her husband dead. At this time the government began to take steps "converting" MIAs to KIAs, killed in action, with the classification "Presumptive finding of death." But Marian Shelton refused to accept a presumptive finding of death. She continued badgering the air force for more information.

She eventually learned from government reports that her husband had safely ejected from his crippled aircraft, parachuted to the ground and radioed that he was in good condition, on the ground in Laos.

A villager later described the episode to U.S. authorities, stating that the airman had been captured alive by Pathet Lao (Communist) troops.

In 1973, Marian went to Indochina in search of her husband. There, she bribed a boatman to take her into Laos. After seven weeks in Laos and Thailand, she returned home with no new information. She would remain active in POW/MIA political issues across the nation.

For Mrs. Shelton, the mental torture created by her husband's absence never ended. Every alleged sighting kept her hopes alive. She had traveled from mountain villages in Laos to refugee camps in Afghanistan in her search for him. She took her story to top TV shows and podiums across the United States.

As a child, Marian Shelton had lost her older brother, missing in action, in World War II. Losing her husband to the unknown fate of missing, presumed dead, was a horrible coincidence. Adding to her suffering was the fact that because of her efforts the air force had changed her husband's status from "Presumed finding of death" to "Missing in action" and ceremonially promoted him to colonel from captain. Colonel Shelton became the last MIA of the Vietnam era.

By September, 1990, Marian had finally reached the unhappy conclusion that her husband probably had died

in captivity. At 11:00 P.M. on the night of October 4, 1990, in despair that her decades of searching and pain had been for nothing, alone in the yard of her California home, she placed a .22-caliber pistol to her head and ended her life. At the very moment Marian Shelton took her life, Phoenix were in Washington, convening for the memorial ceremony for David Nelson, Ralph Moreira, Joel Hatley, and Mike King.

The press would refer to Marian Shelton as the last casualty of the Vietnam War.

Four years later,

On September 24, 1994, Col. Charles E. Shelton was finally declared killed in action. On the following October 4, the anniversary of Mrs. Shelton's suicide, a memorial service for Colonel Shelton was held at his wife's grave at Arlington National Cemetery.

In reporting the Shelton story the *New York Times* said that the last name could finally be placed upon The Wall.

Veterans, however, knew that could not be so.

1995,

19

The Price of Exit

Hits Downed, Casualties, Veterans

After the ceremony at Arlington, Mike Sloniker graciously shared with me a copy of the LAM SON 719 after-action report that had been prepared for army archives. Dated 24 April 1971, the report was addressed to the commanding general, 101st Airborne Division. It had been declassified in 1989. The one hundred-fifty-plus pages were filled with army acronyms, statistics, and statements regarding mission successes and reasonable aircraft and personnel losses.

I read the carefully couched descriptions of actions. The military language, acronyms, and contractions read like a foreign language. I initially took the vague references to successes and the reasonableness of losses as the grossest understatement and misstatement of results. Many pilots and crewmen I knew vehemently disagreed with the conclusions: there probably had been many successful accomplishments, but who determines an acceptable cost?

The military planners had hoped to repeat the success of the Cambodian invasion of 1970, in which American ground forces were used in conjunction with the ARVN, but the Laotian invasion differed from the outset; the Cooper-Church Amendment had prevented American ground troops' entering Laos. Even more important, American advisers, artillery observers, and forward air

controllers were not permitted to accompany the ARVN units they had lived and fought with. These factors helped foster a lack of confidence in the operation that was magnified by communications problems with supporting U.S. aircraft and artillery. The stated goal of the invasion were to spend ninety days in Laos, destroying the enemy base areas 604 and 611. But American planners had not anticipated General Giap's October 1970, move of twenty heavy antiaircraft battalions to the area. The impact of tactical air strikes was reduced since the antiaircraft positions were heavily bunkered, and as at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, artillery positions had been tunneled into position. The helicopter crews suffered heavily from the misjudgments of the planners.

The planned ninety days ended after only forty-five days. Both South Vietnam and North Vietnam claimed victory.

The XXIV Corps after-action report claimed 19,360 North Vietnamese Army dead and inferred the permanently disabled casualties of 6,776. In all, this was roughly one-half of the fifty thousand enemy forces in the area.

The ARVNs reported 7,683 casualties, including 1,764 killed in action. *Newsweek* magazine, however, speculated on April 5, 1971, that 3,800 ARVNs were killed and 5,975 wounded, i.e., that *all* the ARVNs who participated in the initial 8,000-man thrust were wounded or killed!

In material, the North Vietnamese Army reportedly lost 2,001 trucks, 106 tanks, and 13 artillery pieces. The ARVN reported losing 211 trucks, 87 combat vehicles, 54 tanks, and 96 pieces of artillery. However, *15,000* North Vietnamese Army vehicles had been counted moving on just one day in December, 1970, so very few had been destroyed.

The United States reported 108 helicopters destroyed and 618 damaged. The number was actually four times higher. In the approximate forty-five days of the Laotian

invasion, 659 helicopters were employed in the operation; 444 helicopters were shot down by enemy fire.

Helicopters took serious antiaircraft hits on 1,072 total occasions, including those shot down or made unflyable until repaired.

The number of helicopters shot down exceeded the authorized inventory of the 101st Airborne Division. Of those, ninety-one were destroyed beyond recovery. Four more were destroyed in accidents.

On average, ten helicopters were shot down a day. On average, twenty-four times per day helicopters were struck by antiaircraft fire.

An amazing 267 aircraft were extracted in hopes of repair. Those were sling-loaded by Chinooks and Skycrane helicopters from the battle scene to Phu Bai, where a major maintenance depot was located. However, 252 of these were determined not to be repairable and were DEROSed for salvage. Technically, as defined by the army, they were not destroyed by the enemy. Of course, if you talked to those who'd been flying them you'd get a different opinion. An additional sixty-two aircraft were flown back to their units, *then* DEROSed as salvage. Generally those aircraft were simply shot to hell, not flyable and not worth repairing. They, too, were destroyed by enemy action. The air force and navy lost seven fixed-wing aircraft. Forty-two fixed-wing aircraft took hits and returned to base.

Of 659 aircraft beginning the operation, a total of 1,072 aircraft, or 163 percent, had been seriously damaged by enemy fire, repaired, and returned to service. That meant *everybody* flying in the operation got hit seriously once. Nearly two-thirds of the pilots took serious battle damage more than once.

The fact that operations continued under such intense enemy opposition is a credit to the courage and skill of those who flew the missions. An even greater compliment to the pilots in the Khe Sanh and Laotian areas was the

fact that only four aircraft were destroyed by accidents, i.e., accidents claimed less than .6 percent of the total inventory. There were only twenty-nine helicopters damaged by accidents, representing four percent of the inventory, even though pilots of 659 aircraft were operating twelve to fourteen hour days in an uncontrolled air traffic environment, and their piloting was aggravated by fatigue, low ceilings, fog, rain, and continuous exposure to enemy fire. They'd accomplished missions in a hostile environment in an unbelievably safe manner.

In the eyes of Gen. Creighton Abrams, then managing a congressionally mandated retreat from Vietnam, LAM SON 719 was a critical but necessary effort to buy time for training the South Vietnamese and accelerating the U.S. force withdrawal. Strategically, it was a test of the sustainability of helicopter operations in a midintensity antiaircraft environment of the kind which American and NATO forces faced in Europe.

LAM SON 719 was just the first draft of army helicopter history in a midintensity antiaircraft environment. And to this date, little has been written of the experiences pilots and crew members still hold in their minds.

After reading the 101st Airborne Division operational report and considering it in light of the Persian Gulf War, I realized that our military planners had finally gotten things right. General Berry returned to the states after Vietnam and successfully lobbied to have the army establish aviation as a combat arm.

Although many army and air force Officers disagreed with the report's conclusions about losses in Laos, the differences stemmed from the definition of "acceptable" losses. What was acceptable loss to a general was totally unacceptable to the pilots, crewmen, and their families.

As a result of General Berry's efforts, as well as those of many other army officers, by 1990 army aviation had evolved into a well-organized and incredibly effective

power, attaining a potential we couldn't even dream of in 1971.

I began to appreciate the career officers who remained in the army after Vietnam to refine airmobile tactics, procedures, and mission risk assessment. They had gotten the military's act together. Both militarily and politically. lessons had been learned from our experiences. Most important, the national will was firmly in support of the people who put their lives on the line. A newly grateful nation had blossomed with yellow ribbons for all who served in the Gulf War and before.

In 1991, a national spirit, empowered by the military institutions' ability to win, once again emerged in America.

Epilogue

During the 1970s, I watched on television history unfolding. The fall of Vietnam, ending in the capture of Saigon was widely televised. For most Americans, an even more serious event shadowed the history of the time. Vietnam fell in the aftermath of the Watergate debacle, which toppled Richard Nixon. There had been another Middle East war. U.S. forces remained in Europe, facing the Russian and East Bloc threat. In January, 1976, my son, Andrew, was born. My appraisal business was continuing to grow. In October 1978, my second son, Patrick, was born. During 1979, Stanley Karnow's excellent series on the Vietnam War was televised on PBS. To my mind, his was the first analytical, objective overview of the Vietnam War on television. Other than to "fight the spread of communism," most of us who'd served there really had had no true political understanding of why we were there. But I was profoundly disappointed that the Laotian invasion rated only a few paragraphs in history.

I began to expand my personal search for explanations, reading books and accounts arising from the era. I slowly became aware that the cause for the search was not something outside of me; I found myself on a deeply personal, introspective search for meaning, understanding, and peace. Studying the history, reviewing my personal experiences, and reading political studies of the war helped. But the major single step forward was reacquainting myself with members of the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots

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Association (VHPA). The Chicago VHPA meeting was the beginning of a series of meetings, not to reenact or relive the experiences, but to honor the memory of all who served. Affirming the experiences, successes, and hardships, as well as the memories of those lost. To us, the names on The Wall were *people*, people we had shared hard times and hard choices with. In those meetings, friendships, understanding, and appreciation were rekindled.

Not until the ceremony at Arlington in October 1990, were we able to share our grief, in the congregation of those who cared. Families and close friends were there due to love, the honor guard was there on duty, and a surprisingly contingent of active-duty personnel was there by choice. Those present included Rangers and other servicemen from noncommissioned officers to generals. Crowded into the small chapel of the Stone Garden at Arlington National Cemetery, nine of us were pilots who'd flown with the dead. At that fateful juncture, in our minds, finally, we could put them to rest in a place of honor. No longer hovering souls, unanchored spirits in our memories, where they had been for nineteen and one-half years.

While Evelyn Hatley read her poem, I regained a sense of appreciation of her sacrifice and of our national service. The honor of Americans as a people depends on those who serve at their call, aware of the demands that duty, honor, country place upon them. I then realized that history would eventually weave those losses and wounds into the psychic fabric that comprises our national spirit and social conscience. As a nation, we now stand painfully aware of the sacrifices demanded of those in national service.

I have learned over the years that it's not just the veterans who are affected by the war and losses but the wives, children, parents, sisters, brothers, and extended families of those lost as well.

The most forgotten, least appreciated victims of the

tragedy remain the families of those lost. The bureaucracy in place during and just after the war years provided minimal acknowledgment of the families' losses. Little or no help was proferred, or interest expressed after the funerals: a short ceremony, a Purple Heart, a flag, and a Gold Star pin, and that was all. They were then left on their own, to grieve and reconcile their feelings.

Every generation's leaders and politicians should know the cost of a call to arms. War is godless, and the losses transcend generations. The leaders and politicians should also know that with each new generation there are those who seek the young warrior's challenges.

It is the military that implements the national resolve, whether right or wrong. It is the soldier's duty not to question the policy, merely to implement that policy by following orders. In commemorating those lost, we are mindful of liberty's cost.

During the past few years, I've frequently heard misstatements regarding the numbers of Americans who served and the number of casualties taken. *Achilles in Vietnam* was written by Dr. Jonathan Shay, a psychologist with the Veteran's Administration in New York State. Dr. Shay summarized the population and numbers of those served, wounded, and killed in the actions in Vietnam. I have taken the numbers provided by Dr. Shay and extended those for combatants and for the Warrant Officer Rotary Wing Aviator Classes 70-3/70-5. I have also included statistics for the infantry as found in *A Life in a Year*, by James R. Ebert. The results are as follows:

TABLE TK

It is no small measure of tribute to the courage of those who served in the army aircrews during the Vietnam war. The casualty rates were known to be high but did not equal the level of Special Forces units. Compared to all combatants, when casualties happened in a helicopter, there was a much higher fatality rate among helicopter pilots and crewmen than found in ground action. This was evidenced by the 41 percent of all combatants who were wounded in action, with only 7 percent killed in action.

In my army aviator class, roughly 30 percent were killed in action. The two rotary wing aviator classes were representative of the broader experience during the later course of the war. Piloting a helicopter had four times the average combatant mortality rate.

It was in the reality of war's experiences, both those lost and the veterans who returned, were consecrated as warriors and patriots.

The families should know . . . we lost them. . . . too.

We do have Prayers . . . you know . . .

Prayers . . . for forgiveness . . .

And the prayers trail after . . . trying to heal the wounds.

—Phoenix, the Charioteer,
tutor and comrade to Achilles
in Homer, *The Iliad,* Book IX,
c. 800 B.C., tr. by Fragles

Italics or different type style.

Appendix

Spanky's Gang Photograph

The Flight School photograph was taken in June 1969, at Fort Wolters, Texas. We referred to our Flight as Spanky's Gang, after the real Spanky: our respected tactical officer, CW2 Frank Gilbert. We thought he was the best of the tac officers assigned to harass and eliminate candidates.

Candidate Jimmy Thornburgh spent five and one-half years in Special Forces in Vietnam. When forced to leave, he became a warrant officer candidate, returning as a Cobra pilot, among the first to assault Tchepone, Laos, his dream come true.

Candidate Bruce Horton had served as a crew chief on a Huey in Vietnam. He died in an accident in North Carolina, several months after graduation. The author roomed with Horton and Thornburgh. Mr. Gilbert deposited Candidate Marshall upon them, obviously to keep them busy teaching proper military bearing, courtesies, shoe polishing, and display maintenance. Thornburgh and Horton were unrestrained hell raisers.

Stan Struble wanted to serve his time and return home to become a ski bum in Colorado. He was killed by enemy fire in late November 1970, flying near An Khe.

Bruce Baer was badly injured in combat and returned to the States before his twelve month tour of duty ended. He died afterwards.

Doug Womack earned his place in history, a living

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example of determination and skill at Landing Zone Lolo in Laos, March 1971. With the lead aircraft shot up badly, then watching the second aircraft shot down in the landing zone, he continued the assault. His aircraft was also shot up beyond use. He barely made it back to Khe Sanh. His young copilot was in such a state of shock he was replaced. Then Womack returned to Laos for more sorties in support of the South Vietnamese.

William Fitzgerald had one of the best views of the Ripcord evacuation in July 1970. Flying near the end of the green line of Huey helicopters, the Black Widows, he was among the last to extract troops under rocket, artillery, and small-arms fire.

Rick Lukens went on to Aviation Maintenance Officers Course, and became the maintenance officer for the Redskins, Cobra gunships at Camp Evans.

Ralph Moulton flew OH-6A loaches for the combat engineers at Camp Eagle.

Richard Smith died in a helicopter accident after completing his tour.

Herb Nagel Flew Cobra Gunships with the 1st Air Cavalry Division

Joseph Aiello Flew with the 101st Airborne at Phu Bai.

Pete D'Agostino Flew Huey's with the Lancers at Camp Evans.

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