

FSB Lolo 3 Mar 1971

Planning prior to the 3 Mar combat assault indicated that 40 UH-1H's were required for the initial combat assault on Fire Support Base (FSB) Lolo. The name "Lolo" was derived from the name of Italian movie actress, Gina Lollobrigida. It was on somewhat flat terrain, 42 KM west of Khe Sahn on the escarpment in Laos overlooking the Xe Pon river at approximately XD 422375, elevation 723 meters. The South Vietnamese strategic plan was to secure mutually supporting fire support bases (FSB) along the escarpment that was the east-west high ground overlooking Highway 9 and the Xe Pon river. This plan spearheaded by President Thieu was to establish a string of FSB's to the abandoned town of Tchepone, show a presence in the North Vietnamese Base Areas and then withdraw. Lolo was part of the chain of FSB's moving to the west to Tchepone.

At Khe Sahn, the premission briefing, conducted by the 101st Abn Div, the Rattlers from the 71st AHC, 14th CAB, 23d Inf Div (Americal) were designated the lead assault helicopter company (AHC). One has to question the logic of that decision, in retrospect, today. First of all, the 71st was short pilots, and sometimes used pilots from HHC 14th CAB to fill the seats. Secondly, they were from Chu Lai, temporarily posted to the airfield at Quang Tri, and by March 3d had not done a lot of flying in Laos. Why wasn't one of the 101st companies designated as the lead element, since this was the precise AO that the 101st had done numerous Combat Control North (CCN) missions for MACV's Studies and Observation Group (SOG)? The answer probably lies in the belief by the mission planners and intelligence analysts that Lolo was uninhabited and the combat assault would be a "piece of cake."

The aircraft were directed to fly into the LZ at a 30 second separation. Air Mission Commander (AMC) was LTC Kicklighter, Cdr 223d CAB, call sign Red Dragon 20, assisted by his S-3, Maj John A. G. Klose, call sign Red Dragon 09. Aircraft loads (ACL) were designated to be ten South Vietnamese (ARVN). The lead flight of the 71st AHC. Second flight of 10 aircraft was A Company 101st Aviation Battalion (Comancheros), 101st Airborne Division, Camp Eagle, followed by a flight of five aircraft from B/158, the Lancers. Following the Lancers was a flight of ten, and a flight of five, unit designation unknown, so far. Bill Early from the 174th, believes one flight of ten might have been the 173d AHC, Robin Hoods, LS 719 call sign Spasm(?).

Early said the 174th AHC was briefed that the escort gunship support for LOLO was AH-1G's due to the distance to the LZ and their on-board fire power. However, some of the participants recall at least one UH-1C was shot down, vicinity LOLO. On March 3d two Sharks, UH-1C's from the 174th were lost, 66-15094 and 66-15169, in Laos. One of the Shark gunner's, Bob Jansen, was shot in the back, but continued to put down heavy suppressive fire until the Charlie model crash landed. Jansen, at that time a SP4 was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his efforts that day. The award dated March 19, 1971 states the action took place in the vicinity of Landing Zone Lolo. Discussions about the picture led to the thought that the set of ashes on the east end of the southern LZ could have been a burned up gunship. The picture is not clear, and does not show whether or not a gunship was shot down first. However Clewell and Womack both stated, on separate occasions that the larger parts of the debris were pulled away and the ashes that have no aircraft parts around it, is the location of the

downed Charlie model gun.

The first aircraft to fly into the cauldron of fire at Lolo was Rattler 26, CPT Danny Grigsby. His call sign in the 71st AHC, during LAM SOM 719, was Benign Fires 26. His aircraft was UH-1H, 68-16426. Approximate time was 1000 hrs, and the weather was clear and hot. The pick up zone was in Laos, and the initial lifts out of the PZ were uneventful. The LZ had been prepped, previously, but as Doug Womack remembers there were no gunships present during the initial assault. The murderous ground fire seemed like the LZ had never been prepped or the prep had been ineffectual.

Grigsby took heavy automatic weapons fire from hundreds of AK-47's in the vicinity of LOLO on his approach, and radioed to LTC Kirklighter, Cdr 223d AVN BN, call sign Red Dragon 20, that the flights should be aborted into LOLO. Due to the confusion and heavy radio traffic, the reply was not heard by the following aircraft, and the call caused added command and control disorder. At this point, it is unclear whether or not there was gunship escort support for this insertion. Womack says there was none; Butler, who was flying escort in an AH-1G in the area is unsure because the guns were engaged at the PZ also.

Regardless, Grigsby's pax were combat ineffective on Lolo. All the ARVN's on his ship were either hit going in, or hit in the LZ. Grigsby, an experienced second tour veteran, was furious that his recommendation was not heeded, and that he heard from a Red Dragon C+C aircraft for the crews to "keep putting them in!" Grigsby took off to the West, then made a 180 back to the East towards the PZ. Enroute he recognized that the cyclic was binding and would not go aft. He knew he would have to make a running landing at Khe Sahn. Grigsby declared an emergency on one mile straight in final to Khe Sahn. The tower replied, "Roger 26, you'll be emergency number three following the aircraft burning on short final." When he got to a quarter mile, another aircraft declared a frantic emergency. Grigsby continued his approach and landed safely. As did the other Rattlers, he left his shot up aircraft, took a spare and continued to fly, logging nine hours that day.

The second aircraft (Chalk 2) to try to land was WO1 Gary Arne, Rattler 25. As Grigsby was leaving the LZ, Arne's aircraft, UH-1H, 67-17269 was hit by a heavy volume of automatic weapons fire (AK-47). Arne recalls that at a 100 feet, when the windshield exploded, he took three rounds in the chicken plate, and three rounds in the sliding armored plate on the seat. The rounds walked down the left side of the aircraft, hitting the crew chief Johnny Blackburn below the knee, and taking out the tail rotor. Arne decided to streamline the aircraft and head for Khe Sahn. At that point, the hydraulics failed. His co-pilot, a CPT Jones (?) had 10 months in country and a lot of experience. Jones was on the controls with Arne, trying to get the aircraft stable, when the transmission seized and they fell a short distance to the ground with sufficient force to flatten the skids.. 2 or 3 ARVN's were thrown from the aircraft during the spin. Some were saved by the crew using the intercom cables as straps. Aircraft 269 is the first aircraft to crash of those visible in the picture. It is the single UH-1H, sitting on its belly in the center of Lolo, away from the other four UH-1H's and facing east. The crew egressed from the aircraft, and took up defensive positions. There were no US fatalities in the first aircraft to crash on Lolo. Later, Arne and his crew were able to

make up the hill to the LZ. Their movement was hampered by the serious wounds to the legs of the crewchief. Around 4:00 PM the crew was rescued by a medevac UH-1H. Duke Varner, 174 AHC, vividly remembers seeing Arne's Huey, skewered on a tree stump, during the 1300 hrs insertion.

The third aircraft in was flown by WO1 Doug Womack, Rattler 28. Command and control confusion was still prevalent. Doug watched Arne auger in, heard Grigsby say insertion into Lolo should be aborted, and made a 360 while waiting for a response from the C+C ship. Hearing no further instruction, and tired of being a target, Womack flew UH-1H, 68-16383, into the LZ taking heavy fire all the way into and in the LZ. He remembers the aircraft rocking back and forth while in the LZ. Some of the NVA were believed to be on Lolo and firing into his aircraft from the right rear. (Firing from northeast to southwest.) Other's thought the fire came from high ground, east and northeast of the LZ. When Womack departed the LZ, 10 ARVN and 4 US were believed to be on the ground at Lolo.

Chalk 4 was UH-1H, 69-15358, which was shot down in the LZ; the Rattler crew chief was Will Fortenberry. This is the second aircraft to crash into Lolo, and the first one to burn. It is the third aircraft from the left. This crew was rescued immediately by another Rattler aircraft. A following aircraft, commanded LT McMahon, Rattler 16, was able to insert his troops and get out. The remaining Rattler aircraft successfully inserted their loads and safely flew out. All 71st AHC were damaged or destroyed at Lolo. Womack believes 358 was the third aircraft from the left of four aircraft close together in the southern part of Lolo and is next to the intact UH-1H.

Post flight inspection of Womack's aircraft at Khe Sahn revealed 7.62 damage to the transmission, main rotor blades, the hardpoints, skid saddlemounts, door gunners M-60 post, and shrapnel around the fuel filter. As Womack was on final, the transmission oil pressure dropped to zero. He kept the power in and landed at the recovery pad at Khe Sahn, so that the aircraft could be rigged with slings, and flown externally by CH-47 to Quang Tri. He "DX'ed" his peter pilot, got a replacement aircraft and continued flights into Laos with the Rattler 11 Ed Albrick.

The first Comanchero aircraft into LOLO was flown by CPT Peter Federovich with the Company Commander, MAJ Clewell, the crew chief, SSG Miguel, door gunner, SP4 Glenn Nichol. LS 719 call sign for A/101, on this day was Boss. Clewell (Boss 20) related that the change in call signs, definitely caused command and control difficulties, due to the time the crews had to sort out who was calling and how fast he would have to respond. Clewell remembers Federovich spotting the LZ, and wondering if the Rattlers were having difficulty locating it.

Possibly the third aircraft to crash into LOLO, was a Comanchero. The aircraft was chalk 18, and the eighth Comanchero in the LZ. By then over possibly 70 ARVN were on LOLO; less than one infantry company. The aircraft commander was CW2 John Gale, co-pilot was CPT Gerald Crews, crew chief was SP4 Boop, and SP4 Johnson was the gunner. Their aircraft took heavy fire going in, especially from the right, and caught fire. The flight crew egressed the aircraft immediately upon landing, except Gale, who recalls doing a normal shut down of turning off the fuel, and turning off the battery. He left the aircraft while the blades were turning. Aircraft 720 was consumed by fire and is the most southern set of ashes.

Gale graduated from flight school in WORWAC class 70-7, arrived in country

in June 1970, and was in his eighth month in country. He was not having a good week. 2 days before, while flying aircraft 264, his aircraft was heavily hit during a resupply mission to a unit southwest of FB 31. He landed at Aloui and was recovered.

Back at Lolo, SP4 Boop, Gale's crewchief had a "Kodak" moment. He took three Instamatic 126 pictures of aircraft 720 in different stages of burning. Pictures have been provided to VHPA. Additionally, Boop was calm enough in this hot LZ, to get someone to take a picture of him smiling at the camera. What was referred to then as "profiling." He also took a picture of another Comanchero pilot, Robert E. Morris talking on a radio.

Morris' aircraft is the intact UH-1H With Crews and Gale on 720, Morris' picture suggested a second Comanchero aircraft down in the LZ.

Bob Clewell was able to learn that Morris's aircraft is the intact UH-1H, so the two southern aircraft are from A/101 AHB.

Jerry Crews was on his second tour, the first, 1967-68, being with a Special Forces "A" team at the town of Lang Vei, which is on the South Vietnam/Laotian border. He was in the vicinity of Lang Vei, when it was overrun by PT-76 tanks in Feb 1968, at the beginning of the TET offensive. Now, in the third week of his second tour, he was going to have to put all his infantry ground combat experience to work, because the aviation flight crews were fish out of water on the LZ. On 14 March 1971, he would be awarded the Silver Star for his initiative and actions under fire.

Crews realized the defensive positions taken by the ARVN were not making the best use of the terrain and fields of fire. He immediately began arranging the defenses by positioning the ARVN into the empty NVA bunkers and trenches on Lolo. The NVA not only were firing on the approaching aircraft, but also were in position to put low grazing fire into the vicinity of the aircraft crews. Time was approximately 1030 hours, temperature on the LZ was hot and stifling. The deafening roar of weapons firing was unbelievable. It was mostly AK-47 fire, and with the approaching aircraft, Crews thought he heard .51's. He definitely took cover because of 82mm mortar fire. There seemed to be no concern by the NVA of having enough ammunition.

Gale got out of the aircraft with his survival gear, and 38 cal pistol. Realizing he would want more fire power, he took an M-16, with one magazine from a severely wounded ARVN. While in a defensive position, Gale observed another aircraft landing on Lolo on fire. The aircraft commander was WO1 Manuel Catzoela, from B/158th, and a WORWAC 70-7 classmate of Gale's. Gale remembers the impromptu class reunion in the trench in front of the burning aircraft. The co-pilot was a big lieutenant named Charles Richard Anderson. The crew chief was a tall good looking young man, Gale recalls, who was hit in the back of the head by an AK round. He could possibly had been SP4 Paul Anthony Sgambati, who was died on March 3d. Although mortally wounded, the CE did not die on Lolo, but at the Evac hospital in Quang Tri. Anderson's last moments were running from the aircraft. He was hit in the head by the main rotor, during egress, and died on the spot. The ARVN covered the body with ponchos and had great difficulty moving his body, because of his size. The body was recovered by CW2 Michael Victory and MAJ Clewell about 1530 and taken to the Khe Sahn surgical unit (forward).

Crews and Gale recall that this aircraft might have also been hit by a mortar round, because of the destruction of the aircraft by fire was quicker. Combat assaults

into LOLO were then stopped for the time being, while USAF airstrikes and helicopter gunships were brought in. Jerry Crews controlled the airstrikes on the ground, by talking to the FAC using an ARVN PC-25 radio. All airstrikes into Lolo were F-4's with bomb loads being a mix of cluster bombs, and napalm, which are anti-personnel bomb loads. The Phantoms came in low and close to Lolo, and delivered ordnance 100-200 meters from friendlies. Gale remembers looking up to see fins deployed from the bombs and how close they were. Butler recalls the Aerial Rocket Artillery Cobras from the 4/77th being kept over Lolo for suppression. The escort Cobras were used to cover the UH-1H's in the PZ and LZ. There was a shortage of gun cover over Lolo because the PZ would get hot (come under fire).

When the Phantoms made their attack, the NVA did not fire. As the F-4's climbed out in full afterburner, all available NVA AK-47 fire was poured into the sky. Gale recalls the noise to be deafening, and to him, the equivalent of all the rifle ranges at Ft Polk, firing at once. Enemy forces in the vicinity of Lolo were estimated by the flight crews to be no less than battalion (400 soldiers) strength. Continuously, throughout the day, the AH-1G's continued to fire up the NVA, but due to the high volume of fire, were firing rockets no lower than 1500 feet. Heavy enemy fire stopped for a long time after the F-4's delivered the napalm. In fact, Gale recalls, it was the first time he could stand up on Lolo. Lolo had another chilling effect on Gale. The NVA did not use their usual tactics of firing and hiding, but were staying put and fighting with great confidence. It was NOT business as usual.

During the lull, there were frantic planning efforts to evacuate the US troops at Lolo. Knowing this was being done, Gale recalls working with an ARVN major to clear another LZ on the Northern tip of Lolo, with claymores that were knocking down the trees. Getting extremely thirsty, Gale, who had no water, got two capfuls from an ARVN. He believes this water to be the cause of his two week bout with dysentery upon return to Camp Eagle that day.

Bill Early, 174 AHC, recalls during the initial insertion into Lolo, the 174th was flying resupply missions to more eastern ARVN firebases in Laos. He remembers hearing a "general recall, " where the 174th was reassembled into a flight of ten for a combat assault into LOLO at 1300. At the recall, they were informed of the heavy s AHC losses. Early believes some of the other 174th aircraft commanders at Lolo were, CPT Bishop, LT Wayne Mullally, LT Miller, CPT Charles Johnson, WO1 Guy "Cowboy" Martin, and WO1 Neal "Duke" Varner. When they picked up the ARVN's, he recalled the PZ being cold. From the PZ to LOLO it was utter chaos. Early, chalk 8 in a flight of 10 believes he was the first 174th aircraft to land into LOLO. Chalk's 4 and 5 were not in the formation. Chalk 4's aircraft commander CPT Bishop was heard asking for a smoke in the LZ. He was next heard saying, "I got Mellow Yellow", then his aircraft 68-15639, was shot down. They were landing to a smoke in an LZ, between Delta and LOLO, that was thrown by the NVA, who were obviously monitoring the radio. The gunner, Gary Padilla was killed on his gun. The crew chief Rhodes survived the landing of the burning aircraft into the LZ, and stayed with Bishop. The co-pilot, Lt Carl Flemer, got out of the aircraft and escaped and evaded (E&E'd) all the way back to an ARVN artillery base on the Laotian/Vietnamese border. LT Mullally was the AC behind Bishop; it is not known if he got into the LZ at Lolo. Duke Varner's recollection center on the UH-1H that impaled itself on the stumps (which was WO1

Arne's aircraft from the s AHC.

The action at 1300 was the only time Early remembers the 174th going into LOLO and recalls his aircraft taking heavy fire from the right rear and the left. Varner recalls heading for the boulders that are in the center of the LZ, and taking heavy fire all the way in. Early remembers a .51 cal machine gun on the LZ and the words from Red Dragon 09, "land to the burning aircraft."

Chalk 9, flown by LT Miller, 174 AHC, took severe fire on the approach, and was able to get the ARVN in the LZ. The crew chief, SP4 Danny Davison, was firing into the LZ, and assisting the aircraft commander with critical information when he was shot in the head, according to the write up in his Distinguished Flying Cross, awarded March 19, 1971. (Davison would be medically retired with full disability. Davison attended the 174th mini-reunion at Scottsdale in Jul 1993). The gunner was awarded the Silver Star for exposing himself to fire in his efforts to save Davison. His name is currently unknown. Early and Varner recall Miller calling on the radio that he was IFR in the cockpit, because of all the blood on the inside of the windshield. He and the co-pilot could see forward by looking out the side windows.

Early recalls taking off to the right(north) and seeing a lot of UH-1H's down on the road below Lolo.

Later in the afternoon, the third and final March 3d insertion of mass aircraft was made into LOLO, with the LZ being the northern one that was blown in by the US flight crews and ARVN. The first two insertions were from east to west, making an approach from altitude. The final approach was from north to south, making maximum use of the terrain, and flying up the side of the hill to the LZ. The Americans were extracted from that point, around 1530. Gale and Crews saw a lot of American faces show up on the LZ that they had not seen all day. 20 US were extracted; two of which were mortally wounded.

Between 1630-1700, rain and thunderstorms moved throughout the firebases in Laos. The AO got dark with high winds. During the rainstorm, a tactical emergency was declared at FSB Delta 1, and the Comancheros were in the vicinity. The gunships had been released and were out of radio range. A call was made in the blind for gunship support by the Comancheros, which was responded to by a Charlie model team of gunships. believed to be the "Sidewinders".* The Charlie models flew into the high winds and dust, and had to reluctantly break off due to reduced visibility. Bob Clewell warmly remembers their effort and respects them for even trying.

The objective at FSB Delta 1 was to rescue three journalist that had been previously dropped off there. Delta 1 was taking incoming at the time. MAJ Clewell was in the flight that extracted Kevin Buckley, the Saigon bureau chief for NEWSWEEK, Rod Ridenhour, a freelance journalist, and Mark Frankland, a Brit with the London Observer. Clewell was highly disturbed that he and his crews had to be needlessly exposed to enemy fire for this unnecessary flight. Flight crews had been directed to not take the media into Laos. Buckley remembered Clewell's parting words, which were, "just say it was the Comancheros," which appeared in the March 15, 1971 issue of NEWSWEEK, whose cover page was, "The Helicopter War."

* *Sidewinders was the call sign of the 117 AHC gunships. The unit had a big "X" on the tailboom by the sync elevator, which can be seen in a 48th AHC videotape when they were on KILO. This could have been the unit that tried to fly escort in the bad weather to Delta 1*

I learned from putting this brief moment on paper, that when the commander participated in the flights, shared the chaos, excitement, and horror, and was confident in himself, his very deserving subordinates were recognized for their efforts. I base this on discussions with Bob Bunting, Cdr 48th AHC, Dale Spratt, Cdr 174th AHC, and Bob Clewell Cdr, A/101 AHB, and reading copies of Silver Stars and Distinguished Flying Crosses for aircraft commanders to gunners that these commanders directed be written. I also attributed this to those that I have not or cannot talk to, for example Jim Lloyd, Cdr, C/158AHB, and Jack Barker, Cdr, B/101 AHB(KIA Mar 20, 1971), who also insured their subordinates were recognized for their valor. I am sure there are those who would take exception to my observation, and there are many details I do not know. I do know I am impressed when I read DFC citations for SP4 gunners.

I am personally impressed with the quiet courage, bravery and devotion to duty that was so matter-of-factly related to me. I will not use the overused, misused term, heroes. I prefer to consider that I was in the presence of warriors, dedicated to getting the job done, and getting out of LOLO alive.

One thing for sure; this day has been described as a very black day for Army Aviation in Aviation Digest, July 1986 and the book, Into Laos. Granted five destroyed airframes are visible on the LZ, and two Army Aviation crewmembers were killed. This day should be remembered as the day the incredible individual professionalism in the cockpits, while flying through withering fire, overcame poor planning, bad tactics, and very slow reacting battalion level leadership. In fact, Grigsby and Womack got replacement aircraft and flew the rest of the day.

*Mike Sloniker
July 1994*