

ARTICLE FROM **VIETNAM**

## Laos During LAM SON 719

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The combat assault into LZ Sophia, just south of the border between South Vietnam and Laos, was the final stepping stone toward the ultimate objective of Tchepone, Laos, a village roughly 20 miles from the border that was known to serve as a major hub for NVA supply activities on the trail. Large quantities of materiel had been stockpiled there.

Before troops were inserted at LZ Sophia, Boeing B-52 bombers had dropped bombs two to four miles north of the LZ on March 4, raising clouds of smoke and red dust. Even though visibility dropped well below the normal limits for visual aircraft operations, the air mission commander decided to proceed with the combat assault.

Gunships worked over the surrounding area as a flight of 40 Huey "Slicks" carrying South Vietnamese troops were en route to the LZ. The Slicks kept up the procession, dropping ARVN soldiers and returning to Vietnam to refuel and pick up more troops. There were constant calls of "Taking fire! Taking fire!" on the chopper radios as the mission continued. The brown hills of Laos were dotted with clouds from red smoke grenades, thrown to mark enemy AAA locations.



Heavy fire was coming at the helicopters from the roadways and the creek beds. Heavily bunkered and concealed AAA positions were everywhere. Two NVA artillery battalions with more than 200 pieces of heavy artillery had been positioned in the area since October 1970. AAA fire ranged from 12.7mm machine guns to 23mm, and some 37mm and 57mm cannons. Even the command and control (C&C) ship flying at 5,000 feet above the ground action took some flak.

The Slicks ferrying troops began taking fire four minutes (about 12 miles) away from the hot LZ--continuous AAA fire from just inside Laos. The deadly barrage continued as they neared the LZ and did not end until they re-entered South Vietnam's airspace. Several helicopters were shot down with their ARVN passengers aboard. Others stayed in the air but were badly damaged, with many of their passengers wounded or killed before they reached Sophia. Nearly all of the 40 choppers in the formation took hits.

The following day, March 5, 1971, the combat assault continued, again with B-52s providing close air support, which again reduced visibility for the helicopter aircrews. The release point over which all of the choppers turned before making the final approach was a river bend just west of a hill occupied by an NVA battery of 23mm guns--nicknamed "golden hoses" for their golden tracers and high rate of fire. In the very low visibility caused by haze and smoke, the lead aircraft missed the spot to execute the hairpin turn before the final approach. The other Hueys followed the lead chopper westward over entrenched AAA positions, and the NVA gunners had a field day. The lead Huey, call sign "Chalk One," received no help in identifying the release point from the C&C bird above because of poor visibility and the chaos of air combat.

The 174th Aviation Company was assigned as the lead platoon in the first wave of "Phoenix" flight choppers on the second day of the operation. The approach called for a flight path from the pickup zone across LZ Alouie, Fire Support Base Lola, LZ Liz and then on to LZ Sophia. The release point for the helicopters required a turn from a north-bound heading southwestward for a two-mile final approach into Sophia. Chalk One and Chalk Three made it to the LZ despite taking fire and hits west of the release point. They had let their flight path drift too far to the west, over the AAA positions.

The pilot of Chalk Two elected to make a go-around because of hits to his tail boom and fixed tail rotor pedals (he knew the aircraft was capable of only one landing). Chalk Four and Chalk Five were shot down by 23mm fire.

A short while later, the second wave of choppers was underway to Sophia. By then the release point for the helicopters had been moved to the northeast of Sophia. In addition to the AAA threat to the west, there were also reports of enemy helicopters and fighter aircraft operating in the area. A combat air patrol of Air Force McDonnell F-4 Phantoms was flying above the operation, just in case they were needed.

Captain David Nelson--call sign "Auction Lead"--was heading up a flight of 10



Hueys from C Company, 158th Aviation Battalion, en route for Sophia with ARVN troops on board. Call sign "Dragon Lead" radioed Nelson as he headed in, saying, "Auction Lead, what's your position?" Nelson replied, "I'm about three minutes out at this time. I'm just coming down between the road and the river." Dragon Lead responded, "Keep me posted."

Within seconds, Nelson's Huey was hit by airbursts and direct hits from 23mm fire. The chopper's fuel cell was riddled, causing smoking leaks. The metal floor of the cargo bay in the Huey had erupted in shrapnel, taking a toll on the ARVN passengers, and the door gunner on the right side of the aircraft, Mike King, sustained a mortal head wound.

The Huey had been hit very hard. Fuel was being lost, and the chopper was trailing white smoke. Those aboard knew that the Huey might explode. The stability of the flight controls whereas in question, as well.

Nelson had just entered his turn to the long final approach to Sophia from the northwest. He had followed the lead aircraft, which had missed the turn, carrying the formation too far north and west. Nelson continued eastward, away from the area of greatest danger, and handed over the flight lead to Chalk Two.

By that time, chaos reigned. The original formation had dispersed in very loose trail, with all the choppers taking fire. The other Phoenix flight choppers continued the mission. Although they had not yet even reached the LZ, they were taking the most intensive fire they had encountered to date. The pilots in the second wave of choppers, aware that there was a safer flight path, adjusted their turns and spacing.

The C&C ship called out, "Auction 16, what's your status? Do you have the LZ in sight?" Captain Nelson responded, "Negative. I broke off the LZ on long final. I'm heading in back to Kilo Sierra [Khe San] 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 I've stopped losing fuel now...so I'm just heading back...to Kilo Sierra."

Chief Warrant Officer Mike Cataldo was call sign "Chalk Three." He also commenced the fishhook turn to final approach behind Chalk Two. Farther back in the formation was Warrant Officer Rick Scrugham, who was making the same turn. At that point, the communications channels were extremely busy--there were constant calls that choppers had avoided fire or had been hit, as well as reports on combat damage. As he was turning to make his final approach, Cataldo thought he saw an SA-7 surface-to-air missile hit Nelson's aircraft, causing an explosion. (It might also have been a rocket-propelled grenade, but SA-2s were definitely being fired at the jets above the choppers at this point.) As Cataldo turned, he began taking 23mm hits.

During his turn, Scrugham glimpsed a large explosion in the air. Then, distracted by AAA fire directed at his own chopper, he looked away from the explosion. When he looked back, he saw only a fireball in the sky where Nelson's aircraft



had been, which tumbled to earth as he watched. In addition to Nelson, Ralph Moreira, the co-pilot, Joel Hatley, the crew chief, and door-gunner Mike King also died in the crash.

Then the new lead aircraft, Chalk Two, took hits to the tail and fuel cell, which meant it had to go-around. Mike Cataldo, call sign Chalk Three, suddenly found he was in the lead ship--but he was unable to see the LZ, which was obscured by smoke, dust and debris. Then Cataldo saw a heavy spray of golden tracers and green 51 -cal. tracers coming right at him. He made an evasive hard turn and was lucky to find the LZ right in front of him. While he was coming in he took very heavy hits. As rounds stitched Cataldo's aircraft, he lost power and made an autorotation to the perimeter of the LZ. Then he hit a tree and crashed on the skids.

Another chopper managed to land despite taking hits. Cataldo's co-pilot and door gunner managed to get aboard that bird just as it lifted off from the LZ.

Cataldo was amazed that his Huey had stayed upright during the crash. He had not even had time to call out "Mayday." A jet had been shot up above them, and a C&C ship overhead had also been shot down. A gunship beside him had been shot down as well, and the two aircraft in front of him had been shot down or badly damaged. It took 45 minutes for Cataldo and Frenchie Vial, another crewman, to be rescued by another chopper, but it seemed like hours at the time.

Those fortunate enough to return to Khe Sanh reacted to the news of the loss of David Nelson and his crew with disbelief and shock. Nelson had been a platoon leader that men would knowingly fly into hell with, and many of the other Phoenix pilots had flown missions into North Vietnam and Laos with him. The warrant officers knew he had been a first tour warrant officer who had accepted a direct commission and trained to fly the Sikorsky CH-54 Skycrane. He was also a Huey instructor pilot. He was supposed to have been in a unit at Da Nang, flying Skyranes. But the "Green Machine" had shipped him instead to Khe Sanh. He had accepted his leadership role in the Huey company with enthusiasm and been respected by all.

In the eyes of the pilots, Nelson had been the most unlikely of the Phoenix pilots to be killed. He was too experienced, too capable, too damned good! Through his death, the surviving pilots came to understand how little lack of control each of them had over his own destiny.

By March 21, 1971, 444 helicopters of the 659 that started the operation had been shot down. Nelson and his crew were officially listed as missing in action, and continued enemy activity in the area prevented any search for the wreckage of his Huey. But witnesses to the explosion and crash of his chopper knew it would be a hopeless search.

In June 1989, a Lt. Col. Sloniker met with Colonel Joe Schlatter, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency's POW/MIA office, at the Pentagon. Sloniker learned that the DIA was still working on Vietnam-era cases, some of which were



who had just returned from a lengthy overseas trip. Schlatter told Sloniker that a Phoenix crew was going to be buried at 10 a.m. on Friday, the 5th.

Sloniker immediately called Phoenix veterans Jack Glennon in Virginia Beach and Don Davis in Chicago. At 2 p.m. on October 4, 1990, Jack Glennon called my Pensacola, Fla., office from Norfolk, Va. He asked me if I knew David Nelson and Ralph Moreira. My mind reeled back to a very hot extraction of a Special Forces team in North Vietnam. It had been my first mission as co-pilot for Nelson. Sloniker then told me about the burial ceremony scheduled for the next day at Arlington. Without a moment's hesitation, I told Glennon I would be there.

Phoenix veterans from across America began assembling to honor one of their crews. Within 48 hours of notification, Dean Grau and family arrived from Minnesota. Ken Mayberry, traveling unaccompanied and in a wheelchair, flew in from Nebraska. Bruce Updyke came from Indiana. Chuck Doty drove down from Maryland. I flew in from Florida. Rick Scrugham flew in from Tennessee (he had only heard about the service at 10 a.m. that day). Don Davis from Chicago and Jack Glennon from Virginia also arrived on the 4th.

The next morning, Tom Cullen arrived from Connecticut. Nelson had received a Silver Star shortly before his death for rescuing Cullen, who had been a badly wounded Cullen in Laos. All of us assembled at breakfast and went "in-convoy" to Arlington National Cemetery.

Posted at the entrance to a small chapel were the names of Hatley, King, Moreira and Nelson, in alphabetical order without rank. A single flag-draped coffin, holding the bone fragments of the crew, arrived on a horse-drawn caisson. A U.S. Army color guard and marching band accompanied it. Among the mourners were several generals, senior officers and numerous Special Forces and Ranger NCOs.

A chaplain opened the service with an invocation. After singing the National Hymn, Evelyn Hatley was introduced. She read a poem she had written about her son, Joel Hatley, the crew chief on Nelson's chopper.

The tone of the whole service was set by Mrs. Hatley, who paid tribute to the blessing of his short life and explained how grief had motivated her to write about him. Although her voice remained steady as she spoke, all of us in the audience were moved by her words.

After the service, the Phoenix veterans assembled behind the caisson, band, firing party and funeral detail and walked down the hill to the burial site. When the U.S. flag had been presented to the family members, Don Davis, who had rescued Dave Nelson during a mission in February 1971, placed a pair of shined-up jump boots next to the casket. They had been worn by Sloniker during his first Vietnam tour. The Phoenix vets fondly remembered Dave Nelson as the only person who could walk around Camp Evans during the monsoons and not get mud on his highly shined boots. Then, with TV cameras rolling and a large crowd looking on, the remains of Nelson, Moreira, Hatley and King were finally laid to rest in their native land.

more than 20 years old at that point. The DIA's POW/MIA office was continuing its efforts to verify identification of the remains of KIAs.

Schlatter mentioned that two Cobra pilots' remains had recently been recovered. The men had been shot down on April 5, 1972, south of Loc Ninh. The aircraft commander was Chief Warrant Officer Joe Windler, and the gunner was Captain Hank Spengler. A memorial service at Arlington was being planned for Spengler's family and friends in August 1989.

Sloniker had flown Hueys with the 1st Air Cavalry in combat. He had observed the stress endured by Huey pilots flying into An Loc. Some Army pilots, he knew, had routinely vomited near the tail boom of the chopper before they "saddled up" for each mission. Others drank themselves into oblivion night after night. Some calmly accepted the missions and quietly endured, performing admirably under the worst of conditions.

Sloniker decided to attend the funeral service at Arlington as a personal journey--a way of honoring the men who had provided his gunship cover. He knew that their skill, courage, and professionalism had helped him to survive the war. After the service, he went to the family reception. It proved to be a deeply moving experience.

Sloniker had also attended the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association convention in the Chicago Hyatt in July 1989. There, he had chanced upon a kind of mini-reunion of Phoenix pilots--30 of them. Their camaraderie had impressed him.

Sloniker returned to his job at the Pentagon, where he worked in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Special Operations Staff. He stayed in contact with Colonel Schlatter. In late 1989 the remains of a Phoenix crew lost on March 5, 1971, were returned to the United States. Then the tedious task of forensic identification began. It was definitely a C Company, 158th Aviation Battalion, aircraft. The wedding band of co-pilot Warrant Officer Ralph Moreira was found, with his name engraved on it.

Pictures of the crash site showed how carefully the investigators had excavated the area. The area was cleared of brush, the dirt was sifted, and bone fragments and teeth were returned to the States. Then the remains were reviewed by numerous agencies so that multiple sources could provide their opinions. The process took a year.

Forensic investigators confirmed that the remains were those of a Phoenix flight crew, shot down in Laos east of LZ Sophia on March 5, 1971. David Nelson, aircraft commander, Ralph Moreira, pilot, Specialist 4 Joel Hatley, crew chief, and Specialist 4 Mike King gunner, would finally be laid to rest after 19 years.

Colonel Sloniker retired after 23 years of active duty on October 1, 1990. He continued to work out at the Pentagon Officers Athletic Center after his retirement. On October 2, 1990, he again crossed paths with Colonel Schlatter,



At the conclusion of the ceremony, Nelson's younger sister walked over to the group of Phoenix vets and tearfully asked, "Did you guys fly with my brother?" Don Davis responded that all the men present had flown with her brother. She showed them cherished pictures of her big brother and his shiny boots. There were no dry eyes in the group.

Afterwards, we met the family members at the reception hall, where they had stayed the night before. Dave Nelson's younger sister and brother were there, and they told us that Dave's mother had kept his car parked in her garage until her death a couple of years earlier. I silently listened as Rick Scrugham explained to Karla Carter, Dave Nelson's younger sister, how he had seen Nelson's Huey explode in midair, confirming that there was no possibility of Nelson's having survived the crash. Rick had witnessed it personally from a mile away. At that point, I was finally relieved of the burden of guilt I had felt when a retired major, who had been a POW, erroneously reported Nelson had been alive and had died in 1978 in Laos. That moment was as important to me as it was to Karla Carter and her brother.

Ralph Moreira's mother, Patsy, and her husband were there as well, along with Ralph, Jr. I was so shocked at seeing Ralph, Jr., that I could not even speak to him. He was a much taller and heavier version of his dad. I did discuss my memories of Ralph with his mother. I gave her a picture I had of Ralph, taken during a deer hunt south of Khe Sanh.

The meeting with the families was heartwarming but somewhat tense. None of them knew each other. The Army had never been able to satisfy the families' questions about how and why their loved ones had died. But it seemed to me that the family members who attended the service drew great comfort from being able to talk with other people who had been there and known their relatives.

They were definitely surprised at our presence, and some of them wondered if the Department of the Army had set it up. Clearly, some of them still felt a great deal of resentment over the government's treatment of the families of MIAs.

The Department of the Army had not put any of the families in touch with each other or with the veterans who showed up at the memorial service. We were there through the efforts of the Phoenix flight crews, who had stayed in touch over the years. The Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association had made our attendance possible, not the U.S. Army.

It was just something we all needed to do.

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who had just returned from a lengthy overseas trip. Schlatter told Sloniker that a Phoenix crew was going to be buried at 10 a.m. on Friday, the 5th.

Sloniker immediately called Phoenix veterans Jack Glennon in Virginia Beach and Don Davis in Chicago. At 2 p.m. on October 4, 1990, Jack Glennon called my Pensacola, Fla., office from Norfolk, Va. He asked me if I knew David Nelson and Ralph Moreira. My mind reeled back to a very hot extraction of a Special Forces team in North Vietnam. It had been my first mission as co-pilot for Nelson. Sloniker then told me about the burial ceremony scheduled for the next day at Arlington. Without a moment's hesitation, I told Glennon I would be there.

Phoenix veterans from across America began assembling to honor one of their crews. Within 48 hours of notification, Dean Grau and family arrived from Minnesota. Ken Mayberry, traveling unaccompanied and in a wheelchair, flew in from Nebraska. Bruce Updyke came from Indiana. Chuck Doty drove down from Maryland. I flew in from Florida. Rick Scrugham flew in from Tennessee (he had only heard about the service at 10 a.m. that day). Don Davis from Chicago and Jack Glennon from Virginia also arrived on the 4th.

The next morning, Tom Cullen arrived from Connecticut. Nelson had received a Silver Star shortly before his death for rescuing Cullen, who had been a badly wounded Cullen in Laos. All of us assembled at breakfast and went "in-convoy" to Arlington National Cemetery.

Posted at the entrance to a small chapel were the names of Hatley, King, Moreira and Nelson, in alphabetical order without rank. A single flag-draped coffin, holding the bone fragments of the crew, arrived on a horse-drawn caisson. A U.S. Army color guard and marching band accompanied it. Among the mourners were several generals, senior officers and numerous Special Forces and Ranger NCOs.

A chaplain opened the service with an invocation. After singing the National Hymn, Evelyn Hatley was introduced. She read a poem she had written about her son, Joel Hatley, the crew chief on Nelson's chopper.

The tone of the whole service was set by Mrs. Hatley, who paid tribute to the blessing of his short life and explained how grief had motivated her to write about him. Although her voice remained steady as she spoke, all of us in the audience were moved by her words.

After the service, the Phoenix veterans assembled behind the caisson, band, firing party and funeral detail and walked down the hill to the burial site. When the U.S. flag had been presented to the family members, Don Davis, who had rescued Dave Nelson during a mission in February 1971, placed a pair of shined-up jump boots next to the casket. They had been worn by Sloniker during his first Vietnam tour. The Phoenix vets fondly remembered Dave Nelson as the only person who could walk around Camp Evans during the monsoons and not get mud on his highly shined boots. Then, with TV cameras rolling and a large crowd looking on, the remains of Nelson, Moreira, Hatley and King were finally laid to rest in their native land.



more than 20 years old at that point. The DIA's POW/MIA office was continuing its efforts to verify identification of the remains of KIAs.

Schlatter mentioned that two Cobra pilots' remains had recently been recovered. The men had been shot down on April 5, 1972, south of Loc Ninh. The aircraft commander was Chief Warrant Officer Joe Windler, and the gunner was Captain Hank Spengler. A memorial service at Arlington was being planned for Spengler's family and friends in August 1989.

Sloniker had flown Hueys with the 1st Air Cavalry in combat. He had observed the stress endured by Huey pilots flying into An Loc. Some Army pilots, he knew, had routinely vomited near the tail boom of the chopper before they "saddled up" for each mission. Others drank themselves into oblivion night after night. Some calmly accepted the missions and quietly endured, performing admirably under the worst of conditions.

Sloniker decided to attend the funeral service at Arlington as a personal journey--a way of honoring the men who had provided his gunship cover. He knew that their skill, courage, and professionalism had helped him to survive the war. After the service, he went to the family reception. It proved to be a deeply moving experience.

Sloniker had also attended the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association convention in the Chicago Hyatt in July 1989. There, he had chanced upon a kind of mini-reunion of Phoenix pilots--30 of them. Their camaraderie had impressed him.

Sloniker returned to his job at the Pentagon, where he worked in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Special Operations Staff. He stayed in contact with Colonel Schlatter. In late 1989 the remains of a Phoenix crew lost on March 5, 1971, were returned to the United States. Then the tedious task of forensic identification began. It was definitely a C Company, 158th Aviation Battalion, aircraft. The wedding band of co-pilot Warrant Officer Ralph Moreira was found, with his name engraved on it.

Pictures of the crash site showed how carefully the investigators had excavated the area. The area was cleared of brush, the dirt was sifted, and bone fragments and teeth were returned to the States. Then the remains were reviewed by numerous agencies so that multiple sources could provide their opinions. The process took a year.

Forensic investigators confirmed that the remains were those of a Phoenix flight crew, shot down in Laos east of LZ Sophia on March 5, 1971. David Nelson, aircraft commander, Ralph Moreira, pilot, Specialist 4 Joel Hatley, crew chief, and Specialist 4 Mike King, gunner, would finally be laid to rest after 19 years.

Colonel Sloniker retired after 23 years of active duty on October 1, 1990. He continued to work out at the Pentagon Officers Athletic Center after his retirement. On October 2, 1990, he again crossed paths with Colonel Schlatter,



At the conclusion of the ceremony, Nelson's younger sister walked over to the group of Phoenix vets and tearfully asked, "Did you guys fly with my brother?" Don Davis responded that all the men present had flown with her brother. She showed them cherished pictures of her big brother and his shiny boots. There were no dry eyes in the group.

Afterwards, we met the family members at the reception hall, where they had stayed the night before. Dave Nelson's younger sister and brother were there, and they told us that Dave's mother had kept his car parked in her garage until her death a couple of years earlier. I silently listened as Rick Scrugham explained to Karla Carter, Dave Nelson's younger sister, how he had seen Nelson's Huey explode in midair, confirming that there was no possibility of Nelson's having survived the crash. Rick had witnessed it personally from a mile away. At that point, I was finally relieved of the burden of guilt I had felt when a retired major, who had been a POW, erroneously reported Nelson had been alive and had died in 1978 in Laos. That moment was as important to me as it was to Karla Carter and her brother.

Ralph Moreira's mother, Patsy, and her husband were there as well, along with Ralph, Jr. I was so shocked at seeing Ralph, Jr., that I could not even speak to him. He was a much taller and heavier version of his dad. I did discuss my memories of Ralph with his mother. I gave her a picture I had of Ralph, taken during a deer hunt south of Khe Sanh.

The meeting with the families was heartwarming but somewhat tense. None of them knew each other. The Army had never been able to satisfy the families' questions about how and why their loved ones had died. But it seemed to me that the family members who attended the service drew great comfort from being able to talk with other people who had been there and known their relatives.

They were definitely surprised at our presence, and some of them wondered if the Department of the Army had set it up. Clearly, some of them still felt a great deal of resentment over the government's treatment of the families of MIAs.

The Department of the Army had not put any of the families in touch with each other or with the veterans who showed up at the memorial service. We were there through the efforts of the Phoenix flight crews, who had stayed in touch over the years. The Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association had made our attendance possible, not the U.S. Army.

It was just something we all needed to do.

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