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History of Aviation Collection



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Allen Cates

Dear Mr. Cates:

As always, it is a pleasure to hear from you. I am happy to have been able to find the letter you requested so quickly. For your records, the letter is housed in the CAT/Air America group, Dave Hickler Collection, Box 7, Folder 7A.

Should you need official verification of the authenticity of the photocopies, I will be happy to send you something. In the meantime, if I can be of further assistance, please contact me or one of the other staff.

Before I close, I should point out that we now have in addition to me, another fulltime archivist that may be helping you from time to time.

Best wishes,

Paul A. Oelkrug

President - TPE

22 August 1964

GML

GML-64-065H

Personal Observation

Reference: Our XOXO Message of 18 August 1964 Regarding the Loss of H-19

You will, in due course, receive a full and official detailed report of the chain of events that took place from our staff via my office. It might be of interest for you to know of my personal and unofficial knowledge of the events that took place.

I first became aware of the "problem" at about 181400L after returning to the airfield from town. I was advised that we had "problems." H-19 was down, shot down as a result of trying to pick up a T-28 crewman who had been shot down. Caribou 392 flown by Gary Malmberg was at the scene flying cover and reporting action/location and search for signs of survivors. Malmberg had actually witnessed the approach to the pick up, the hover of H-19, and the roll as it fell off down the slope of the hill, filled with bullets and the immediate fire that engulfed and destroyed H-19. Malmberg saw one man jump free of the burning machine and he "thought" he saw one other person but he was not sure.

We were in the radio room of our Operations shack receiving reports from the scene from other planes, as well as Malmberg, that had been directed to the area by our staff.

The Air Attache was at the control point - our OD radio room - as well as other concerned individuals. Ambassador Unger soon arrived with his staff. He was first briefed by Col. Tyrrell, Air Attache, and his designated air rescue chief and coordinator. The Ambassador then came to our OD radio room for further briefings and info from our FIC and OM staff. This was done quickly and capably by our Senior Operations Manager, Larry Joseph, and our designated FIC Chief, Bill Solin.

By the time this briefing had been completed, Malmberg had returned to VTE from the scene of the crash which was definitely located about five miles from Site 95 on a heading of 020 degrees. He was brought immediately into the presence of the Ambassador who asked for full details of what had taken place. Malmberg was visibly shaken up and full of spirit. He was extremely emotionally involved and wanted to "get them" now - at all costs. He made an excellent presentation to the Ambassador by drawing diagrams of terrain, position of the H-19, where ground fire was coming from, what the problems were and his recommendations that only Napalm would do the job. Bullets and rockets alone in this heavily jungled area would not drive out the intruders who were no doubt surely at this moment creeping up on our American pilot from H-19.

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Prior to the arrival of the Ambassador, elements within our staff and others at the airport had initiated orders to line up and stand by our special pilots for T-28 duty. Word had been received prior to the Ambassador's arrival that "no friends" from across the river could be used - only Air America pilots in this case but only after his go-ahead after his first-hand appraisal of the situation after our briefing at our OD shack.

The Ambassador listened attentively to Halberg, asked the proper questions, and was the center of a quiet but earnest crowd of about ten very concerned individuals, including myself. Finally, after a quiet moment of reflection, he said, "OK, let's go." "Napalm, if it must be but no, repeat, no villages or houses are to be hit." "Jungles and troop positions, but no villages." Later the Ambassador individually briefed each pilot that "no napalm to be used on villages - troop and gun positions only." Our three special pilots were ready, eager, willing to go - they only wanted the approval to go. And go they did. Off in their T-28's they went. These were our pros, our "last resorts," our guys with skill, courage, and devotion to a cause. Laugh, if you wish, but these young men are real men and a credit to our Company and our Country. I was real proud to be a part of this fine group. Hooray! Wave the flag some more! I might also add that we had all sorts of volunteers that had to be "denied" the honor of participating in the rescue air support. In one case it was necessary for me personally to tell the Air Attache that a certain pilot was not authorized to participate due to insufficient recent training and check-out procedures. The Air Attache was in complete accord and he fully agreed with my position and authority in these matters.

The time was now about 1600L and "our" three T-28s were in the air and enroute. Flying time was about 40 minutes to Site 95 in the T-28. We could only wait.

In the meantime, we had directed another Hotel to stand by at 95 for our T-28 effort. We had sent Fred Walker off in a Caribou to fly high cover and see what he could see pending further decisions on rescue efforts. Fred was able to contact us in VIE via a relay aircraft. His observations were helpful as were others in the area.

The radio suddenly blared forth from one of the high cover aircraft, "Bandits, Bandits in the area." This was a new and sinister development. Our Tom Krohn immediately asked, "What kind are they?" "How in the sh _ _ _ would I know." "OK, have you called the cowboys." "Hell, yes, they are on the way." Everyone was stunned. People went out on the run to inform other people. It was not until four minutes later that we were advised by the same pilot that his report was in error and to cancel the alert. Needless to say, there was a noticeable collective sigh of relief from everyone. But the H-19 pilot was still down and yet to be picked up.

Tom Krohn was especially good on the radio in directing the search and controlling the aircraft in the area. Larry Joseph, our Senior OM, was a pillar of strength and wisdom with his knowledge of planes, crews, locations, sites, availability, etc. T. C. Walker, Assistant Station Manager, was continually on the scene, keeping in full contact with all parties and coordinating as

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required and as necessary. T. C.'s practical experience, as well as his flying background, made him a welcome addition to the Air America executive team in this rescue effort.

To degress and go back for a moment, for the sake of a point, consider this: Ambassador Unger listened to all the points and arguments for going full steam ahead - nothing was said in favor of caution - of holding off - of waiting for further information, of waiting for words of guidance from Washington. The Ambassador, after hearing all the arguments for sending out the T-28s with AAM pilots, said simply, "OK, let'em go."

Now this may sound easy, simple and logical on the basis of my report, but consider his problem. He had specific orders not to send out these AAM pilots! He was instructed to secure Washington approval prior to authorizing this sort of military. Yet, on the basis of the reports of our pilots, our people, our recommendations, he said, "OK, let'em go." I found out the following day that he had been severely criticized by his bosses in Washington over his arbitrary assumption of unauthorized authority. Frankly, I have now found admiration for this man who has one hell of a difficult job with little thanks from anyone. I assure you that he will have my unqualified 100 per cent support.

I speak of the above as a result of a private personal conversation right after he had given the go-ahead. He told me of his problems and of how he was out on the limb and without proper authorization for his actions. He was well aware of our pilots' concern for a fellow pilot and the natural human desire to save a buddy. But he also expounded on his duties and obligations to his bosses, the USA agreement to abide by the Geneva accord, and his responsibility to the entire American people. His words would have been worthy of quoting in a future history book of the war in Southeast Asia. Of course, the crew of the lost T-28 was of great concern.

We had coffee and waited for the action. It came. Our T-28 pilots did their job, our Helo moved in and picked up our Helo 19 pilot and took him to alternate where he was picked up by a Helo and taken to T08 and to where we dispatched a Ten-Two to take him to Korat. Our information at this writing is that he has a bullet hole through his foot or ankle and has burns covering 25 per cent of his body and that he is suffering from shock.

From about 1300L onward there had been assisting friendly aircraft on the scene. They had worked well and honestly in trying to aid our cause. Their help is appreciated and I wish that you, through one means or another, would convey our most sincere thanks and appreciation for a job well done. Goodness only knows how many people were involved, but they were loyal and sincere.

We learned of a late, last, strike that was to come off at the site at about 1820L. I was in the OD shack (and shack it is!) following the complete operations over the HF set installed in our office. (Incidentally - a number of our aircraft operating in this area MUST, repeat, MUST, be equipped with HF sets. This is absolutely necessary for us to keep in contact with our

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friendly friends from over the sea and from over the land. Our present communications capability is severely limited and dangerous. This problem is easily solved by an expenditure of money - the cheapest thing we have these days!) It was fast getting dark and we could easily hear those pilots talking from plane to plane of the four plane strike element. They had small difficulty in locating the target area and they kept talking of this "ridge" or "this valley" or just "ahead on the ridge line." "OK, I got it." "I'm on the run." "Follow me, I'll get this side - you see?" All in short, clipped sentences, unemotional voices doing a professional job on a business-like basis. There was no hysteria - just a businesslike, airplane-like talk between a group of dedicated pros. We could hear them clearly as they went about their business of shooting shot and shell into enemy positions and as it businesslike started, it businesslike finished. We knew it was finished by the pilots' "let's go home" chatter to each other. "OK, I'm out of ammo." "I'm getting low on fuel." "We got all the areas blasted." Etc., Etc. My quotes may not be exact but they will suffice to convey the meaning. Everyone by the radio is glad that the mission is over and no one hurt. Planes are now enroute home and relay plane and tanker are on the air relaying messages and tanker giving headings for a hook-up. Everything for about five minutes seems fine - OK, but then we hear of one pilot saying that "I only have 1200 pounds of fuel remaining - I am losing fuel - this could be serious!" Oh boy, that is an understatement. He has been hit, he has holes, he is in danger. The pilot asks for a wing man to take a close look to see if he can see anything. The wing man reports visual loss of fuel and one rocket that is hung up. It is now definite and positive - trouble on the wing. We know that now we have problems of the very nature we fear - the Ambassador fears - everyone fears and the 100 pilot who no doubt fear the most. Action is immediate in our shack. People rush to call the Ambassador and others to inform others of this latest development which could be a real gummy, sticky ball of goo. Udon is alerted to prepare for rescue by our people. The air waves are now full of rescue information to sweet "Candy," the tanker plane keeps giving headings, distances. The pilot of 32 is calm sounding. He has prepared and trained for this moment many times in the past. Others likewise are using their skill acquired in countless hours of training and dry run practice. It all pays off now, all so obviously by the unseen voices on the radio who are saying, "Steer 220, now 210 is the heading," "you are 40 nautical miles out (from the tanker)," "30 miles - steer 200 degrees," "you are on the 020 radial." The responses are, "am at one one angles (11,000 feet)," "now descending," "now 600 pounds fuel remaining," "now 200 pounds and at 2500 feet." This is a real drama unfolding in real live life. I have listened to countless radio mystery and suspense programs in the past but nothing can compare to this piece of action. Everyone is now silent in the radio room, everyone leans forward to try to catch every word and static crackle of the UHF speaker hanging so innocently on the wall. The faces of the men are tense - most of them are pilots who can feel and understand every voice inflection and word spoken at this now life and death moment.

"Can't make Udon." "Now 2500 and am getting out." There is silence for a moment and then another plane calls 32 several times. There is no reply. He relays this information to Candy. Suddenly, "I just saw the explosion where

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the plane hit." "No, I cannot see if he got out." Instructions are immediate, "Planes - orbit the site, Plane - tie up for fuel - we don't want to lose someone for lack of fuel." Precise location of crash has been determined and it is relayed as "020 radial from Udon and 20 miles out." Oh, they have him located all right - no questions and the big relief from so many, many people is that he is across the river! He no longer "was" in Laos, he "was on a night training flight when he experienced engine trouble, etc. etc." The worry now is for rescue. Udon has not been sleeping. They have CIC copter out, running, and into the dark night in record time. CIC copter is used as that is the only ready available machine. The radio now blares out new positions, voices, instructions. Soon there are reports of seeing lights, hearing radio bearing signals, and quickly the copter is overhead and the fallen angel has been picked up and is enroute to Udon - apparently in good, uninjured condition. There is much shouting, joking, and pounding of backs in the radio room. People are happy. It's been a long, long afternoon. People now head for the Comary restaurant for coffee and not a few now release the pressures and tensions by partaking of the good gin and whiskey. It is the happy ending to what could have been a mess, a mess, a mess, a mess.

The day's drama is over for us at VTE and this singular incident is one that is no greater or lesser than those of the past. We have "won" again. "Lucked out again" is another well used term by many. But everyone knows that it will come again and that it may be me the next time.

D. H. Hicklar