

HISTORICAL OCCURRENCES

COBRA DOWN

From Charlie Beasley

I want to begin by thanking Gregg Jorgenson for a great job on his book LRRPS in Cambodia, MIA Rescue, telling the story where we lost both Cochrane and Laker.

About a month later, team 52 was put back together and I was advised that I would be the new team leader. Following is a story about an unforgettable mission that the team experienced in the fall of 1970.

Our team left a firebase to be inserted on a mission, and we had been airborne a short time when a door gunner passed his headset to me so that I could talk to the pilot of the Huey that was carrying our team. The pilot advised me that our gunship had gone down in a small clear area and that he had lost contact with the gunship pilots. He said, "I'm putting your team in immediately to secure the gunship and pilots."

Once on the ground we quickly reached the Cobra only to find that both pilots had been killed on impact and that a small fire was burning on the right front of the chopper. I radioed the bad news to the lift ship pilot. Our team was trying to get the Cobra cockpit open when the little bird landed and those pilots quickly assisted our team in removing the bodies from the burning gunship.

Once the little bird was airborne, we started carrying the bodies away from the gunship as quickly as possible. We were located on the right side of the chopper. We were about thirty yards away when the small miniguns' munitions started cooking off. We took cover behind a huge fallen tree, and over the next few minutes, the fire got bigger and rockets started firing. I remember that when the fire set off a rocket there was a loud whistle followed by a boom in the distance as the rocket landed.

You might be able to guess what happened within a few minutes. When the fire reached the full load of fuel, the explosion was so powerful it is hard to describe. Small pieces of red hot metal was raining on us behind the huge log. I remember calling the lift ship pilot to ask in the gunship was carrying Willie Peter. When the debris stopped falling we got up and found that the fully intact chopper was gone as only tiny pieces of metal remained.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to all the chopper pilots and crews for the courage they showed while working with our teams. Think about the courage it takes for the little bird pilots to get right down on the tree tops to check out an LZ that a Ranger team is about to go in. I sometimes wonder about the identity of the pilots and crews from the three choppers on this mission.