

MAYDAY! MAYDAY! MAYDAY!



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**A true story in the setting of South Vietnam and Laos in 1971 and
written by a U.S. Army Helicopter Pilot.**

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Foreword

War stories are something that Veterans of all wars have inside them. Millions of those stories are never told, but on occasion some can be pried out of a memory. Some of those stories will be distorted due to the memory of the teller and the time that lapsed before it was told.

Others are as vivid as the day they happened.

This one is most likely a little of both, but more truth than fantasy. It is told the way this Helicopter Pilot's memory best recalls it and augmented by input from some of the crew and the Army and Air Force Pilots who were on station.

There are two stories told here because as the author began to research he found some striking similarities between two instances thirty years apart. The largest Naval Air Battle and the largest Air Assault in history had pilots flying for their country with the same name; a father and son. The focus of the story from the Vietnam Conflict lasted three days and the WW II battle lasted two days. They both taught aerial tactics before going into combat. These things and many others made it necessary to bring the two stories together.

Some of the facts of the incident in Vietnam can be verified, if you care to, by obtaining documents from USAF Historical Research Library where original correspondence and documents between General Abrams, the JCS and the President are retained. The library at the United States Naval Academy has the complete record of the Battle of Leyte Gulf.

To My Family and Friends,

As you will notice, throughout this story, I had a lot of help in the form of comments from friends, family, comrades, and others.

To those of you who waiver in your good feelings toward others, please listen to my thoughts and philosophy of life.

Life is too short to continue another day without remembering the good in people and forgetting the bad. I never pass a broken down car unless someone else has already stopped to help and it doesn't matter how much of a hurry I may be in.

I always start a day with a fresh slate; no one has done anything wrong on this day so they are due a credit for just showing up.

If I know of someone about to make a mistake, I tactfully give them suggestions that will preclude or lessen the consequences.

I always remember that very few people have the benefit of life's experiences like the one you are going to read herein.

And, most of all I have to believe that help given sincerely will be rewarded some where, some how, some time. All the help I can possibly give in my life was already rewarded by the action of the men in the following pages.

Thank you all and God bless you.

VIETNAM, 1971.

The lack of popularity of the Vietnam War had mandated a program of Vietnamization which was really our attempt to turn the main role in that War over to the Government and the Army of South Vietnam. The American Military Forces in Vietnam were completely hamstrung by the politicization of the war on the home front. In fact, the Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas teaches that "the handling of the Vietnam affair was a shameful national blunder." The Army was prevented from doing what needed to be done. Political controls of various kinds had been imposed, which doomed the military to ultimate failure. As an example, new pilots were briefed when they arrived that "if fired upon, you must determine the location where the fire is coming from, if it is hostile and then you must get permission from the province chief before returning fire."

The War had become so unpopular at home that some men and women stayed in Vietnam two and three tours of duty rather than go "HOME" to the bitterness and anger of those who really knew nothing of what it was like to be called to the service of their country and then be so unthanked for their efforts.

A year earlier, 1970, the U.S. Forces launched an attack on key supply storage facilities in Cambodia and, at home, riots broke out in protest. Anti-War factions in the United States used this opportunity to enrage Americans by claiming the Military and the President were now escalating the Vietnam Conflict to include invasions of other Southeast Asian Countries. The riots became almost uncontrollable and the attacks were halted before they had any effect on the resupply of the North Vietnamese Armys in South Vietnam.

The effort to Vietnamize the war was difficult. The class system in place for thousands of years dictated that the high ranking officer positions in the Vietnamese military were filled by upper class members who sometimes had neither aspirations nor aptitude in military tactics or affairs. The soldiers could be trained to be some of the very best but without leadership they could not function.

The civilian government suffered much the same problems and both were traditionally corrupt. It was a way of life. Their way of life and the Vietnamization Program was doomed because of it.

The Americans were committed to place the burden and responsibility on the people of South Vietnam and their efforts were herculean but the results were slow, minimal and at times non-existent.

Lam San 719 was masterminded by General Creighton Abrams who was the Commander of all the United States Forces in Vietnam and a famous World War II tank commander. In WW II he had braved his own artillery shells to break the siege of Bastogne and ultimately allowed the allies to win the Battle of the Bulge.

His aim in Lam San 719 was to cut the enemy's supply routes between North and South Vietnam. The attack was to proceed along an East-West Highway named Route #9. The "highway" was nothing more than a dirt road that followed the southern edge of the De-Militarized Zone (DMZ) from Quang Tri to a place called Khe Sanh where the U.S. Marines had been held under siege during the Tet Offensive of 1968. From there Route #9 continued west to the small border hamlet of Tchepone in Laos. Tchepone was the crossroads of that trail and the North-South trail called Route #1. Many USAF pilots who braved its deadly anti-aircraft flack daily called the intersection "Bloody Tchepone."

General Abrams laid out his plan for the politicians nearly six months before the operation actually began and argued with Washington that a decisive move was needed to forestall a potential invasion from the North. It should have also given the "Vietnamization" program some breathing space and allow the newly trained Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) to prove their "Mettle".

As was the norm, several political constraints were placed on General Abrams. The first and most restrictive provision was that no U.S. Ground Forces would be allowed to cross the boarder into Laos. The U.S. Aviation assets could be used in support of the South Vietnamese Army but they were the only U.S. Forces allowed in Laos. This restriction was placed on the operation to preclude a repeat of the demonstration

"backlash" that broke out after the Cambodian incursion of 1970. The President planned to confirm that U.S. ground forces were not involved on television on the day of the invasion. This ban extended to any advisors and special operations forces, as well as to American Divisional forces that could and would be used within South Vietnam. Even the Special Forces units that always operated across borders would be required to withdraw from that area until after the end of the operation.

The restriction meant that if General Abrams led the operation with an American Division, the South Vietnamese Divisions would have to pass through or "leap frog" the American lines at the border while, at the same time, shedding their American Advisors. If he led with a Vietnamese Division he felt the operation would be compromised and might have several false starts which could lead to disaster.

Passing one Army Division through the lines of another entire Division, is not an easy maneuver even with highly skilled troops speaking the same language. This was the Achilles heel of Lam San 719, but to General Abrams, it was worth the gamble. His decision was to lead with an American Division. He reasoned that he could air lift one division ahead while the tanks of another moved through strong American defenses.

During the last weeks of February 1971, Americans of the 5th Mechanized Infantry Division, reinforced by the 101st Airborne Division smashed North Vietnamese forces from Quang Tri to Khe San.

A total rout was in progress. Lam San 719 was going even better than hoped or expected. The enemy was pulling back in broad daylight dragging heavy artillery and trucks into the open making them easy pickings for American air attacks.

Then it was time for the passing maneuver by the ARVN forces. As their American advisors left their units, the confidence of the ARVN units left also. The advance slowed almost to a stop and what was once a rout became a determined North Vietnamese Army defense and counter attack.

Time and politics robbed General Abrams, and all those who participated in the operation, of any hope of victory.

This was the phase of Lam San 719 where our story focuses.

174 th Assault Helicopter Company

They were the 174th Assault Helicopter Company (AHC) stationed at Duc Pho, Vietnam. The company was comprised of a Gunship Platoon called the Sharks; a Lift or Slick Platoon, which carried supplies and / or troops, called the Dolphins; and a Maintenance Platoon called the WitchDoctors.

The company Aircraft consisted of eight (8) Huey UH-1C model Gunships marked with the "Sharks Teeth" of the Flying Tigers from the Second World War, twenty-three (23) UH1-D or UH1-H model Slicks and one UH-1H maintenance helicopter identified by its caricature of a WitchDoctor complete with a bone in his nose painted on the helicopters nose. Their Battalion Headquarters, the 14th Aviation Battalion, was about sixty miles to the North at Chu Lai and they were all part of the Americal Division.

In January 1971 the sky in northern South Vietnam was filled with U.S. Army helicopters flying north for some secret mission. It was a secret to those who were headed that way but the press had already told the rest of the world including the North Vietnamese about the mission.

No American soldier in Vietnam ever figured out which side of that War the "gentlemen" of the press were on but every soldier there knew that the press and Jane Fonda were on the same side and normally it was not their side. It is likely that as many lives were lost due to their sensationalized reporting and subversive anti-war activities as there were to the activities of the VC. The VC or Viet Cong were "Communist" guerrillas operating in South Vietnam and there were larger numbers of them the closer you got to the North.

A month earlier the newspapers had told of the plans for a massive air assault to be flown by U.S. Army Pilots inserting South Vietnamese soldiers

into key points along the North Vietnamese supply route known as the Ho Chi Mien Trail. The insertion was to be made into Laos near the De-Militarized Zone (DMZ). The mission was officially titled "LAM SAN 719." That was the normal degree of secrecy during the Vietnam War. And, it was not unusual to get a letter from home with a reference to a specific mission that was classified SECRET and the hopes from home that you were not involved.

The 174th AHC was part of that mass exodus to the north. On 29 January they left Duc Pho. The maintenance crew, in rather rough shape after a 21 st birthday celebration of their door gunner, loaded up, stopped in Chu Lai for the night and then overflew Da Nang, China Beach, the Hia Van Pass and ended their trip in Quang Tri where they set up temporary quarters for the next four months.

Quang Tri was like a magnet. It seemed to attract rocket and mortars almost every night. When one enemy mortar position was silenced another appeared magically the next night. On a night that a rocket attack was not obvious, there would normally be a Viet Cong (VC) sapper who slipped through the wire fences undetected to place a satchel charge bomb on an aircraft or on a pallet of newly delivered Carlings Black Label Beer. Carlings Black Label and Ballentine beer were sent to Vietnam in ship-loads, probably because no one back home would voluntarily drink it and besides nothing was too good for our boys overseas.

The nights were long and sleepless and the days were long and fierce with combat.

On 28 February a new Commanding Officer reported into the 174th AHC. He was a tall, lanky, infantry officer named Dale Spratt. He had been trying to find the 174th for several days as he hitched hiked by air up the coast of Vietnam. He had been assigned by the replacement battalion at Camron Bay and told to report in at Duc Pho only to find, upon his arrival, that Duc Pho was almost deserted.

The night of March 4th 1971 began an episode in the lives of seven men known as the WitchDoctor Crew that will live in their memory forever. None of the seven had any indication that the next few days were going

to be any different than had been the previous 20 or, in several cases, 300 days of their tour in Vietnam.

That night, 4 Mar 1971, the acting maintenance officer for 174 th AHC, Lt Ralph (Butch) Elliott, attended a mission briefing, as he did almost every night. The briefing included a maintenance and recovery portion in which the maintenance officer for the Task Force explained that the next day's mission included one hundred and twenty (120) lift ships (UH-1 Huey helicopters). In support of the mission were a large number of gunships and three (3) maintenance and recovery helicopters. It was to be and remains the largest Air Assault in history.

The maintenance and recovery ships would be piloted by the three maintenance officers with the most time and experience in country which meant two Captains, one from battalion headquarters and one from the 116th AHC, and one Lieutenant from the 174th AHC, Lt. Ralph E. Elliott III (Butch).

The plan was to have the maintenance aircraft depart approximately fifteen (15) minutes before the rest of the flight, from Khe Sanh located at the southwest corner of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) . They were to "ORBIT" in the vicinity of landing zone (LZ) Sophia and Tchepone across the Laotian border. Their job was to assist any aircraft that was damaged or forced to land due to maintenance problems or "HOSTILE" fire.

The term "hostile fire" was used often and always brought up the question of "what is non-hostile fire?" Pilots in an initial briefing when they first arrived in Vietnam were told they could not return fire unless they could determine that it was "Hostile"; hell the bad guys didn't have helicopters so, if someone was shooting at you in a helicopter, you could bet it was HOSTILE without much of a determination!

Their primary responsibility was to recover all downed U.S. personnel, but if possible, repair the aircraft and fly it out or rig it to be extracted. The mission statement also determined that two of the three helicopters would orbit at or above 3000 feet while the third would fly at 25 feet or less above the tree tops. Three thousand feet above the ground put you out of the range of all small arms fire and relatively safe. The only advantage

to 25 feet was by the time they saw you they didn't have enough time to aim before you were behind another tree.

In the normal pecking order of the military with two Captains and one Lieutenant, the lieutenant (WitchDoctor 05) would fly the low aircraft.

Leyte Gulf, South Pacific, October 1944.

The Battle of Leyte Gulf in the Philippines was a two day "slugfest" fought on the 24th & 25th of October 1944 and is remembered as the largest Naval Air Battle in history. Japanese Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa led the majority of the U. S. Fleet under the command of U.S. Admiral "Bull" Halsey on a wild goose chase. He suckered Halsey into thinking that the Japanese started an attack and then were running away to the north when Bull started chasing them. What Halsey didn't know was that the carriers he was chasing had virtually no aircraft on board as a result of previous battles. All remaining Japanese ships and aircraft were part of another Japanese fleet that was circling to the south as General McArthur started his famous "RETURN" to the Philippines.

The Japanese Plan

On 20 Oct, 1944 Vice Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa was to launch his Northern Force from Japan toward the U. S. Fleet of Admiral "Bull" Halsey. Ozawa's mission in this enormously complicated plan was to draw the American Fleet north to meet him as he steamed toward General McArthur's landing force at the Island of Leyte.

Admiral Ozawa's Fleet was once one of the largest and probably most powerful in the Pacific but now, in comparison, it was near anemic. His Fleet consisted of only one large carrier, the Zuikaku and three light carriers with a total of only 116 planes. That was slightly more aircraft than one of Halsey's Essex class aircraft carriers. The other ships in Ozawa's fleet were two old battleship-carriers, three light cruisers, eight destroyers, and a small supply unit.

Two days later, on 22 October, the real power of the plan would depart Brunei Bay in Borneo and set course for Leyte Gulf. This would be

Vice Admiral Takeo Kurita's Striking Force sometimes referred to as the Center Force in the Japanese plan. Kurita's Fleet consisted of the real firepower of what remained of the Combined Fleet's Mobile Forces. Present would be the monster battleships, Yamato and Musashi, along with three other battleships, ten heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, and fifteen destroyers. Kurita's mission was to penetrate the San Bernardino Strait north of Samar and attack the transports that were unloading in Leyte Gulf; effectively stopping "McArthur's Return to the Philippines".

To assist the Japanese Center Force in the destruction of the Americans, yet another force had been assembled; The Southern Force. It would be deployed in two units. The lead unit was Vice Admiral Shoji Nishimura's Force known as the Van Force which would depart from Borneo several hours after the Center Force. It was composed of two large battleships, the heavy cruiser Mogami, and four destroyers. Bringing up the rear would be Vice Admiral Kiyohide Shima's Second Striking Force (the Rear Force) with another ten ships composed of one light cruiser, two heavy cruisers, and seven destroyers.

What Happened:

Admiral Tommy Sprague's Jeep Carriers supported the landing forces of General McArthur and on 23 October, feeling that the larger part of the U.S. Fleet would deal with the Japanese, they continued their normal operations with a heightened awareness of the air and sea around them. By the end of that day the total loss of American planes to combat from the 18th through 23rd of October was eleven and they had flown 1,326 combat missions, dropped 268 tons of bombs and destroyed 145 enemy planes.

Sprague's VC squadrons were newly equipped with FM-2 fighters. The FM-1 fighter aircraft was an eastern built F4F-4, Hellcat, but the follow-on FM-2, Wildcat, fighter was "a cat of a different color". It was an experimental aircraft which began as a XF4F-8. It was faster, stronger,

and more maneuverable. Its taller vertical stabilizer and rudder made it quicker in the turns and it was lighter than its predecessor.

The "VC" squadrons were relatively small composite squadrons formed to operate from the Navy's Escort or "Jeep" Carriers with both fighters and torpedo / bomber aircraft under a single commander. By far the most successful air-to-air composite squadron was VC-27 with 12 Wildcat fighter aircraft and 9 Avenger torpedo/bombers. Between October 1944 and January 1945 the Savo Islands Wildcats of VC-27 splashed 61.5 enemy aircraft, including 17 bombers of various types and are honored as the highest scoring VC squadron of the entire war.

Lieutenant Ralph E. Elliott would be VC-27's highest scorer and in fact Elliott would ultimately be the Navy's leading Wildcat Ace in the entire War with a score of nine enemy planes shot down.

Elliott's VC-10 colleague, Joe McGraw, who had been taught tactics in flight school by Elliott, recalled him as being "a tough fighter pilot even before he got into combat".

Butch, another Ralph E. Elliott, was born after that war, 1946. He had spent all his life "in the Navy" so when his father retired in 1963 he swore Butch into the Naval Air Reserves. Butch was a junior in high school and spent one weekend each month and two weeks each summer in training for the next four years.

Butch's dad's last assignment as a Navy Captain was the Commanding Officer of the Naval Air Reserve Training Unit at the Naval Air Station Jacksonville, Florida and every person in that unit had known him. Now the "Old Man's" son was assigned to that unit. As a result, Butch, who had always been a bit rowdy, spent his two weeks of active duty in the summers cleaning the "heads" and standing guard on fire hydrants; learning discipline, humility and "building his character".

The Navy had a program called the Naval Air Cadet Training Program which enabled a person with two years of college credit to enroll and if he completed the Naval Flight Training Program he would get his wings and be commissioned as an officer in the United States Navy.

This was Butch's goal and when he finished his first two years of college he walked into the Navy Recruiters office and announced that he wished to sign up for the program.

He was promptly informed that the Program had been terminated a month prior to his announcement. Butch, not to be deterred from his goal to be an officer and fly, marched into the Army Recruiters office and asked what programs they had that would ultimately result in his commissioning and flying. The plan was laid out thus: he would get a conditional release from the Navy Reserve to join the Army and would enlist; at the end of Army Basic Training he would apply for Officer Candidate School (OCS) and upon completion he would sign up for flight school. He was tested in advance of enlisting and all was set into motion. Except, upon completion of Basic Training, the Army had changed the requirements for OCS and required a year of active duty prior to acceptance. He had been thwarted once again but he had a backup plan. He had been a school trained aircraft mechanic in his Naval Air Reserve life and had the foresight to sign up for an aviation maintenance program as a fall back.

This was 1967 so when his maintenance schools were completed his orders read "Report to Fort Lewis Washington Replacement Center on ultimate assignment to RVN"; the Republic of Vietnam.

Butch applied for OCS during that assignment in Vietnam, was selected and upon his return to America was sent to Fort Belvoir, Virginia to the Engineer Officer Candidate Regiment. He finished in February 1969 and got orders to attend an Atomic Demolitions Munitions School with a follow on assignment at the Engineer Agency of the Army Combat Developments Command at Fort Belvoir. In July he was going crazy with boredom. He was given an assignment and was given a set time frame to complete it but he always finished, checked and rechecked it in less than half the time allotted.

He was extremely bored and so after only four months in that assignment he completed his application to flight school, walked it through all of his command and then walked it through the Military Personnel Center who assigned him an August class date.

It was on to Fort Wolters, Texas and Fort Rucker, Alabama for Rotary Wing Flight Training (Helicopters). It wasn't Navy Jets but it was flying. When he graduated he taught helicopter gunship tactics for four months before he got orders that once again said "Report to Fort Lewis Washington Replacement Center on ultimate assignment to RVN"; the Republic of Vietnam.

Vietnam, 5 March 1971

The next morning WitchDoctor 05, Ralph (Butch) Elliott; his copilot, Richard Gabauer; the crew chief, Dave Smalley; the door gunner, Harold (Bud) Brasket; and the three most experienced maintenance mechanics in the company, Mike (Mac) McFadden, Jim Watkins, and Rumaldo Salinas had a full, one course meal of cold "C" ration, scrambled eggs and ham (probably the inspiration at least for the name of Dr. Suess's famous "GREEN EGGS and HAM"). Then, they loaded into the maintenance helicopter known as "The WitchDoctor" and fondly referred to as the "WitchBitch" and flew from Quang Tri to Khe Sanh. They departed Khe Sanh, after the mission was delayed several times, but still about fifteen minutes ahead of the rest of the flight.

Butch and Dave had the most time in country and Dave only had a month before he was to return to the "World". Bud had already been selected as his replacement as crewchief although he had only been "in country" about 30 days. Rich Gabauer had only been there a couple weeks.

Dave remembers thinking it was a very strange situation to put a new co-pilot, one week in country, and new gunner on this type of mission.

As Butch remembers, Rich Gabauer got the co-pilot job because he was the only aviator in the Company who wasn't already scheduled to fly that day. Butch selected the rest of the crew himself.

As the main flight left Khe Sanh enroute to their Landing Zone (LZ) they reported in and then the Commander of the 174th, Dale Sprat, on his first major combat mission, asked on the radio, if anyone had made contact with the WitchDoctor?

Dale's call sign was "Boats 6" for that mission and his exact words were "this is boats 6 has anyone heard from witchdoctor?" A quick response from someone was "I think he was going to be on Company Fox Mike"

(Fox Mike was the FM frequency assigned to each unit). But, before anyone had time to answer his question, a silence fell over all radio frequencies except the emergency, Guard, channel.

"MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY, WitchDoctor 5 is going down, west of Aloui in the trees."

The WitchDoctor helicopter had been barely over the top of the trees and flying as fast as possible, about 90 knots. Fifteen miles across the Laotian border, as Butch started to round the top of a hill and follow the nap of the earth (tree tops) down the other side, he passed over a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) machine gun position and that gunner was good. He fired a fifteen round burst and hit the WitchDoctor five times. Bud Brasket remembers, it felt like someone was standing on the engine deck slamming a sledge hammer into the engine.

The WitchDoctor was hit by the fifty-one (51) caliber machine gun rounds in the engine and the effect was an immediate and total loss of power. The bullets, which are about the size of a mans thumb, had gone completely through the front stage of the engine causing the compressed air, needed for ignition in the later stages, to leak out the top and bottom. The result was a loud hiss and no more ignition.

Dave and Bud opened up with their M-60 machine guns at each door. They couldn't see anything to shoot at but the gun was something to hang onto and may have kept the enemy's heads down. Bud fired his M-60 until one of those treetops ripped it out of his hands.

When a helicopter is already at the top of the trees, it becomes extremely difficult to choose a good, emergency landing area. In fact there is practically no choice as to where and the only decision becomes HOW!

The mind is a fantastic thing in these situations when the rest of the body is pumping adrenalin at a rapid rate. From somewhere deep inside his sub-conscious Butch remembered a brief discussion in his flight training program in which he was told do not get into this situation; always keep enough altitude to pick your landing spot

because if you don't "you are going to crash." He then remembered a caveat of: if you do find yourself there, the only thing you can possibly do, that might save your rear end is to bottom the collective (take all the pitch out of the rotor blades) so that you don't climb and pull back hard on the stick. Just as you hit the trees, pull all the pitch back in the blades and the helicopter will be thrust into a tail down attitude and the fall will be cushioned by the crushing of the tail boom. Maybe!

He did it. There was no other choice. It worked!

As the helicopter settled to the ground through the trees, it felt as gentle as a brand new helicopter pilot's first landing. Bud remembers it was bone jarring as opposed to bone crushing. All seven men moved from the helicopter unscathed. Bud grabbed his M-16 and a bandoleer of ammunition, his M-60 now being an integral part of the surrounding trees. Then, remembering that his first duty in a situation like that was to get the pilot out in case his door was jammed. He rushed to pull the quick release pins on the door. As the door fell away he was astonished to find the seat empty and Butch already standing behind him.

Butch told Rich Gabauer to shoot holes through the radio equipment (KY-28) with his 45 caliber pistol. The KY-28 was used to encode messages and the codes in the radio were classified. If it fell into the hands of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) they might use it to listen to classified radio transmissions.

Each man had his own personal weapon in addition to the two M-60 Machine guns used as door guns on the helicopter. One of the machine guns, Buds, could not be removed from the crash as it had been wedged against a tree when the helicopter forced its way down through the dense jungle.

As they thought about their situation, they suddenly saw dozens of figures in "black pajamas" moving toward the place that they had assembled and thought it prudent to move away from the downed helicopter. Dave Smalley set up his M-60 and laid down a burst of machine gun fire that startled and scattered the black pajamas. The

crew had one, hand held, survival radio but no food or water as they left their dead bird.

It wasn't that they didn't bring any water or rations but rather that they left it behind in the helicopter. There were full canteens, two complete jungle survival kits, C rations and even a brand new camera that Butch had brought along for Mac to take pictures as they "toured Laos."

They would all remember in the future that "if you think you may need it, wear it."

As the NVA came closer the crew fired and maneuvered, and again, fired and maneuvered away from their aircraft knowing the farther they moved away, the less likely it was that they would be found by either the good guys or the bad guys.

Dale Sprat remembers this as the first of many aircraft under his command to be shot down. This one being followed within a few minutes by two or three others in the LZ. Dale was flying lead aircraft of the 174th flight and somewhere in the middle of the 119 other helicopters all with about thirty seconds of separation. He was intensely listening to the reports of aircraft landing, some crashing, and departing the LZ when his concentration was broken by the MAYDAY call.

He left his flight in the charge of the second helicopter to facilitate a rescue attempt when he realized he was close to "Alouie." The Battalion Commander, LTC Rutkowski, immediately ordered Dale back to the formation and he joined at the trail of the formation.

There were several early attempts to rescue them but the enemy fire was so intense from all sides that the efforts had to be stopped. The WitchDoctor Crew remembers how startled they were when fire broke out from all sides of them as the rescue helicopters attempted their approach.

Next an Air Force "Jolly Green Giant" helicopter tried. His rope ladder was hanging ten feet over their heads when he was forced to abandon

his efforts and move away. The enemy ground fire was so intense that his A-1H Fighter support aircraft was blown out of the sky and he retreated to pick up the pilot who managed to bail out.

The Air Force coordinated the air cover through a unit known as the "Hammers". Their theme song, of course, was, "I'd rather be a Hammer than a Nail". Their mission was Forward Air Control (FAC) and entailed coordination of all tactical air support in their mission area or sector. At one time Hammer 55, Captain John Wright, reported eight flight levels of fighters from the U.S. Navy, Marines, Air Force and even some US Air Force out of Thailand holding above and ready to protect and support the WitchDoctor crew.

The downed crew started taking a considerable amount of fire from the bad guys, "Hostile Fire", and started to move in a southerly direction. They remembered that there was a small river several miles south of where they had crashed and thought it might be a way home. They also remembered that the main east-west supply road was between them and the river and it was very crowded with bad guys in retreat.

As they moved they found a bunker that was more of an odd shaped foxhole. It was a trench about two feet wide dug a circle about 10 feet in diameter with the center left in tact so it looked like someone had cut a large doughnut out of the earth. Butch made everyone wait while he checked the entire inside of the position for booby traps. During his Engineer Officer Training he had spent many hours making such searches and but this one was for real not just training. There were none.

The hole was later identified as an abandoned 51 caliber machine gun position. By placing a machine gun on the center pedestal the NVA could cover an entire 360 degree area.

The WitchDoctor crew got in and established contact this time with Roger Carter, Hammer 21. The FAC located their position when Butch turned his flight jacket inside out (bright orange side) and placed it on the center pedestal.

That evening, as it became evident that they would not be extracted until the next morning, Dale called them on the radio. Dale remembers it as the hardest thing he ever had to do when he told them they would have to stay over night before another attempt could be made.

During the night there was a special Air Force aircraft called "Specter" that was equipped with night vision equipment, machine guns and Mini / Gatling guns in every window of an airplane designed as a cargo plane. This was an AC-130 Gunship called "Specter" and the AC-47s, fondly called "Puff the Magic Dragon" was also there in support. Both were devastating. Again the Hammer FACs, Hammer 86, 1st Lt Charlie Hosmer; Hammer 84, Tom Flemming and several others (Hammer 76, 77 and 24) directed the air support at night.

That first evening and throughout the night the crew of the WitchDoctor called in air strikes on various movements around their location. In the not too far distance, they could hear the enemy disassembling their helicopter under the cover of the night. As they listened, they recognized a sound similar to an electric golf cart moving up and down the nearby road. They reported all this information and the end result was that U.S. Intelligence determined that the NVA was using electric vehicles so as not to be detected by infrared photography at night. Once that was realized, more sensitive film was used and, when developed, there they were.

The next morning Butch and one of the crew slipped out to look for water since none had been available for about 24 hours. As they neared a small stream they were surprised as they crossed over a fourteen inch diameter pipeline and then saw a manned machine gun position close to where they had heard one of the guns firing the day before at their would be rescuers. The gun was well hidden and well fortified with large timbers and apparently some concrete for overhead protection. They carefully made their way back to the remainder of the crew without water and reported all they had seen to the Air Force (FAC), Hammer 21 who called in several strikes on the position.

Dale Spratt had assigned himself a mission to orbit near the WitchDoctor crews' position and monitor the progress. He was at

about 2,000 feet when his crew chief reported some small clouds periodically forming and dissipating behind their position. They immediately climbed to 3,500 feet and out of the range of what was obviously 37mm anti-aircraft fire and luckily not radar controlled.

After orbiting for a period, refueling and returning to the area, Dale made a decision to attempt a rescue. So, from an altitude of 3,000 feet he slowed down the engine RPM from the normal 6,600 to 6,000 (normally described as beeping down the RPM) so it would not overspeed from his planned, quick descent. He started a tight spiral dive and somewhere between 1,000 and 500 feet all hell broke loose. Intense fire was erupting from all sides and even with the assistance of the FAC and several Navy Fighters it could not be silenced. The right side of the windshield suddenly exploded and Dale looked over to see his co-pilots helmet visor shatter and his microphone boom fall off as a bullet struck him in the face. He was sure that he was mortally wounded and he rolled out of his descent and pulled in the pitch of his rotor blades. The low RPM warning buzzer began to sound indicating the engine was losing power and Dale thought he must have been hit in the engine as well. He began calling MAY DAY and looking for an emergency landing area. His co-pilot, Lt. Waugh, who he had assumed dead, reached over to his own controls and beeped up the RPM that had been beeped down prior to their descent and the warning stopped. Dale was so damn happy that Waugh was alive that he began babbling to him until he realized he couldn't talk back because his microphone boom was shot completely away. He returned to Khe Sahn where Waugh and both the crew chief and door gunner had to be taken away by Medical Evacuation helicopters (Med Evac) for injuries. The helicopter was declared un-flyable and slung loaded back to Quang Tri.

That morning, the Commander of the 101st Airborne Division, Brigadier General Sidney Berry, who had overall Command and Control of the Air Operation, announced on the radio that they (the U.S Forces) were going to try one more thing to get the WitchDoctor crew out and if it failed they were on their own. His exact words were "we will not waste any more Army resources to get you out."

This statement did not exactly help their morale but later that morning Major Dale Sprat was back on the radio announcing that Butch had been promoted to Captain. That helped morale a little when Butch asked if he could send General Berry down to pin on his new rank. It was rumored that Berry had never been below 7,500 feet.

Several other individual attempts to extract the crew were made all of which failed and late in the afternoon of 6 March the FAC told the downed flight crew that he was leaving the area for ten or fifteen minutes. This statement would not bother anyone under normal conditions, but the FAC had been their primary and usually only contact with friendly forces since their initial, tree trimming, touch down in Laos. The response heard by Hammer 21, 1st Lt Roger Carter, on the other end of his radio was "what the hell do you mean you're leaving?" (Maybe in harsher terms). Roger responded by saying that "if you don't understand why, by the time I return, I will explain".

Within two minutes after this promise from the FAC, the ground started to shake and limbs started falling from the nearby trees. It could have been a terrible earth quake, but how did the FAC know it was coming?

It actually was a bombing strike by a B-52 squadron destroying a fuel storage facility two miles to the north of their position. They watched as the entire hillside lit up and then disappeared in a cloud of fire, dust and smoke. Then a few seconds later there was a swishing sound over their heads as eight inch pieces of hot bomb casing landed all around them. The term "Arc Light" became an indelible vision in their minds forever and the sound of "Hillsborro on Guard" would always have a special meaning. The FAC returned and explained that, after the discovery of the pipeline the day before, they had taken some infrared photos that followed the pipeline to its origin, the fuel storage depot. Those photos also identified the WitchDoctor's position as being in the middle of the North Vietnamese Division Headquarters of 3000 to 4000 bad guys which could explain the intense enemy activity.

As the day progressed there seemed to be more and more enemy activity and as a result more and more fire fights between the downed

crew and the NVA. Late that afternoon, the crew tried to move toward a small clearing where another rescue helicopter was to attempt to pick them up. The whole area was crawling with NVA and as they called off the attempt and moved back toward the bunker they spotted an NVA soldier alone and within fifteen (15) feet of their position. Their normal plan was not to fire unless they were discovered. However, the enemy looked directly into the eyes of Bud Brasket and out of instinct he aimed and fired his M-16. It jammed. Butch then shot him with the 38 caliber Smith and Wesson revolver which was his personal (issued) weapon. Butch approached the motionless enemy soldier took his ammunition, his AK-47, two hand grenades and his canteen. They went back to the bunker, grateful for finally having a little water to drink. Much to their surprise as they looked at the canteen, they discovered that all the water had leaked out through a bullet hole which entered but never exited the canteen. Quickly, they turned to see that the dead NVA soldier had miraculously come to life and vanished from his resting place.

Later that same afternoon the Air Force attempted to drop canisters with water and radios cushioned by sponges but none survived the fall to earth. Jim Watkins went to try and locate the canisters first and didn't have any luck. Then Salinas went looking and found one canister with two broken cans of water and another with the remnants of a radio but nothing survived the drops. Their one survival radio, with batteries rated at 12 hours of continuous use, was weak but still working after almost 40 hours of intermittent use.

That night the NVA must have figured out who had been calling in all the airstrikes and they must have been tired of it. A fierce fire fight ensued that lasted a full six hours. The night time Air Force, "Specter", directed that night by Capt Tom Flemming, (Hammer 84) repeatedly laid down protective fire, sometimes within thirty (30) feet of the downed crews position. The crew was returning fire as sparingly as possible because, by that time, they were dangerously low on ammunition.

At one time they heard the NVA advancing toward them, firing as they advanced through the underbrush and then the most frightening thing for a soldier to hear came from the direction of the bad guys. A hand grenade makes only one sound before it explodes. If thrown accurately, that sound is the last thing ever heard. The sound is the metallic "pop" of the handle, called the spoon, as it flies free of the explosive body of the hand grenade. As it disengages, it ignites the fuse and, seconds later, the explosive scatters bits of the metal jacket in all directions.

They heard the POP! Then, miraculously, they heard a second noise, not the normal succeeding noise of an explosion. It was the thud of that same hand grenade as it was blocked by a tree directly in front of them. The following explosion was accompanied by several loud screams as the attackers were attacked by their own terrifying weapon. One additional grenade was thrown that landed just outside their hole. Someone yelled grenade and everyone ducked.

Bud only had time to duck his head but his arm remained on the rim of the hole. When the explosion occurred the arm went completely numb from the elbow down and when he looked, there wasn't a scratch on it.

After that foiled assault, the NVA seemed to only fire in a harassing manner without any major assaults until the next day.

MEANWHILE

The U.S. Air Force had, during the Vietnam conflict and still has, a philosophy that when a pilot is down everything stops until that pilot is recovered. The U.S. Army's unwritten philosophy was and is "the mission comes first, the men are second".

On March 5, 1971, U.S. Air Force 1st Lieutenant William Roger Carter, call sign "Hammer 21", was flying an OV-10, Bronco, when he was diverted from his Sector FAC (forward air control) mission to find the crash site and coordinate a Search Air Rescue (SAR) of WitchDoctor 05. He was told it was an Army UH-1 helicopter which had been shot down with seven U.S. Army soldiers on-board. The place was about half way between Khe Shan, Vietnam and Tchepone Laos on a section of the Trail designated Route 9.

He located the site and made contact with the survivors, who had moved approximately 200 yards away from their helicopter and into an abandoned NVA 51-Caliber machine gun pit. The commander of the downed group, Lieutenant Butch Elliott, reported heavy ground movement all around his position. Roger immediately began diverting fighter aircraft to suppress enemy activity and anti-aircraft fire in the area. Using both U.S. Air Force and Navy fighters he knocked out several anti-aircraft positions along the road which was only about 500 yards Southeast of the survivors, and struck enemy troops within 100 yards of the group.

When four A-1H (Sandy) aircraft and two HH-53 (Jolly Green Giant) helicopters arrived as a rescue unit, Roger relinquished on scene command to Sandy-01. After an additional 20 minutes of suppression fires from the A-1s, Sandy 03, Capt. Chuck Tipton made a final pass across the proposed helicopter flight path to the survivors, a route too close to the defended roadways. Sandy-03 was hit almost immediately by intense ground fire. As the plane began to burn; the pilot turned away from the Witchdoctor SAR area, and ejected. The remaining

Sandy and Hammer 21 began an immediate cover for that downed pilot and the approaching low Jolly. Sandy 01 and Roger formed a defensive wheel over the rescue site and strafed threat areas on the helicopter's approach. After the rescue of the downed Sandy, Hammer 21 returned to the scene of the Witchdoctor 5 crew. At this point the Sandy aircraft informed him that the rescue operation for the Army men was being terminated. Roger refused an order to leave the area (with some expletive comments) and continued coordinating aircraft who had retained residual munitions, onto enemy positions that threatened the men. After approximately an hour, out of ammunition and low on fuel, Hammer 21 was forced to return to base.

Another fighter was shot down during that afternoon, and during the evening an O-2 was destroyed by an SA-2 missile. This prompted the Joint Recovery Center (JRC), with concurrence of The 7th Air force, to decide that the area was too hot to continue the SAR.

During that same afternoon the Army had inserted a 97-man South Vietnamese, ARVN, Special Forces Team called the Hac Bau, to attempt linkup with the downed Army men and to fight their way out if necessary. This effort instantly ran into trouble, as the team had been placed in the midst of a major NVA counterattack of the Lam San penetration. By early evening all was felt lost.

Despite the decision to write off the survivors of Witchdoctor 05 and the Hac Bau team, Roger went to the commanding general of the 5th Mechanized Infantry Division, General Sutherland with a plan to save the soldiers. Knowing the area possibly better than anyone else, Roger gave him his assessment of what had gone wrong with the attempted rescue efforts (mostly inexperience, unfamiliar terrain, and bad tactics) and discussed the complicating problems that inserting the 97-man team presented (need for many helicopters, suppression of defenses, blowing a landing zone, and getting the two groups together so as to make only one extraction). He also continually reinforced his belief that it was still possible to get the men out of harm's way.

Dale Sprat remembers being part of this discussion and remembered the scores of reporters just outside the Tactical Operations Center

(TOC) who would have had an absolute field day with a story of the Army deciding to leave that crew on their own.

Luckily he did not need to pass on that information although he remembers it being a real possibility. After about an hour, Roger convinced them he could do it, and he won their full support. Through the remainder of the night, Roger planned the following day's work along with several Army Aviation personnel. Roger was not scheduled to fly the next day because of high flight time already that week but he knew, somehow, he would get in the air. Nothing would stop him.

The plan hinged on his knowledge of the area and his ability to obtain adequate "ad-hoc" air power by direct requests to the fighter flights (mostly US Navy, and US Marine). He had convinced the Army to provide sufficient helicopters and gun-ships to extract the 104 men from a landing zone that would be blown out of the dense jungle. Fighters from the U.S. Navy would suppress enemy anti-aircraft positions and make the LZ. And, he hoped that after amassing such an effort, he could convince the 7th Air Force to re-enter the fight with aircraft to provide sufficient CBU-12 (smoke) to cover the Army Helicopters ingress / egress route mark with his rockets.

Then Roger went to the squadron operations building and placed his name on the schedule; hoping for forgiveness later and took a one-hour nap.

The first pilot to arrive at squadron operations the morning of March 7 was Hammer 21. He was ahead of any who might challenge the amended schedule; he collected his flight materials, weapons, appropriate intelligence updates, and stepped to the first available aircraft. At this point he was confronted by his operations officer. Silver tongued devil that he was, he was airborne within minutes.

BACK ON THE GROUND

It was the crew of the WitchDoctor's third day on the ground, and they had survived ground fire while flying through most of a North Vietnamese Divisional Headquarters; survived a helicopter crash from tree top level; and had managed to walk away from a less than coordinated fall through the dense trees from a height of 30 feet and a speed of close to a hundred miles per hour. They had left their crash site under intensive attack from two directions and had spent two nights surrounded by men wanting only to terminate their lives. They also found, and were the main factor in destroying a fuel pipeline and storage facility; they had unraveled how the NVA was so successful at moving supplies at night down the Ho Chi Mien Trail by recognizing the sound of electric vehicles. And, they sat in a hole in the ground and witnessed the most devastating of all weapons used in Vietnam, the B-52 bombing air strike, less than two miles away. In the end they would have directed ninety seven (97) Air Strikes against the enemy. They all independently thought that perhaps, that morning of 5 March 1971, God really had been their co-pilot on that flight because they had survived so much.

That third morning became the worst, as hoards of NVA soldiers past less than fifty yards from their position only stopping long enough to place harassing fire in their direction. Hundreds passed them seeming to know the crews exact position, but not wanting to spend the time needed to overrun them. They were easy to find because by that time it was the only piece of real estate still intact on the entire hillside. Sometimes a group of them would stumble out of the thick underbrush within spitting distance from the crew and the crew would fire a few of their precious bullets in their direction.

In the pre-dawn twilight, Roger arrived on scene of the aborted SAR efforts of the previous day and located the Witchdoctor 05 crew. They were caught in a fire-fight with NVA troops and once again about to be

overrun. The situation appeared desperate. They began pinpointing positions of enemy attacks over their survival radio and despite the darkness and low fog of the morning, Hammer 21 began strafing the area with four M-60 machine guns at tree-top level. Killing enemy soldiers within 10 meters of the downed Americans, the OV-10's bullets kicked debris into the pit where the survivors continued their ground battle. It was very, very close. During one pass, he shot a North Vietnamese soldier who was about to throw a grenade into the midst of the downed men. That pass was so close to the down men's position that his gunsight covered both the enemy and the friendlys. That morning he broke three other attacks on the position with directed fire from other aircraft guns.

This was not in the plan.

The first thing he had intended was to blow a landing zone (LZ) using Navy A-7E fighters. Then, he wanted to link up the survivors with the Hac Bau, and have them all go to the LZ together. At that time he planned to lay heavy air suppression (more Navy jets) along the helicopter approach path over dense jungle and hills. As the helicopters began their landing operation, he would obscure visibility on their flanks with smoke (preferably with F-4's, or optionally from AH-1 helicopters).

As more bad guys came near, so came more good guys in their fighters from all points of that war. There were U.S. Navy and Marine Jets from an aircraft carrier off the coast miles away. There were Army, Air Force and Marine helicopter gunships; there were Air Force fighters and even Aircraft from the U.S. Air Force out of Udorn and NKP in Thailand. They were there to help the crew of the WitchDoctor survive and they all did. Those aircraft dropped bombs, napalm, antipersonnel cluster bombs (CBU), shot rockets, cannons, and laid down machine gun fire so close that Dave Smalley got a piece of their shrapnel in his own shoulder and arm. That same CBU that hit Dave also destroyed his M-60 machine gun and the recovered AK-47 became Dave's personal weapon.

At 0730 the Navy A-7Es arrived. They blew the LZ as advertised just south of Route 9 and directly down the north-south ridge line that the survivors were on. Roger felt that he could cover the movement of the survivors south, along the ridge, and out of the "flak trap" area from which they had taken so much fire. However, one other action had to take place prior to their movement. The rendezvous of the Hac Bau team and the survivors had to be completed. Together they might have adequate firepower, should they stumble into an enemy patrol. Coordinating this rendezvous was not easy. The Hac Bau were dressed similar to NVA, spoke very little English, and the only radio frequency that worked was "Guard." Thus, the entire operation had to be coordinated on a channel which the enemy certainly monitored. Things were not coming together for the 9:00 appointment with the Army helicopters. And, Roger was out of ammunition and rockets, as well as running out of gas. He delayed the helicopters until 1500 hours, a move which would allow more time for the two groups to get together, and for him to return to base, re-arm, refuel and return.

The ever present FACs continued in action the morning of the 7th of March. When Lt Carter ran out of bullets and rockets he called Hammer 59, Captain William (Bill) Applegate, to mark for him. Bills marks released still more fighter planes to wreak havoc on the assailants.

When Roger returned to Quang Tri, his operations officer was there to meet him, along with a crowd of reporters. The news was starting to spread. Roger's commanders stood fully behind him at this point and had made several requests to get the higher headquarters back into the fight. All Roger wanted was another load and he got it. Some pictures were taken...no talk. He was back in the war within the hour.

The afternoon of that last day progressed and the FAC, once again Roger Carter, explained the reason for the increased movement of NVA toward their position. No one had been able to tell the downed crew about the ARVN Special Forces Rangers until now. They were now told that in the early afternoon of the day before a light company consisting of ninety seven South Vietnamese Rangers, known as the HOC BAO, had been air-lifted to an area approximately two miles from their

position, but had met with such great resistance that they were only now approaching their location. Butch asked how he was to know the South Vietnamese from the North Vietnamese as they approached. Hammer 21 had a South Vietnamese FAC in the back seat of his aircraft who explained that as they approached, Butch should call out "Witchdoctor" and that their response should be "HOC BAO". That discussion compromised the password but he believed there was no choice. As the HOC BAO came closer, they drove the bad guys toward the WitchDoctors and by 3 pm on March 7th 1971 the downed crew had only half a dozen bullets left among them; less than one each.

The noise in the underbrush started once again and the WitchDoctor Crew braced for another battle with their six remaining bullets. The FAC informed the WitchDoctors that the HOC BAO were very close. As the underbrush rustled, the password, "WitchDoctor", was called and the response was "A OK".

Not exactly a good feeling!

Butch called the FAC and Roger Carter reassured him that the movement could only be the HOC BAO. Butch called "WitchDoctor" once again and got the same response. He then fired one of their precious few remaining bullets into the air and three voices came from the tree line all calling "HAC BAO, HAC BAO, HAC BAO".

If it hadn't been the good guys, the crew was going to leave with the bad guys or not leave at all because their five remaining bullets were not going to be much help.

Dave Smalley remembers watching the South Vietnamese walking toward them in their tiger striped fatigues after their tough trip through the jungle, shaking their hands and seeing the smile on their faces.

Bud Brasket remembers getting a long drink of water from one South Vietnamese Ranger. They were all very glad to see each other and they started their trip to the LZ.

Hammer 21 arrived back over the action just prior to noon, the two groups had just joined together and were proceeding to the landing zone. Hammer 21 took over again and coordinated the team's movement south. As the Hac Bau and the survivors moved, he directed diversionary air strikes to conceal their position. Nothing was said on the radios until all had reached the LZ objective. The attention was turned to knocking out the remaining anti-aircraft guns that were in the vicinity of the rescue helicopter's proposed flight path. Roger could not get his rockets to work. In the rush to rearm, he had left the ground safe switch off, but in this tense moment, it did not dawn on him to check the switch. He assumed that a ground crew had probably forgotten to "arm" the system. So he had to direct fighters against enemy troops and anti-aircraft positions by flying at tree-top level and rocking the wings over targets.

This move of not using his limited rocket supply at this time actually served to conserve his weapons for the helicopter operation when they would be needed much more. After killing several guns, Roger directed AH-1 helicopters against enemy troops which were beginning to overrun the survivor's former position. Then he observed the team and survivors cross the road and he came up on the radio to check their condition. All had made it. With air power now arriving from all branches of service, he began to pulverize everything on the north side of the road. This was done with vengeance—against the gunners which had been so deadly on the previous day. It also served as a diversion for the helicopter activity, which was approaching from the large ridge line located South of the LZ.

It took three hours to thread their way back through the mass of timber, concrete and steel reinforced bunkers that had been between the crew of the WitchDoctor and the pick-up zone (PZ). Complicating things was their somewhat less than peak physical condition and the mass of interlocking bomb craters. It was only then that they could understand why it took a full twenty four hours for the HAC BAO to traverse a mere two miles and luckily the pick up zone was closer.

The Army helicopters checked in with Hammer 21 promptly at 1500 hours. A flight of F-4s loaded with smoke was overhead and ready.

AH-1 Cobras would escort the 12 "slicks" in and out of the LZ. Winds were light from the East. So the F-4's were directed to lay their smoke on the helicopter line of approach. The helicopters were to follow the eastern edge of the smoke with gunships protecting their eastern flank. The smoke would thus serve as a navigation aid as well as help conceal them on their approach. The "snakes", Huey Cobra Gunships, would fire high explosive rockets (HE) and white phosphorus rockets (WP) as required to suppress fire from the East. It was at this time that Roger found his switch error and armed his weapons. Then, he floated as required from side to side of the helicopters, firing white phosphorous rockets and guns as required to cover the operation. He saved most of his ordinance for the exit.

As the crew approached the PZ, helicopters from the 101st Airborne Division screamed in to extract the crew and their rescuers and return them to Khe Sanh. Frank Espesito piloted his UH-1H into the PZ and the WitchDoctor crew jumped on board. They were out of the PZ in fifteen seconds.

It was a good LZ and the whole landing and pick-up operation lasted only 10-15 minutes. As the helicopters lifted off they executed just as planned the night before, paralleling but not retracing their inbound route. Roger emptied his remaining rocket pods, marking the best path out.

The crew of the WitchDoctor was met at Khe Sanh by Brigadier General Sid Berry and General Creighton Abrams who shook their hands and welcomed them back. Butch, as the last to exit the helicopter because he stopped to thank that crew, paused at BG Sid Berry and then refused to shake his hand, remembering that the General said on the radio two days earlier that he would "try one more thing to get them out and then intended to leave them on their own". He did, however, shake the hand of General Abrams with both of his.

ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA, MARCH 7th 1971

Meanwhile, in Arlington, Virginia on the 7th of March the Radio News announced that Captain Ralph Elliott had been rescued from "an enemy bunker where he and his crew had been held captive for three days." Once again the News Media couldn't get the story right. It was heard by someone who recognized the name, Ralph Elliott.

The telephone rang at the home of Mrs. Patricia Elliott, a Realtor in the Washington D.C. area. It was late but in her business she was used to late calls. This time, however it was her neighbor. The neighbor asked, "Pat, where is Butch?"

The answer was "well, I haven't heard lately but as far as I know, I think he's somewhere in Vietnam?"

The neighbor said, "I think he's in Laos; it was just on the radio a little while ago that Captain Ralph E. Elliott had just been rescued from an enemy bunker in the jungle in Laos and he had been in there for three or four days. The underground people had just gotten him out and he's been rescued and he's alive. I just wanted to let you know in case you didn't hear the broadcast."

Pat's response was "Oh my God, I didn't hear it, let me call the Radio station right away. That can't be Butch he's a lieutenant not a Captain but I better check on it."

The neighbor found her the number and gave it to her. Mrs. Elliott called the radio station. When she identified herself they said, "hold on just a minute we want to get you on this broadcast." They stopped the music and put her on the air.

"This is Captain Ralph Elliott's mother and I just heard on your broadcast that my son had been rescued from an enemy bunker in Laos and this is all news to me I didn't know he had been missing. Tell me about it what happened."

The information they had was only a few lines from the news teletype, part of which was news that he had been promoted to Captain while he was on the ground. It went on to say he was alright along with his entire crew after being rescued from behind enemy lines. They told her all they knew.

She remembers, "I immediately called my son's wife who lived in Maryland and she didn't know anything about it either but she said her mother had called her in the middle of the night to ask if Butch was alright. She had a bad dream that woke her and prompted the call. I also called his father in Jacksonville, Florida, and he hadn't heard anything about it either."

The next day it was in all the papers. All of Pat Elliott's friends were calling her. Even a friend in California called to say it was in the California paper.

There was normally no effort to contact any of the families of men in these situations by the Military and the only time they found out about them was when the Media sensationalized a situation and made an entire broadcast out of one or two lines from the teletype.

VIETNAM

As they recall, the hobnobbing with the Generals was not nearly as memorable as the Coke someone handed them and some idiot reporter who asked what they were doing in Laos when no American troops were supposed to be there. That reporter did not have the slightest idea how close he came to being decked by one or all of the crew. They were fed and debriefed and returned to Quang Tri where they were grounded by their commander so as to recover.

Bud remembers not being able to sleep at all until some newly promoted Captain came in and handed him a Coke can half full of Jim Beam. Butch and Roger had a few drinks together that night at Quang Tri.

After a good nights sleep, Butch and Dave went in search of the rest of "Hammer, FACs" and thanked each of them again face to face over several days of intense celebration. Butch and Roger Carter later flew each other's aircraft. Butch "taught" Roger how to fly a UH-1H (even hover?); and Roger "taught" Butch how to fly an OV-10, sometimes upside down. They returned to the area where Butch and Roger had spent those long three days and photographed it then got caught in bad weather and were forced to fly to NKP, Thailand. Butch, who had been grounded and not supposed to fly until he recuperated, had to call Major Dale Spratt and explain how he got to Thailand "without flying" and why he would not be there that night for bed check. Somehow, Butch got Roger an Army blanket and a mosquito net (prized possessions) and Roger still has the blanket.

Ralph E. Elliott III, Butch, was recommended for award of the Congressional Medal of Honor and paper work was submitted to the Commander of the Americal Division. This recommendation was down graded to a Silver Star which was ultimately awarded at his next duty station in a Ceremony in front of the entire post complement at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.

The citation follows:

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
Headquarters, 23rd Infantry Division
APO San Francisco 96374

GENERAL ORDERS
NUMBER 7219

26 June 1971

AWARD OF THE SILVER STAR

TC 439. The following AWARD is announced.

ELLIOTT, RALPH E., [REDACTED], CAPTAIN, ENGINEER CORPS
174th Aviation Company, 14th Combat Aviation Battalion, 23rd
Infantry Division, APO 96374

Awarded: Silver Star

Date of service: 5 March through 7 March 1971

Theater: Republic of Vietnam

Authority: By the direction of the President under the
provisions of the Act of Congress, approved 9
July 1918.

Reason: For gallantry in action against an armed force in the Kingdom of Laos. Captain Elliott distinguished himself by intrepid actions during the period: 5 March through 7 March 1971 while serving as the Pilot of a UH-1H Helicopter with the 174th Aviation Company. On that date, while on a recovery mission in the Kingdom of Laos, his aircraft came under intense enemy fire. Taking many direct hits he was forced to make an emergency landing, and successfully maneuvered his craft safely to the ground. Immediately realizing the imminent danger that he and his crew were in, he began evasive action from the enemy. Captain Elliott, realizing that a rescue attempt would be futile, set his men up in defensive positions to wait until rescue was possible. After having set themselves into good fighting positions they began to hear much enemy activity in their immediate area. Throughout that night and the following day, Captain Elliott called in 97 airstrikes against the enemy and numerous times exposed himself to hostile fire in an attempt to silence the aggressors' positions. On the night of 6 March 1971, Captain Elliott and his men were subjected to a fierce assault on their position by enemy soldiers and after a fierce fire fight were able to successfully drive the hostiles off. The following day Captain Elliott and his men joined forces with the ARVN Hoc Bao unit and together they moved to a position about two miles away where they were successfully rescued and lifted to safety.

Captain Elliott's tremendous courage and ability to remain calm while under an extremely dangerous situation undoubtedly saved the lives of his crew and eliminated numerous enemy positions and personnel. Captain Elliott's personal heroism, professional competence and devotion to duty are in keeping with the highest tradition of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, the 23rd Infantry Division, and the United States Army.

FOR THE COMMANDER:

OFFICIAL:

WILLIAM R. RICHARDSON
COL, GS
Chief of Staff

R.J. BERNHART
LTC, AGC
Adjutant General

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Epilogue

5 March 1991

Twenty years later a package arrived at the door of Butch Elliott, by then retired after twenty one years in the Army. The package contained three audio cassette tapes labeled Lam Son 719, but with no name or return address.

Butch placed the first tape in his player and sat down. As he listened to the wop, wop, wop of helicopter rotor blades, the voice of Dale Sprat, twenty years earlier, said "This is Boats Six, has anyone heard from the WitchDoctor?". Then Butch's own voice of twenty years past calling "MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY, WitchDoctor five is hit and going down in the trees west of Aloui."

Lam San 719 was the largest Air Assault in history to date and when parallel with the largest Naval Air Battle in history it seems strangely coincidental that there was a Lieutenant Ralph E. Elliott flying for his country in both battles.

"We thought we were invincible and this is just another long story of another bullet proof Lieutenant."

Butch and most of the WitchDoctor Crew meet every year in Fort Walton Beach Florida during the long Columbus Day weekend with dozens of other Alumni of the 174th Assault Helicopter Company to celebrate that they can meet.

This story is a thanks to all those, in all branches of our Uniformed Services and all those of the South Vietnamese military that jointly brought us all back.

God Bless us all for what we tried to do in Vietnam.

Butch, WitchDoctor 05, Elliott

The news teletype:

NNN
NDMOIR
CK 0815
MORD13 XDA836

0822 : INDOCHINA -- PILOTS;

BY JOSE KATICBAK

QUANG TRI, SOUTH VIETNAM, MARCH 7, REUTER -- SEVEN CREWMEN OF AN AMERICAN HELICOPTER SHOT DOWN OVER LAOS ON FRIDAY WERE RESCUED TODAY AFTER BEING STRANDED IN AN AREA SURROUNDED BY NORTH VIETNAMESE TROOPS FOR 48 HOURS.

THE CREWMEN WERE SHOT DOWN 13 MILES (20 KMS) INSIDE LAOS AND ABOUT 500 YARDS NORTH OF ROUTE NINE ON A MISSION TO RECOVER ANOTHER DOWNED HELICOPTER IN THE AREA.

AT A PRESS CONFERENCE HERE TODAY CAPTAIN RALPH E ELLIOTT, 23 OF JACKSONVILLE FLORIDA, SAID HIS HELICOPTER CRASHED AFTER RECEIVING HEAVY GROUND FIRE WHEN ABOUT 20 FEET FROM THE GROUND.

BUT CAPTAIN ELLIOTT SAID NONE OF HIS MEN WERE INJURED AND HE WAS ABLE TO LAND.

CAPTAIN ELLIOTT WAS PROMOTED TO HIS PRESENT RANK FROM A LIEUTENANT YESTERDAY WHILE HE LAY HIDING INSIDE LAOS.

HE SAID HE AND HIS MEN TOOK COVER IN A NEARBY BUNKER IN WHICH WAS A ABANDONED 50 CALIBRE NORTH VIETNAMESE MACHINE GUN.

CAPTAIN ELLIOTT SAID ON GAINING THE BUNKER HE HAD USED HIS SMALL SURVIVAL RADIO TO ALERT OTHER HELICOPTERS OF THE POSITION.

U.S. PLANES PATROLLED OVER THE AREA CONSTANTLY DURING THE TWO DAYS LIGHTING IT WITH FLARES AT NIGHT TO PREVENT NORTH VIETNAMESE TROOPS ATTACKING.

MGRE/JK-B

NOTES FROM THE CREW AND OTHERS:

Harold "Bud" Brasket

The following are some thoughts that came to Bud Brasket after he read an earlier version of the foregoing:

"I remember going back to the ship for smoke grenades, grabbing half a dozen of them and leaving two canteens of water. I've been kicking myself in the butt over that for twenty-four years. Of course, none of us thought that we'd be on the ground long enough to get thirsty at the time."

"The sound a FOX 4 makes when it rolls in on a target. First you hear the cannon rounds exploding on the ground, then the growl of the Vulcan,(I always thought that it sounded like a pissed off grizzly) the bombs exploding and then, after it was gone, the scream of the jet going by."

"The sinking, We are in deep shit, feeling when at least five guns opened up on Major Sprat on that first attempt to get us out and he had to break it off. I heard he took twenty some hits and only pulled out when his copilot was wounded."

"That one napalm attack that shriveled the leaves right outside the hole, must have been really close. We could have roasted marshmallows with that one, if we'd had any marshmallows."

"How much better I felt after getting a couple of fresh magazines when the ARVN's got to us."

"That first drink of warm,unsweetened tea, out of a canteen (best drink I ever had)."

"When the Air Force blew up the WitchDoctor and all the M60 rounds started cooking off in the fire. I thought it was kind of strange that the NVA hadn't taken them."

"I know it was a case of mistaken identity, but that A1 was taking deliberate aim on us. I remember watching as he made his turn, line up on us and seeing the CBUs drop off his wings. I yelled something about ducking and when the dust cleared most of the smaller trees and bushes around us were a lot shorter. That's when Dave took the shrapnel in the shoulder. I think that was when he lost his M60 too. A piece of shrapnel blew a hole in the gas cylinder and turned it into a single shot."

"How good that red dust cloud over Khe Sanh looked on the way back out."

"I don't remember being bitten by any mosquitoes, but one of them bastards put me in the hospital for a week."

Bud Brasket 1/12/95

Dave Smalley

The following are the thoughts that came to Dave Smalley when he read an earlier version of the foregoing:

"I was the crewchief when we went down. I only had about a month left in country but wanted the time to go by so I kept flying. My year started as a maintenance mechanic, then a door gunner briefly and a crewchief for most of my time. I remember a few things about Butch and the time before we went down. I used to play the guitar and sing with the guys in our hooch. One or two times, I remember Butch coming to join us and party a bit. We thought that was pretty cool of him. Also, once on a test flight, after pulling some maintenance on the ship, Butch turned the controls over to me in flight along the ocean for a bit. I really enjoyed that a lot. I had gone down once before with the "Bitch" and flown everything with her from maintenance runs, re-supply, dust-off, combat insertions to VIP flights. After going down, my thoughts come in bits and pieces, mostly. My sequence of events gets a bit jumbled. It was interesting reading the account of what happened as I learned a good deal I hadn't known, or being enlisted, wasn't privy to. I remember the first chopper in to get us being opened up on from all around us and having to turn back with a wounded crew member; the Jolly Green coming in and hovering with the rope ladder hanging 10 feet above us and having to bail out also and feeling freedom snatched away in an instant; Feeling glad Butch was there with his communication skills and leadership; watching the South Vietnamese walking toward us after their tough trip thru the jungle to reach us; shaking their hands and watching the smiles on their faces, glad to have reached us. I remember thanking the FAC pilots and feeling a camaraderie with them for getting the job done. I don't remember the names of the others. I can't remember much of the details so can't be much help."

Dave Smalley 2/11/95

Jim Watkins

The following are the thoughts that came to Jim Watkins when he read an earlier version of the foregoing:

When we went down, I remember I was listening to Janis Joplin sing, "Me and Bobby McGee". Even now, whenever I hear that song, it brings back vivid memories.

I remember exiting the right side of the helicopter, then realized everyone else went exit left - I never felt so alone - I scrambled back through the helicopter and caught up with the rest of you guys.

I still have the canteen and the bullet.

I went to look for the water canisters but found none, Salinas went next and found some but they were broken.

When the HOC BAO got to us I had two bullets left.

We took a lot of fire as we lifted off.

I recall on the second day, I think, a marine Skyraider dropping baseball grenades so close it damaged our remaining M-60; "scared the shit out of me."

Jim Watkins 3/11/95

Dale Spratt

The following are the thoughts that came to Dale Spratt when he read an earlier version of the foregoing:

Dear Butch,

Sorry it took me so long to get back to you. Guess I'm just getting old and slow. The closer I get to the "60" mark the older I feel. I think when I turn 60 I will request a recount!

Anyway, it's good to talk to you again and I hope to be able to make it down there in October.

If you have any question at all regarding what I have written or if I can fill in any blanks please give me a call or drop me a line.

Regards,

DALE R. SPRATT

Dale Spratt (continued)

Boy, speaking of flashbacks. Receiving your letter was a flash from the past. Well, I'll do my best to stir around the old grey matter and try to remember what I can about that fateful day.

I had assumed command of the 174th on February 28th. On March 5th my first major combat assault as Commanding Officer was taking place, and YOU my friend, have the dubious honor of being my first aircraft to be shot down. Within a few minutes you were quickly followed by two or three more in the LZ, but you, Butch, were first.

I was flying as lead aircraft of our flight somewhere in the middle of 120 helicopters flying with a thirty second separation between aircraft. We had departed from Khe Sanh destined for a landing zone deep in Laos (the name of the LZ escapes me now). Things seemed to be going smoothly up to this point and I was listening on the radios to reports of aircraft landing (crashing) and departing the LZ and wondering what fate awaited us on our approach to the LZ.

I was shaken from my concentration by a "Mayday" call from Witch Doctor 5 saying he was going down west of Alouie. Realizing this was one of my aircraft, we quickly checked our charts and realized we were just south of Alouie. At this point I decided to see if we could get you out. I turned the flight over to Chalk 2, dropped out of the formation and started down to see if we could do it. I'm not sure how we would have gotten everyone out (the Witch Doctor crew plus the eight ARVN's I had on board), however, before the need to make this decision arose, LTC Rutkowski order me back into the formation. We jointed up at the trail position and continued on to the LZ, with full confidence that the crew would be rescued by the Air Force "Jolly Green's". If my memory serves me correctly, I think we made two lifts in the LZ that day. Later on that evening while returning to Khe Sanh and "licking my wounds", having lost two or three aircraft in the LZ, one of the pilots in the flight reported that the Witch Doctor crew was still on the ground.

I came up on "Guard" and talked to Butch, who told me that rescue attempts had been made but had been met with intense fire and they had been forced to break off the attempts. At this point I spoke with LtC Rutkowski on the radio. He called some one else and at some point he told me that we would have to leave the crew for the night, that any further rescue attempts would have to wait until the next

morning. I think having to tell that to the crew was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do.

Next morning I went out to orbit near your position and wait for word from LTC Rutkowski as to what was going to transpire next. While orbiting south of your position and listening to the FAC's talking to you, we took some 37mm fire. Obviously not radar controlled but it sure got my attention when the crew chief reported "small clouds that were forming behind us.

Sometime later that morning, LTC Rutkowski was also orbiting over the position, when my crew and I decided to make a rescue attempt. We started at about 3,000 AGL in a tight spiral to the left with the engine "beeped" down to 6,000 RPM. Somewhere between 1,000 AGL and 500 AGL we began to take pretty intense fire with the first few rounds coming through the right windshield hitting my pilot in the left part of his face breaking his visor and severing his microphone boom. I thought at this point he was mortally wounded. When I rolled out and started to "pull pitch" I forgot to beep the engine back to 6600 RPM. When I heard the low RPM warning I thought we had an engine failure so I began calling "Mayday" and looking for an emergency landing area on the road leading east of Alouie. At this point the pilot (Lt Waugh) saved the day by reaching down and beeping the engine back to 6600 RPM. I was so damned happy when I realized he was alive I kept talking (babbling) to him until I realized he couldn't talk to me with the broken "mile boom."

We returned safely to Khe Sanh where the Med Evac aircraft picked up LT Waugh and took him for treatment. I also believe that both the Crew Chief and Door Gunner received wounds. I think they had to sling the aircraft out. Anyway, LTC Rutkowski picked me up and we went to the first of several meetings with GEN Berry and others whose names and titles or rank escape me now. A number of different options were discussed, with the final decision being to insert the "Hoc Bao" troops that evening and to plan for an extraction the following day (hopefully).

If my memory serves me correctly there were four or five of us from the 174th on the insertion and on the extraction. I remember that evening, after the insertion was completed, I decided to ride along in the back of the C&C ship from the Cavalry Squadron responsible for the operation. I learned something that night while riding in the back of that aircraft, I WILL NEVER NEVER NEVER EVER GET IN THE BACK OF ANOTHER

AIRCRAFT WITH A WO-1 AND A LTC AT THE CONTROLS, NOT EVEN TO SAVE YOU, BUTCH!! I don't think either one of them understood the meaning "straight and level flight at 80 knots" as we were in a continual series of unusual attitudes from the time we took off until we landed. I rode with them until close to midnight that night, refueling a couple of times during the evening. I know I was one happy person when that evening ended, not just to get out of their aircraft, but it appeared that the operation was proceeding smoothly.

The next day saw the successful completion of the operation when we extracted the "Hoc Bao" along with the Witch Doctor crew and brought them back to Khe Sanh.

A couple of items I failed to mention was the fact that if I remember right I promoted you over the radio while you were on the ground and them pinned you at Khe Sanh.

My own feeling about GEN Berry is that he would have gone to any length to insure that we got you out. At some point if we would have taken severe losses they probably might have stopped the operation, but it would have had to be bad losses. I think that leaving you would have been the last consideration and again, only had we suffered severe losses.

I know that when I landed at Khe Sanh after we had attempted to get you guys out, I was surrounded by news media wanting to know what had happened. I knew in my own mind that as much as I disliked the media, I would still have gone to them with my story if at some point you were going to be abandoned.

NOTE:

All members of the WitchDoctor crew have been in touch except Richard Gabauer and Rumaldo Salinas.

Anyone with information about either one of these crew members should try to contact Butch Elliott at 904-282-3815.

The following Air Force Facs have been found and contacted and have provide insight and input into this story. Their information as to the Air side of the story has greatly enhanced picture of what happened.

William Roger Carter (Hammer 21)

Charles R. Hosmer (Hammer 86)

John A. Wright (Hammer 55)

William P. Applegate (Hammer 59)

Thomas O. Flemming (Hammer 84)