

Mike Law
Removed VNCA
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Mike

You asked for Bill Leach's address and also Tom Garrett's. I need to know why you need them. Bill and Tom have been a personal challenge to me, because I have been trying to get them into the VHPA since 1989. Both have been extremely successful with their post Vietnam lives. Leach is a retired LTC, who runs the Lockheed Martin Corporation office in St Louis, and you know Tom is the assistant division commander of the 101st from the article.

Both have been deeply affected by their tour in Blue Max, F/79. I am going to attach what they have helped me write, and took years to get it out of them. Garrett has had many challenging assignments, but none like Blue Max at An Loc. He has been extremely helpful over the years, but has balked at joining the VHPA. The article has swayed his attitude into joining and once he goes, Bill will go. We are trying to put together a Blue Max reunion at Santa Clara, and these two have hinted an interest in going.

I am writing the complete aviation history of Loc Ninh and An Loc because I am extremely angered with the way our history was written in the 600 page book, Trial by Fire, by Dale Andrade, published in 1995. It is a great reference book for the overall Easter Offensive of 1972, but his Army aviation recounts are so bad, I recommend that folks don't buy the book.

I have about 57 pages so far, and will now attach the first piece that Leach helped me write.

On April 5, 1972 Blue Max 26 CPT Bill Leach was flying wing with his copilot WO1 Jim Jackson on Blue Max 594 , flown by CW2 Bill Windler aircraft commander and CPT Hank Spengler , the front seat co-pilot/gunner, over the town of Loc Ninh. Their aerial rocket artillery section of two AH-1G Cobras had been tasked to fly from their base at Long Thanh North to Song Be to support missions requested by the Third Regional Assistance Command(TRAC), commanded by MG Hollingsworth. NVA activity had increased dramatically since the end of March, and the sightings of NVA in the open were becoming more common.

At 0400(?) the NVA struck ARVN firebases in the vicinity of Loc Ninh in force. TRAC immediately rounded all the Army close air support available, which by then, due to the numerous III Corps standdowns was the 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion, 3d Brigade(Separate) 1st Cavalry Division. Specifically, F/79 ARA(Blue Max), F/9 Cav (Saber) and D/229(Top Tiger) were the only three units with Cobras.

According to 1st Cav journals, by the time(around 0630), these units arrived at Song Be to be deployed to Loc Ninh, on a mission by mission basis, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) advisors were in dire straits, some were surrounded already, and rescue missions were being planned. The gunship crews were

in a target rich environment, that also had coordinated .51 machine anti aircraft fire, and the beginnings of 23mm air defense fire at the higher altitudes. The NVA units got to the Loc Ninh area with ease, and quantity, due to the proximity of Loc Ninh to the Cambodia border, where they had sanctuaries.

The Leach and Windeler's ARA section spotted NVA laying wire near the road in the town itself. They rolled in and fired up the target. On climbout, Windeler's aircraft was trailing smoke because of hits from ground fire. As Leach looked over the AH-1G, he saw flames inside the engine cowling and told Windeler to land immediately. As Windeler made his approach to the ground, he again took hostile fire and diverted his flight path, which extended his time in the air. Simultaneously, the fire was spreading forward towards the cockpit, and the aircraft continued its descent to landing. Leach pleaded with Windeler to get the aircraft down, now, because Leach could now see flames behind Windeler in the cockpit. CPT Spengler's radio selector switch was on UHF instead of intercom and he could be heard hollering at Windeler to get the aircraft down. One hundred feet above the ground, AH-1G # 67-15594, tail boom separated from the aircraft as the aircraft exploded and fell to the ground. Leach and Jackson, circled the fire, saw no survivors and had to leave quickly because of ground fire. They flew to Song Be to refuel in stunned silence, not wanting to believe what they had just seen. Spengler was Leach's roommate in the officer's hootch back at Long Thanh North.

It would take until 1989 to get the remains of Windeler and Spengler returned to the United States, and on August 19, 1989, CPT Hank Spengler was buried at Arlington Cemetery. Many of his 1968 West Point classmates were in attendance as was one lone former member of A/229th, "Black Bandits." When the A/229th pilot met Spengler's mother in the receiving line at the chapel at Arlington Cemetery, she asked if he was a member of Hank's West Point Class. He replied, "No Ma'am, I was just one of the many protected by Blue Max, and came to pay my respects."

Ironically, as the bugler was playing tapes at the cemetery, a flight of 5 UH-1H's from Davison Army Airfield flew near the cemetery sight to land at Ft Myer VA to pickup members of the 3d Infantry, "the Old Guard" for air assault training. Although it had not been planned as part of the funeral ceremony, it happened at the most appropriate time, and appeared to be Army Aviation's salute to one its flight crews, who finally came home. More Blue Max crews would be lost between Apr to Jun, and the majority would be MIA.

Blue Max was the call sign of F Battery, 79th Aerial Rocket Artillery, 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion 3d Brigade (Separate) 1st Cavalry Division. Prior to the majority of the 1st Cavalry Division returning to the United States in May 1972, Blue Max was C Battery 2/20th Aerial Field Artillery, and assigned to Division Artillery (DIVARTY). Also in May the aerial weapons company, D/229th "Top Tigers" was converted to an air cavalry troop and Blue Max assumed the additional mission of aerial escort.

From May 71 to late March 1972, activity in III Corps slowed down dramatically. During this time frame many units in III Corps stood down; Air Troop 11th ACR, 334th AWC, 128th AHC, to name a few.

It seemed like everytime someone made a parts run to the maintenance facility at Vung Tau, they would see aircraft being prepared for shipment home by sea. In March, you

could stroll down the flight line a see the fancy nose jobs on the nose covers-the old granny cartoon character from Playboy magazine on the nose of a CH-54 to a vulture sitting on a perch on a aircraft from the 162d AHC "Vultures." At the bottom of the paint job were the initials "STS", which we all thought was "slicker than shit," but were informed by a 162d maintenance officer that it stood for "Set the Standard." Right!

It was unnerving to see the Cobras from the 334th taped up and ready for shipment, knowing that things were heating up. However in Feb/Mar rumors were raging that the Cav would be out by Apr/May, so we knew that we would be going soon.

On June 13th Garrett was in the front seat of a Blue Max gun and killed the .51 crew that caused this:

13 June 1972, 0905 hours

UH-1H 69-15095 XT 763 790

A/229 AHB WO1 Josh Dunigan/CPT F.John Bowers

Dunigan was "White 2" in a flight of 5 UH-1H's. Flight was inserting troops in the vicinity of Tan Khai and took fire in and out of the LZ. White 1 WO1 Bill Nuess/CPT Jim Orahood flared hard into the LZ because of the speed needed to outwit the NVA gunners. After dropping the ARVN's the flight made a left turn out of the LZ for a southerly departure. The aircraft were in a loose 120 knot treetop gaggle when White 2 was hit. With the aircraft losing power, the cockpit filling with smoke, Josh Dunigan initiated a high speed low level autorotation, which was successful to a point 3 feet above the ground. Because Josh could not tell the depth of the elephant grass he had pulled all available pitch at an altitude of 3 feet. 095 slammed hard vertically and spread the skids, with the only injury being the door gunner's back. Josh immediately informed lead that "White 2's down in the LZ." Dunigan and his crew were immediately rescued by "White 5," CW2 Vickery. Within minutes Comet 67, the OPS officer for F troop was in the vicinity of the crash site with a pink team, and the "Browns,"* ready to initiate aircraft recovery. However, the intensity of the ground fire and the condition of 095, made recovery too dangerous for the slow lumbering procedure required when the Chinook hovers over the downed aircraft for recovery. 095 was abandoned, but her crew survived.

* The "Blues" from the Air Cav Troops normally provided security for aircraft recovery. Other than the aircrews and the advisors, no other Americans were allowed to be on the ground during this battle, so ARVN were used in place of the "Blues" and were called the "Browns."

Then on June 20th, death got very personal to Tom Garrett, because he lost his Blue Max room mate and West Point Classmate from the Class of 1969 Ed Northrup in the following action:

20 June 1972 0955

AH-1G 67-15718 XT 769 770

F/79 AFA 1LT Shields/CPT Northrup

1LT Stephen Edward Shields/Cpt Edwin Gilbert Northrup

Shot down by heavy anti-aircraft fire in AH-1G #67-15718, 0955 hours, at XT 769 770, also in the vicinity of Tan Khai.

LTC Lew McConnell, Bn Cdr-229th, went to extract the pathfinders south of a creek bed near Tan Khai. An F/9 Cav pink team was covering McConnell, when a puff of white smoke went off under his aircraft. Three Blue Max aircraft were in the area; Causey and Funk were lead, Shields and Northrup were in the second aircraft, and Leach was in three. All Cobras were flying low level at high speed, when Shields and Northrup were hit by .51 cal fire. Shields, the aircraft commander successfully landed the aircraft, but could have been wounded. Jim Jackson remembers Northrup was killed after getting out of the aircraft, and attempting to help Shields out. Causey/Funk were also in the area and took 12.7 hits aft of the cockpit. Also an RPG went through all rocket pads and damaged primary hydraulic and nitrogen accumulator. Crew successfully landed the aircraft.

I talk to Leach about 3 times a week on business. I am around him about once a month. I have to be very careful about bringing up Blue Max and An Loc, because it completely changes his disposition. Usually, I wait until he has had a couple beers, then ask.

I see Garrett about once every 90 days, when business takes me to Ft Campbell KY. Since the July 24th event that was in the Newsletter, he has asked me to drop by his office at the Division Headquarters, and talk.

Both are seeking out the past and are working with it. Both have the same reaction, when I ask questions about An Loc. Sometimes their thoughts remind me of "how in the worlds did I survive that, when eight Blue Max crewmembers were killed?"

So tell me why you want their addresses? Russ Warriner of the Blue Max Association up in Maine is all confused. He thinks you think they were not in Blue Max. I can assure you, that when I took my flight of five to Lai Khe for mission updates, prior to going to An Loc, I would see both of those six footers, standing there getting the same details.



Mike Sloniker