

Chapter 10 crash of 426, April 1972

We had a short flight to Phu Cat on April 2, 1972. We were monitoring tac frequency when "Disco", an awacs type plane, called a pilot who's call sign I missed, to say "you have a Sam on the way, 2, 3, 4." The E6 pilot calmly replied, "oh f..k" We later learned that it was the Air Force EB-66 pilot call sign Bat 21. His aircraft was struck by a surface to air missile. Lt Col. Hambleton ejected and landed near a busy highway junction on a communist supply route just south of the DMZ. His shoot down sparked a 11 ½ day search and rescue effort that cost the lives of a number of people. He went for 10 days with only a couple ears of corn to eat and some rain water. His experience inspired a book and a movie by the name Bat-21.

In Northern Binh Dinh province two remote outposts LZ pony and LZ orange about 10 miles southwest of Bong Son were attacked by the 3rd NVA division and overrun and abandoned on April 9. As the NVA moved in streams of refugees streamed down from the mountains saying "beaucoup VC".

A major operation by the NVA commenced at 0430 April 11, 1972 when a VC sapper unit hit 1st Co Cav Regiment of the ROK Capitol (Tiger) Infantry Division in order to cut re supply to the central highlands. The NVA had cut highway 19 in several places and established positions on surrounding high terrain. Elements of the 12th NVA regiment and 2nd NVA regiment conducted numerous attacks along Highway 19 through An Khe Pass and Highway 1 north of Qui Nhon.

On April 12, 1972, the 2nd NVA division commenced the final prong of the Easter Offensive with an attack on Rocket Ridge at Dak To in the central highlands. They had gathered for the attack at the borders of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Two infantry regiments of the ARVN 22nd division and two armored squadrons were shifted to the three military compounds at Tan Canh, Dak To II, and Ben Het, north of Kontum. The NVA introduced the Sagger wire guided anti tank rocket, which decimated the Arvn M41 light tanks. The NVA attacked with barrages of artillery and T54 Russian tanks.

April 13, 1972. Dennis Faucher flew with David Stamper during the day and only the FM radio was working. Dennis was scheduling officer and knew he would be with David again the next day. Dennis was scheduled on the Night Hawk missions that evening, and on his way down to fly, he stopped by Stampers room and told him they had a CA the next day, could he get someone to look at the radios. David worked with someone from Avionics till around 2am. Dennis and crew had scrambled several that night.

April 14, 1972. When the Combat assault birds got to 3rd battalion area, they were the only one who had all 3 radios working. Maj Jones was going to give the aircraft to Cpt. Goodnight, but Dennis protested that he was senior AC and was given lead.

WO Dennis Faucher, W01 Guffy, David Stamper, and Rick Heath were tasked to fly 65-09915 (Bulldog 915) to insert ROK troupes into a single ship LZ about a click east of An Khe Pass. David was the crew chief and would have normally flown in his normal

position on the left side. For this mission however a minigun had been installed and Rick Heath was more familiar with its operation having flown some of the firelight (night Hawk) missions, so they swapped sides. They were the 3rd ship into the LZ and started taking intense fire. David was hit above his chicken plate. The aircraft was hit and was losing power. Dennis tried to make it back to Lane, but it was obvious that David Stamper was dead. They did not think they could make it back to lane without crashing, so they put it down at 3rd Battalion outpost.

We got the call for the recovery. When we got there, David's body was still in the aircraft. The engine had taken rounds through it, so it was not going to be feasible to fly it back. We rigged it for sling load. About the time we completed the rigging; a medivac from 133rd Med Det. Came. We carried David to the other helicopter, and they flew away to graves registration.

Thursday April 27, 1972.

An Khe Pass was a hostile place to be. LZ5 was getting mortared by the NVA at the west end of An Khe Pass and desperately needed re-supply. WO Shilleto and 1lt Jones were scheduled to fly Bulldog 426, but they were over the maximum flight hours for April.

Claud Strother and Thomas Shaw were assigned to fly Bulldog 426 today. Bernie Hernandez was the door gunner and, and Bruno Sanchez Crew Chief. They could have said, "no this is just too dangerous", but like the heroism displayed time and again by our crews they ignored their personal safety to get food and ammo to the beleaguered outpost.

They would make daring high speed runs through the valley, around trees, trying to trick the NVA observers. They would then pop up and land on the LZ trying to get supplies kicked out before the mortars hit. At best it was an extremely hazardous cat and mouse game. They made several successful runs and refueled at An Khe Airfield at about 10:15. They were making a sortie to 1st Co, 1st Bn located at the summit of the mountain just south of An Khe Pass. This time they cut it too close and hit the edge of the hill. The tail boom failed, the Huey bounced back into the air, spun around a couple times and 68-15426 rolled down the other side. Bruno and Bernie wound up on opposite sides of the aircraft. Both were unconscious for a while and bleeding. Bernie had a broken hip, and Bruno had a severely broken femur as well as numerous cuts. The pilots and the ROK cargo handlers were not moving. A squad of Koreans came down from the LZ. Maj Allen Jones was at Cav regional HDQ when they got the word something happened. He jumped in a bird and was there shortly. Peter Arnett (news paper reporter who later worked for CNN) was along. The U.S. Liaison officer Miyamoto, the reporters and Maj Jones climbed to the site. Sanchez and Hernandez were pretty banged up and thought it was the enemy coming up the hill and opened fire. Jones yelled up to them not to shoot.

A medivac from 237th Medical Det arrived and medevaced Bernie and Bruno to the 133rd Med Det at Qui Nhon.

It was obvious that nothing could be done for the ROK cargo handlers and the pilots.

Recovery call.

Cpt Baxter, Cpt Lindstrom, Tom, Rick, and myself arrived at the crash site. Bernie Hernandez (gunner shown in newspaper picture) and Bruno Sanchez (crew chief) had already been medevaced out. The broken bodies of 1LT Thomas Shaw and WO1 Claud Strother were laying uncovered near our landing site. Tom Nicholls (Paul T. Nicholls) and Rick Stevens went up to the crash site to smash the Classified radios while I covered with the M60.

There was nothing to recover on the helicopter. A medivac came in later to pick up the bodies and took them to graves registration in Qui Nhon.





American Survivors

... copter chief awaits first aid—(AP)

Downed Copters Big Threat To Yanks In Viet

AN KHE PASS, Vietnam (AP) — The renewed fighting has brought more American deaths in downed helicopters than from any other means.

Some helicopters fall prey to the sophisticated antiaircraft fire the North Vietnamese have introduced in their thrust into South Vietnam. Others crash into mountainsides, victims of rifle fire, as they make daring, low-level flights to help embattled fire bases.

Some go down for reasons never, to be fully known.

IN THE LAST hours of the two-week battle for An Khe Pass the crash of the UH1E helicopter ended the lives of two American pilots and two Korean observers.

The Huey crashed without a word from the pilots. Two men were injured.

During the battle every flight below 3,000 feet was a nightmare for the Americans. No Vietnamese or Korean helicopters were available to help.

The helipad of the An Khe outpost atop the pass came under pinpoint mortar fire. When a helicopter approached to drop supplies and drag wounded aboard, a North Vietnamese mortarman would throw a shell into his tube. He hoped the helicopter would still be on the pad when the round exploded eight seconds later.

The American pilots would make cunning approaches, racing over and between trees, out of view of that gunner until the last moment: They would nip onto the pad and hope to be away before the round exploded.

THE ENEMY and fate never caught up with the Americans until the end of the battle. A surviving crew member of helicopter said he

thought he heard rifle fire as he leaned over his machine gun, staring into the elephant grass below. A split second later he was half-conscious below the broken helicopter.

He heard a cry. Despite a broken hip he staggered through the brush and saw his fellow gunner.

He was still standing dazed when Lt. Col. A. A. Miyamoto, an American liaison officer with the Koreans, approached followed by Maj. Allan Jones, from Longview, Wash., commander of the 129th Assault Helicopter Company.

A RESCUE TEAM flew overhead. Without a thought to danger, the team landed just below the wreck.

Miyamoto bandaged the injured gunners. Jones and a Korean radio operator knelt in the grass, calling for a medical evacuation helicopter and gunships for protection.

Jones and Korean soldiers pushed up to the helicopter and dragged out the four broken bodies.

Minutes later a white helicopter painted with a red cross fluttered into the pass. The wounded were carried down the hill on litters.

The Koreans went back to their base. Within 90 minutes, the books were closed on this episode in the battle of the An Khe Pass.



Medics Evacuate Wounded

... GI carried from crashed chopper—(AP)

Years later I contacted Bruno by email. He asked me "oh by the way did you find my cigarette lighter? Well no, actually I had other things on my mind other than looking for a cigarette lighter. Following are some newspaper accounts of the incident and the surrounding fighting

Communist Forces Move I

An AP News Analysis

By PETER ARNETT

AP Special Correspondent

PLEIKU, Vietnam (AP) — South Vietnam's rolling, unpopulated central highlands used to be a war theater where neither side tried very hard to win, an "economy of force" war in military terms. Until Sunday night.

Then 20 North Vietnamese tanks roared in along a dirt road from Laos. Heavy artillery guns opened up from hidden mountain positions. A South Vietnamese division headquarters was engulfed and overrun.

Americans and South Vietnamese in Pleiku, the highlands capital, have for weeks been forecasting that the major drive of the current general offensive would come here.

"The enemy actions at Quang Tri and An Loc are limited. He wants Kontum, Pleiku and Binh Dinh provinces and will try for them soon," argued the senior American adviser for the region, John Paul Yann.

Saigon was slow to get the message. Government forces have always been extremely thin in the highlands. In Kontum Province the two regiments of the 22nd Infantry Division had been beefed up earlier in the year with a division of airborne troops. But when the Communist offensive began across the demilitarized zone three weeks ago, President Nguyen Van Thieu tried to take the airborne from the highlands

and send them north.

"We fought like hell to keep them here," one senior American said. "Saigon was not interested in us. They thought it was the same war up here, the economy of force war, and that the enemy objectives were limited."

It took the loss of the coastal district of Huai An, and three fire bases on "Rocket Ridge" above Kontum last week, to get Saigon's joint general staff really interested in what was happening.

The air over Pleiku got thick with generals in helicopters. U.S. Air Force transports swarmed through the skies with supplies, recalling the huge American buildup in the highlands in 1966-67.

But American military advisers in the Kontum area say it's all too late and too little.

"We will just have to get used to the idea of losing a lot more territory," commented an American major wounded early last week. "The other side obviously means business, and there is little we can or will do about it."

Hanoi has amassed a powerful force in Kontum, twice as big as anything sent there in the past, according to American intelligence assessments.

Two full North Vietnamese infantry divisions, the 2nd and the 220th, are aimed at the Dak To valley, Highway 14 and Kontum, assisted by two independent regiments of infantrymen, an artillery regiment and a

sapper regiment.

This means 15,000 men backed by tanks and heavy artillery threatening Kontum.

The Hanoi battle plan goes far beyond Kontum. Senior Americans have expressed amazement at its boldness. It apparently calls for isolating the cities in the highlands by cutting the highway arteries, then taking the airstrips under direct fire. The ultimate aim seems to be to defeat Saigon on the highlands battlefield and capture major cities.

Step One was to take the An Khe pass and cut Route 19 between the coastal supply bases

LZ English, north of Qui Nhon was abandoned with very little fighting. It was rumored that the ARVN command made a deal with the NVA since there was no pursuit or shelling of the retreating ARVNS.

The initial fighting around Tan Canh was led by Colonel Le Duc Dat. His leadership was totally ineffective staying hunkered down in a bunker. He disappeared. One South Vietnamese captain reported he triggered a land mine fleeing from Tan Canh.

The US commander in the area was a civilian John Paul Vann. He had served several tours earlier, but resigned his commission when the military and the Johnson administration did not want to hear the truth about corruption in the South Vietnamese military.

He was appointed to the chief US advisor in military region 2. Even though he was not actually in the military, he wore 2 stars. He was a dynamic leader and after the fall of Tan Canh and Dak To, he gave up all pretense of limiting himself to advising and started actively issuing orders. One of his first was to place most of the defense of Kontum to Colonel Ly Tong Ba. They had worked together for years, and Ba was better than most Vietnamese officers. He was the commander of the Arvn 23rd division.

Vann did not like the progress of the Koreans in opening the An Khe pass. He flew his Jet Ranger to the pass, landed on the road in the middle of a fire fight. The hill just to the south of highway 19 was held by the NVA, and had been hit by tactical air strikes, and gunships. The Koreans insisted on more air strikes before they assaulted the hill. John Paul Vann met the Korean Colonel in the middle of the road with bullets and mortars flying. The Korean Colonel stood up straight in the face of the mounting artillery fire and agreed to most of what Vann wanted in the interest of keeping the meeting short.

The Koreans finally opened An Khe Pass on April 27, pushing pierced steel planking ahead of them as a small protection from small arms fire. They traded hand grenades and literally dug out the enemy. A couple days later I saw them near lane returning to their compound with a 2 ½ ton truck nearly filled with bodies, I suspect they were Korean, but we didn't stop to ask.

Claud Strother was Dennis Fourcher's room mate. Dennis escorted the body of Claud Strother back to his home in Texas. When Dennis left Vietnam, he married Claud's widow. They say relationships formed in those circumstances are doomed, and this marriage lasted only a short time.