

Chapter 9; March 27, 1972

SHORT! 109 days and a wakeup.

Monday night, the 26th, we took a couple 122mm rockets at Lane. They landed across the hill and wrecked a couple of Hueys from another company. We got up on top of our bunker, but the show was over so we went to bed.

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The primary standby ship has a drive shaft problem so we have primary standby.

After a breakfast of watery scrambled eggs, greasy bacon, and mediocre coffee, Aircraft commander William Knebusch, pilot WO2 Mike Fannon, door gunner Billy South, and myself as Crew Chief, departed Lane to deliver documents to the U.S. advisors at the 22nd ARVN Division command post located at Tan Canh. After a pleasant flight over An Khe and Mang Yang passes, we headed north of Pleiku and Kontum and just south of Dak To. When we landed we were told to keep our engines running because an VNAF (Vietnamese Air Force) Huey had been shot down nearby.

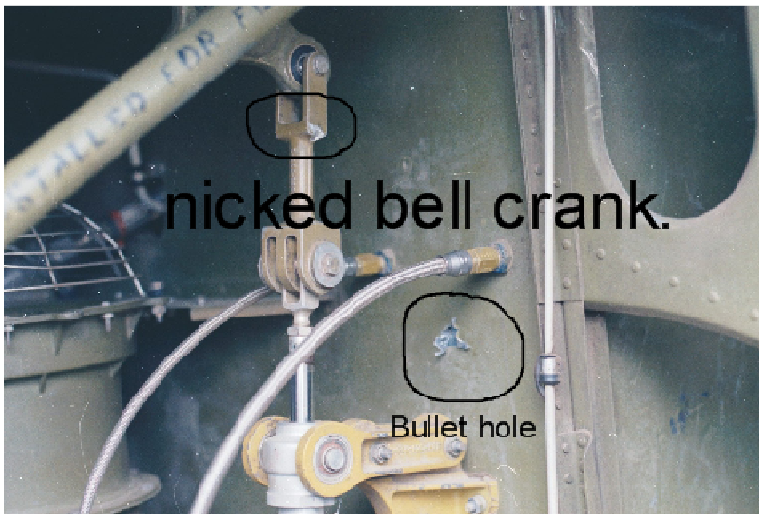


I had my M79 grenade launcher with me. I usually had the ammo vest clipped to the pole just forward of the Crew Chief seat. They say if you go down, you get out with what you wear, so I put it on over my chicken plate (armored chest plate). A couple of American light Colonels and a Vietnamese RTO got on and we went looking for the downed ship.

The wreck area was a couple of clicks southwest of Fire support Base Charlie located on Rocket Ridge.

Finding a wreck in tall trees is pretty difficult, but we spotted the Huey on its' side with no crew visible. We spotted one of the crew with a helmet on waving at us in a small clearing. We did not have any radio communications with the crew. American cobras from Camp Holloway and VNAF Huey gun ships prepped the area while we orbited at 500 feet. It was a very small clearing and we had to move left and right as we came down to avoid the tree branches. About halfway down we started taking a large volume of automatic weapons fire. Even over the noise of our helicopter, the shooting could be clearly heard. My door gunner Billy South and I opened up our M60's, spraying the area. We could feel the ship taking hits. It sounds like somebody kicking your car. In spite of the overhanging branches Bill pulled an armload of collective and we rocketed out of there. As soon as we moved away from the clearing, the firing stopped.

We landed in a clearing a couple clicks away to check the damage. Nobody was hurt, but our Huey was shot up, losing fuel from holes in the fuel tank, but basically flyable so we headed back to Tan Canh.



When you fly into a situation like that, you are tense because you have no idea what is going to happen. When the action starts, you react. There is little time to be scared, but the adrenaline gets going pretty good.

We flew back to Tan Canh and shut down. There was a Huey from 57th AHC based at Pleiku, who were

planning to try extracting the VNAF crew that we could not get. Mike tried to talk them out of it since it appeared that we may have fallen into a trap. Just as we were pulling out of the clearing, I saw the guy in the flight clothes running away. We discussed it on the ground and concluded that it may have been an NVA dressed in the flight



clothes to lure us in. They decided to go anyway and we went in and had some lunch.

When we came out, one of the guys was looking around the helicopter on my side and said "looks like somebody was pretty lucky over here". I looked where he was pointing and saw a nice 30 caliber hole in the ceiling where I had been sitting. It was about then that the adrenalin wore off and my knees turned to Jelly. That same round would have hit my M79 ammo vest with its high explosive rounds if it had still been on the post. It missed my head by about 2 inches, hit the fuel line going to the engine where it went through the fire sleeve and the metal braided layer, but just nicked the inner Teflon core. From there it made a mess out of the top of the engine cowl.



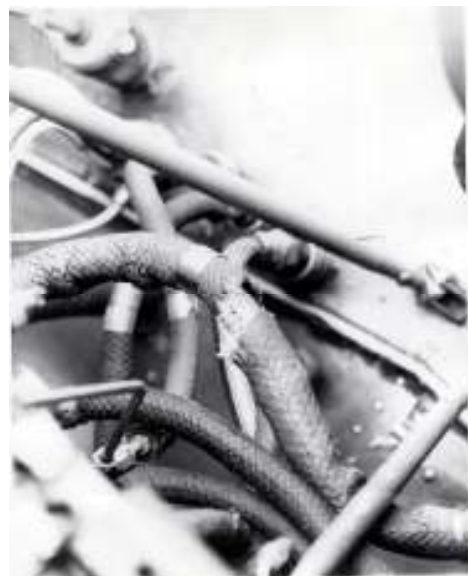
We had rounds through the fuel cell. It is supposed to be self sealing. It slowed the flow enough to allow us to get back to Tan Canh, but far from sealed.

Another round nicked the tail rotor control bell crank. The tail rotor opposes the torque of the main rotor, and if the round had been $\frac{1}{4}$ " more inboard, it would have severed the control, and we would have crashed on the spot. I didn't know what God had in store for my life, but I was very grateful for sparing it that day. Thanks for your prayers mom.

The word came back that Huey 67-17841 from the 57th AHC at Pleiku, the crew we talked to at Tan Canh, had crashed. They also received a heavy volume of fire and crashed near by. Larry James was not as lucky on this flight. Pilot Larry James Woods was killed and gunner Ed Wong went MIA while they were making their way to firebase Charlie on Rocket ridge. There but for the grace of God go I. That could have just as easily been me or my friends that could have been killed or captured.

Back at Lane, the word came down that we had been shot up. Linh heard about it and was sick with worry. Nobody seemed to have any details if anybody had been hurt or what. She wanted to stay and see what had happened, but she had to go home at 4pm with the other hootch maids.

We hitched a ride back to Lane and got back late that night. The next morning Linh came in with the other hootch maids and ran the $\frac{1}{4}$ mile from the gate and came into the hootch not knowing what to expect. When she saw



me she hugged me tight and was crying. She had been so scared all night not knowing if I was OK.



Later that day Rick and I and Sgt Smith went back to Tan Canh and rigged 740 for sling load to Pleiku.

The transmission had been over torqued, the engine deck was delaminated, and basically shot to the dickens. It was decided that its tour in Vietnam was over.

At Pleiku we had to steam clean it inside and out to make sure there was no "biological matter" left in it before it went back for depot maintenance in the States. We removed the Snow Snake battery cover and put it on Snow Snake 2 tail number 910.

The Vietnamese gave Mike and Bill a cross of Gallantry with a silver star and Billy and Me a Cross of Gallantry with a bronze star for our efforts. It was presented at a temple north of Lane called Ba Gi, the headquarters of the ARVN 22nd Division.



This is me hooking up
Snow Snake for the ride
to Pleiku.

Cleaning up to go home.





Award presentation at Ba Gi.

Unkown to us at the time, we had been part of the opening moves of the largest North Vietnamese offensive of the war, generally known as the Easter offensive of 1972. The Tan Canh area was a major entry point into south Vietnam for the NVA on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

On March 30, 1972, 3 NVA divisions crossed the dmz into Quang Tri Province. Facing them was the recently activated 3rd ARVN division. Key units, especially some of the rear support units panicked and ran at the first explosions of artillery fire. In addition many of the gunners of the ARVN artillery batteries took shelter instead of providing critical fire support and counter battery missions. The low weather precluded effective air support, so the only fire support they were receiving was from a U.S. destroyer offshore.

The general confusion and the tendency of ARVN commanders to downplay their bad fortune led the officials in Saigon to dismiss the attacks as diversionary attacks only.

Meanwhile During the later part Of March, the Fire Support bases along rocket ridge northwest of Kontum received probing attacks. Which increased in intensity until the Fire bases and Tan Canh were overrun. This was the start of the NVA Easter offensive that was to involve all of Kontum and Binh Dinh Provinces. It

was a change of operation from small scale attacks to large scale division sized attacks including tanks and other mechanization.

The NVA intended to annihilate the ARVNs while the US still had a presence. North Vietnam thought that if they humiliated the US, they would have a better bargaining position at the Paris Peace talks.

Prior to the Easter Offensive, the NVA was content to draw the US into small battles in order to cause casualties that would cause the people back home to turn against the war. In this, they were very successful.

President Nixon was implementing Vietnamization, the turning over of the war to the South Vietnamese. The US had a peak of 543,482 soldiers in Vietnam in April 1969.

When the Easter offensive started, there were only about 24,000 U.S. servicemen in Vietnam.

Another factor in making the North decide to go on a massive offensive was that President Nixon had made trips to both China and the USSR, and they felt that the window of opportunity for military help might be closing.

The US intelligence services were expecting some kind of attacks, but never dreamt of the extent or even the direction of the attacks. For example near the DMZ, the NVA had typically gone around the dmz and attacked from the west. Now, they dropped all pretense of this being a fight fought with local Viet Cong and boldly sent several divisions across the dmz with long range 130mm artillery and T54 and PT76 tanks. In fact it was some time before the US and Vietnamese commanders in Saigon were convinced that these attacks were for real. ARVN defenses were led in some places by inept, corrupt and politically appointed commanders who were not up to the task and turned tail and ran.

The NVA attacked nearly simultaneously up north around the dmz, in the central highlands around Kontum, highway 19 connecting the east with the west, and the coastal low lands in Bin Dinh Province.

They attempted to cut the nation in half with these attacks.

They also attacked down south in the An Loc area, thinking they might be able to march clear into Saigon.