

Bad Day at Quan Loi: The Loss of Crimson Tide 106

By Clifford J. Morley

I remember that day like it was yesterday. It began before dawn with the awakening of the flight crews of Charlie Company, 228th Aviation Battalion ASHB, 1st Air Cavalry Division, based at Camp Gorvad not far from the village of Phuoc Vinh, South Vietnam. It was March 9, 1970 and duty called to attend to the mission at hand. There were 16 CH47B Chinooks parked in their revetments out on the flight line and one of them was my responsibility. I was a flight engineer with Charlie Company since January which was a continuation of a previous tour of duty with Bravo Company.

It was the usual hustle and bustle of gunners, pilots, flight engineers, crew chiefs and maintenance crews chowing down for breakfast and afterwards getting on the trucks or walking to the flight line. The crew chief and I opened up the ship as the gunner mounted up the M60D machine guns. I went up top to begin a pre-flight inspection. To the east beyond the villages and fire support bases and beyond the South China Sea, the horizon began to glow bright crimson hues laced with streaks of gold, blue, and shades of gray and white and red.

In silent thunder the Sun burst into the sky and hung there suspended, a huge reddish orange sphere alive and belching fire and brimstone, unleashing its hot breath and light across the land, across Vietnam and Cambodia to the west and beyond. It reeked of hell, of war and living life on the edge of death. Closer at hand were the sights, sounds and smells of early morning flight operations: pilots, flight engineers and crew chiefs performing pre-flight inspections in, on and around their CH47B Chinooks: the whine of turbine engines firing up as rotor blades began to whirl, then cascade into full lift-off rpm: JP4 exhaust fumes filled the air, reminiscent of driving behind a Trailways bus back home: and there was that never ending Vietnam smell.

My ship was relegated to standby status which meant that we might be called up in the next ten minutes or be there all day. In the next row of revetments, almost directly in front of me was CH47B Chinook 66-19106, also known by its radio call sign: Crimson Tide 106. SP4 George Arthur Bamford was standing at the rear of the aircraft getting ready to crank up the engines, flight helmet on and hooked into the intercom system, chest protector on and his sidearm. SP4 Phillip Leslie Clark was sticking his head out the window hanging over the left gun as if to say "OK, let's get this show on the road". SP4 Keith Harold Reitz was standing well ahead of the front rotor blades. The aircraft commander, WO1 John Lynwood Fortner was seated in the left side of the cockpit and the co-pilot was WO1 Terrance Wesley Anderson. The crew communication most likely went like this: Fortner on the intercom to Bamford, "ready on the "P" chief?" and Bamford replies "ready on the "P". Either Fortner or Anderson reached up to the overhead panel in the cockpit and started the auxiliary power unit which must be operating in order to crank the engines. "Ready on one?", "Ready on one". Engine one ignites and the rotor blades slowly begin to turn. "Ready on two?". "Ready on two". Engine two ignites and as the throttles are thrust forward in the cockpit, the rotor blades accelerate to maximum velocity and invisibility. Rotor wash kicks up dirt in all directions.

Reitz guides the 106 out of its revetment with Bamford back at the rear following, down the taxiway to the take-off area. There was nothing out of the ordinary to indicate that Crimson Tide 106 and its crew were lifting off into ominous skies.

Down time is always a good time to catch up on all the things that need to be done but don't get done otherwise. At approximately 1510 (03:10pm) the maintenance sergeant came by and he was not bringing good news. He told us that 106 had flipped upside down, gone inverted in flight, broken up, and crashed at Quan Loi, killing the entire crew. Flight crews rotated on a regular basis, so we had all flown with Fortner, Anderson, Bamford, Reitz and Clark at one time or another. I thought about that morning, having watched 106 and its crew crank up, taxi out, and take off. Stunned silence was the prevailing mood.

Quan Loi was an Army supply base about thirty minutes flying time from Camp Gorvad-Phuoc Vinh. It was surrounded by an old rubber plantation which I recall flying over, coming into and out of Quan Loi on re-supply missions in support of the 1st Air Cavalry Division. The base was not unlike many others spread around the Cav's area of operations and for that matter, all of South Vietnam. Giant C130 Hercules aircraft and other fixed wing planes flew in materials and supplies and the "Hooks" converged on a daily basis to haul it out to the boonies as mission assignments required. There were a number of other Charlie Company Chinooks flying missions out of Quan Loi that day and some of their crews were eyewitnesses to the last minutes of Crimson Tide 106's flight to tragedy. Some others arrived on the scene shortly afterwards.

Later that evening at the flight platoon quarters, as crews who were out on missions that day began to arrive, details of what had happened to 106 and its crew began to emerge. At that point and for the next several days I became a second party to first party eyewitness accounts, and also to some reasonable and wild speculations. On the other hand, the Army's Incident Report is constructed from many more eyewitness accounts than myself or any one person could have ever been exposed to and is very dry and matter of fact. What follows is an inter-mingling of what I remember and what the Army's Incident Report says but not verbatim unless indicated with quotation marks.

Eye witness accounts indicate that earlier on March 9, 1970 but prior to the crew of CH47B 66-19106 shutting down for chow and a maintenance check, the aircraft did show signs of trouble at getting off the ground with some of its external loads. In fact it was observed on several occasions "dragging its load" a short distance before lifting off. This was not shown in the report but I would surmise it was considered moot as it was not an element of the actual incident being described.

The crew of Crimson Tide 106 probably shut down for chow and for the midday maintenance check at about 1300 to 1320 (1pm to 1:20pm). The first mission of the afternoon for 106 was a sortie of 5 bundles of barbed wire, 3 bundles of 8 foot steel engineer stakes and 3 bundles of 3 foot steel engineer stakes destined for Fire Support Base Bill from the logistics pad at Quan Loi. The report acknowledges that Crimson Tide 106 was piloted by Aircraft Commander John Fortner and Co-pilot Terrance Anderson. The takeoff time was 1420 (2:20pm). The load was picked up to a hover of about 10 feet above the ground and allowing for the length of the cargo

net and sling, 106 was hovering at about 50 feet in the air. The aircraft commander issued the initials J.N. to the logistics pad controller as certification that he had taken the sortie. Fortner was told to hold for about 20 seconds which he did. At this point there is no indication in the report of any further communications between Crimson Tide 106 and the ground controller or any other aircraft. It is highly likely that over the next five minutes many attempts were made by air traffic control and other aircraft to raise 106 on the radio.

The aircraft moved forward to begin takeoff down the runway and started to lose altitude immediately. At a point to the right of the active runway and directly across from the control tower, the load started to drag the ground and was dragged for about 200 feet. Some of the steel engineer stakes came loose from the cargo net and were being strewn on the ground. The report now says "A rapid and unusual popping sound was heard by witnesses near the scene". What I heard regarding the latter statement was that this was gunfire and the speculation was that the aircraft commander was attempting to ditch the load but the cargo hook was not operational, so the flight engineer was trying to shoot the cargo sling free with his pistol. This may be one factor in the hypothesis of a massive hydraulics failure.

Crimson Tide 106 then sat down on the ground right on top of its load with an extreme nose low attitude. I find this part of the Army's incident report to be very curious since it begs a number of questions. The report says "This attitude was described as extreme with the possibility of the forward blades striking the ground". This is ambiguous. Did the front blades strike the ground or not? I would conclude the front blades did not strike the ground but probably came close since it would have been very evident if they had. Also in the seconds on the ground, why didn't the pilot or copilot shut down the engines? There may have been a malfunction that prevented them from doing this. It is also puzzling as to why some of the crew did not jump out of the aircraft. The questions are intriguing but there were no answers then or now.

An abrupt nose high pitch was observed as the aircraft became airborne again, jerking the load off the ground as it shot up to about 100 feet. The load was twisting wildly, swinging fore and aft, to the left and right, in extreme motions and jerking the aircraft around. The aircraft was described as "fishtailing and jerking along the load". At a point about 100 feet forward of and about 100 feet to the right of the spot where 106 had sat down on the ground on its load, the load was released and landed on a UH1H Huey helicopter. The UH1H sustained major damage to its tailboom and rotor blades. No one on the ground was injured by the falling bundles of barbed wire and steel engineer stakes.

With the loss of the weight of the load, Crimson Tide 106 then shot up rapidly to an altitude of about 500 feet above ground level. At this time the aircraft was over the approach end of runway 23 and its bizarre and erratic flight attitudes continued to be observed. Then a round black object was seen falling from the aircraft. There was no indication in the report as to what that might have been. Was it a part of the aircraft or was it some item that had fallen out from inside the ship? The answer to that is a relative unknown, at least within the constraints of the report.

Crimson Tide 106 then began to bank to the left as if trying to return to the airfield to land. As the aircraft banked left it appeared to be in control part of the time, then it would fishtail and porpoise. When 106 had completed approximately 270 degrees of the left turn, the aircraft

then flew straight and level for about 500 feet, then rolled to the left, nose low, and went approximately 180 degrees inverted i.e. it flipped upside down. The aft rotor pylon tore off and fell away at the same time that a loud bang and flash of light was seen coming from the rear. The main fuselage continued forward about 100 meters and impacted the ground nose low on the left side. The forward section did not burn. Aircraft and ground personnel were on the scene immediately after the crash but there were no survivors. The time of the impact was 1425 (2:25pm). *ibid 1

It was about 2215 (10:15pm) when the company commander and the first sergeant came by the flight platoon quarters to gather the personal effects of the crew of 106. They spoke briefly and then put the private property of Bamford, Clark and Reitz into duffel bags and took them away. A similar scene took place at the flight officer's quarters. Armed Forces Vietnam Radio was playing, barely audible, stateside songs: "Iron Butterfly", "Blowing in the Wind", "Born to be Wild", "White Rabbit", and "In the Year 2525" but Oblivion had already sang its song "It was a Bad Day at Quan Loi".

On the day after the crash, the word was passed to all of Charlie Company about the memorial service scheduled for the Crew of 106 at 1900 hours (7pm) that evening. I was set for flight at first light and the first mission of the day was out of the Quan Loi Airfield. The wreckage of 106 had already been picked up and placed in one large pile and several smaller piles on the logistics pad. Pieces of the main drive shaft had been put back together as if to reassemble a broken spine. It was a disquieting sight as we flew missions out of Quan Loi, mostly to the west out beyond Nui Ben Den, hauling supplies to fire support bases close to the Cambodian border. The sun was straight up in the sky, high noon, and it was time to shut down for chow and a maintenance check. We all walked over to view the remains of CH47B 66-19106. Not much was said. Photographs were taken and are attached as part of my recollections of two days in March, 1970.

"I am Thine, Oh Lord" was the opening hymn of the Memorial Service which was about five minutes late in getting started and most of Charlie Company was in attendance. A few flight crews were still flying missions and other duty requirements kept some away. The Group Chaplain, Major Edward A. Simon, spoke about the tragedy and in tribute and memory of:

WO1 Terrance Wesley Anderson 1948-1970, Pilot Hometown: Fremont, Ca.

SP4 George Arthur Bamford 1947-1970, Flight Engineer Hometown: Lebanon, Or.

SP4 Phillip Leslie Clark 1948-1970, Left Gunner Hometown: Fort Walton Beach, Fl.

WO1 John Lynwood Fortner 1949-1970, Aircraft Commander Hometown: Miami, Fl.

SP4 Keith Harold Reitz 1948-1970, Crew Chief, Right Gunner Hometown: Stotts City, Mo.
ibid 2: 106 crew profiles updated 1995, 1997 and 1998.

The Chaplain led with an invocation and prayers and selected verses were read from scripture by a few of the officers and enlisted men. The company commander, Major Robert E. Lanzotti, delivered the eulogy. There was a memorial meditation by the Chaplain and a closing prayer and

benediction. The Bugler then played "Taps". The postlude hymn was "Rock of Ages". On the front of the memorial service document handed out that day, there is a quote from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address which says "That we here highly resolve that these dead here shall not have died in vain".

By Clifford J. Morley
B/228th ASHB 1st Cav/May 1968-May 1969
C/228th ASHB 1st Cav/January 1970-September 1970
Kent, Washington

Thanks and credit to Jim Ketcham, webmaster of charter.net 228th for providing me with a copy of the U.S. Army's Incident Report regarding Helicopter CH47B 66-19106 and to Gary Roush, webmaster of <http://www.vhpa.org/> who was the source of that information. Also, other confirming and research sources were: <http://www.vhcma.org> and <http://www.vhfcn.org> and The Virtual Wall.

*ibid 1 and 2: United States Army Incident Report #700309301ACD

Attachments: Four photographs of the wreckage of CH47B 66-19106 taken at Quan Loi on March 10, 1970 and a copy of the Memorial Services Document.

The attached photos and documents to "Bad Day at Quan Loi: The Loss of Crimson Tide 106" are from the Vietnam War Military Records, papers and photo collection of the writer, Clifford J. Morley, Kent-Oak Harbor, Washington.

October 11, 2006



Wreckage of C/228 ASHB 1stCav CH47B Chinook 66-19106 which went inverted in flight at Quan Loi on March 9, 1970 at 1425 hours. Its 5 man crew was killed in action.



Wreckage of CH47B 66-19106 taken at the Quan Loi logistics pad on March 10, 1970.



Wreckage of CH-47B 66-19106. Shown is the reassembled main drive shaft.



Another view of the wreckage of CH-47B 66-19106. Out beyond the wreckage is the rubber plantation.

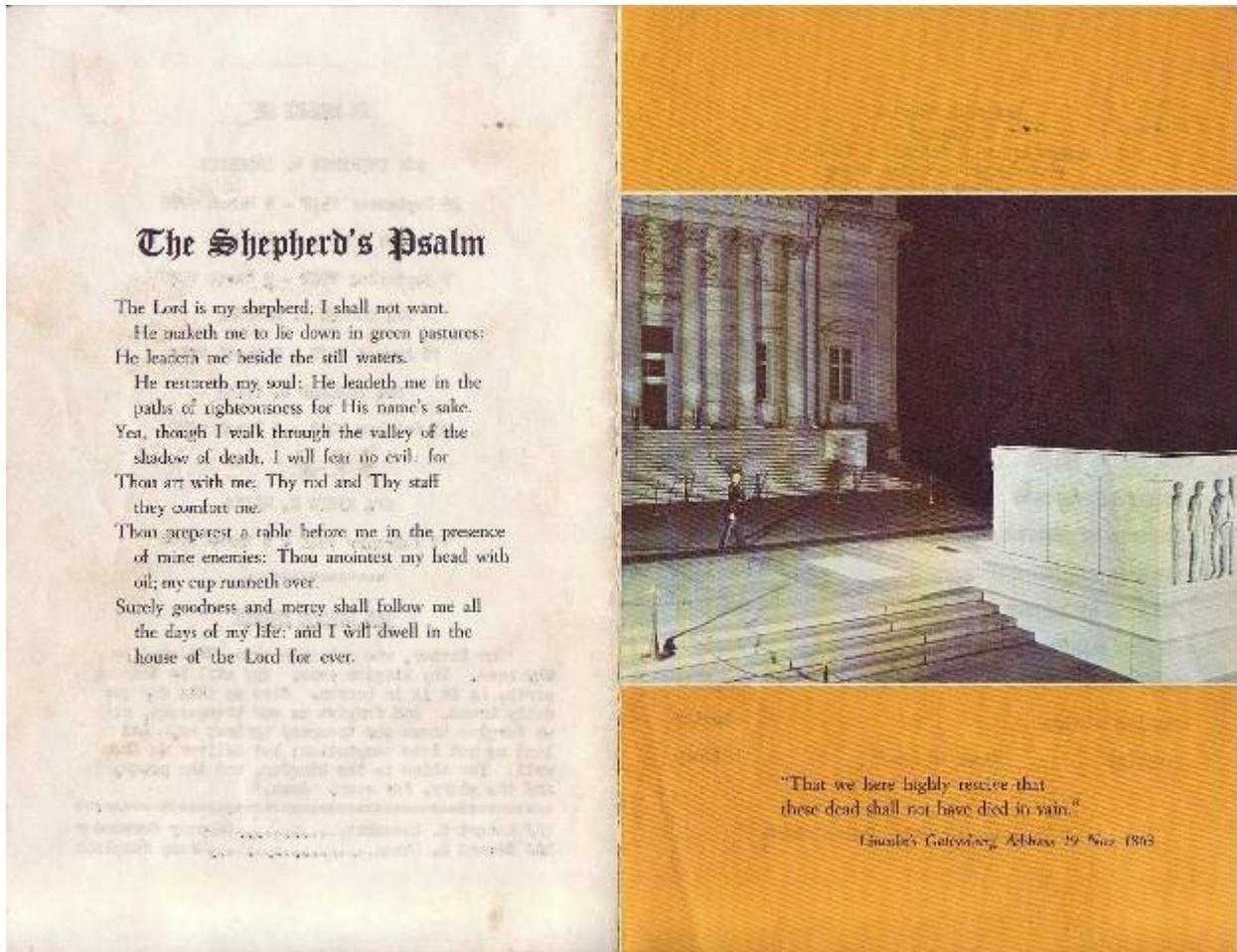


Photo caption for the Memorial Service Front & back: The front and back of the memorial service document for the crew of CH47B 66-19106 held at Camp Gorvad, Vietnam on March 10, 1970.

MEMORIAL SERVICE
 C Company
 228th Aviation Battalion (ASH)
 11th Combat Aviation Group
 1st Cavalry Division (AM)
 Camp Servad, Vietnam

 10 March 1970 1900 Hours

PRELUDE	"I Am Thine, O Lord"	Whitney
*OPENING SENTENCE		Chaplain
*INVOCATION		Chaplain
*THE LORD'S PRAYER		Congregation
SCRIPTURE READINGS		Selected Verses
COMMENTS BY COMPANY COMMANDER		MAJ Lanzotti
MEMORIAL PRAYER		Chaplain
MEMORIAL MEDITATION		Chaplain
*CLOSING PRAYER		Chaplain
*BENEDICTION		Chaplain
*PLAYING OF TAPS		Hugler
POSTLUDE	"Rock of Ages"	Whitney

* Congregation will please stand.

IN MEMORY OF

WO1 TERRENCE W. ANDERSON
 26 September 1948 - 9 March 1970
 WO1 JOHN L. FORTNER
 7 September 1947 - 9 March 1970
 SP4 GEORGE A. BAMPFORD
 16 August 1947 - 9 March 1970
 SP4 PHILLIP L. CLARK
 25 October 1948 - 9 March 1970
 &
 SP4 KIRTH H. REITZ
 17 February 1948 - 9 March 1970

THE LORD'S PRAYER

"Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil: for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen."

 MAJ Robert E. Lanzotti.....Company Commander
 MAJ Edward A. Simon.....Group Chaplain

Photo caption for the Memorial Service inside: Inside of the Memorial Service document for the crew of CH47B 66-19106 which went inverted in flight at Quan Loi on March 9, 1970.