

First Night of the Tet Offensive, 31 Jan 68 -- Mike Hernandez and the Distinguished Flying Cross

We were all back in the tents, the Crossbow Crew Chiefs; the birds were rearmed and refueled, the miniguns wrapped with shelter halves, the pods unplugged, and most of us managed to get a warm shower as opposed to a cold one. I put on my last remaining flight suit, left over from Korea and the 19th Trans, and cranked on AFVN TV.

It was January 30th, the first day of the Tet Holidays. Somehow, our government and theirs had managed to negotiate a cease fire and the next day we would stand down.

Papasan Haase came stomping past, the oldest man in the platoon. He had on shower clogs and a towel. As he clomped by, the wooden floors creaked and the bare light bulbs overhead swayed back and forth.

Randy DeGood stopped by my cubicle on the way to the screened in porch and asked if I wanted to play "Crazy Eights" with him and Bobby Wright. I figured what the hell; I'd already missed "Combat," so I grabbed my stash of extra "8"s and headed for the screen door.

We had a simple rule when we played Crazy Eights--everyone cheated so all was fair. I hid my extra 8s in my sleeve as I started to sit in a lawn chair. We all heard the mortar tubes at the same time. Most sounded like they were to the south, but I remember hearing at least one to the west, from the other side of the Village.

I kicked off my shower clogs and stepped into my jungle boots and headed through the rubber trees for the flight line. I could hear Randy right behind me, he was crewing my wing ship.

As we passed in front of Operations, the siren started; and, at the same time, the duece and a half airhorn we used for scrambles went off in one long blast. Just in front of the Orderly room, the first round went off to the south somewhere near the P.O.L. farm.

I speeded up as I reached my ship, because I knew they would start walking them up the flight line. I plugged the rockets in on my side and started unwrapping the mini guns. Mike Hernandez, my gunner, came skidding to a halt on the right side

and was following my moves almost as if we had rehearsed it. I popped the Aircraft Commander's door, and then started getting my chicken plate on.

Mr. Peters arrived with the co-pilot, and I grabbed his helmet and gear as he came past. He jumped in, and I handed him his chicken plate. The pilot began flipping the switches as Mr. Peters pulled on his flight helmet that I handed him. As he plugged in, I put my flak vest on over the chicken plate and then slung the shoulder holster for my Browning Hi-Power over the top of everything.

The rounds were really starting to fall now, and I could hear the impacts to the south start moving north along the flight line. I pulled Mr. Peters armored shield forward on his seat and closed and locked his door.

Grabbing my helmet, I stepped into the cabin and sat down after hooking up my sissy belt. A round hit about 150 yards to the south as I plugged my helmet into the intercom system. I heard Mr. Peters tell the pilot to screw the checklist, just pull the starting trigger.

I saw the first round explode just as I heard the kaWHAM! I told Pete that the last round went off just 100 yards south and then saw another blow across the runway near the tower. The blades were beginning to blur and then Mr. Peters yelled "I've got it!" and he frog hopped the ship out of the revetment to the left. I couldn't see him, but I knew he was thumb pressing the hell out of the throttle; and suddenly I heard our wingman say,

"33, 37. We're Up."

Mr. Peters pulled the collective into his armpit just as a round went off in the revetment next to us. We made one giant leap to the pierce steel planking of the runway, bounced once, and then took off in a left break to the south.

I already had stuck a barrel in my M60 machinegun, and the belt of ammo was hanging from the C-ration B3 can, already loaded into the feed tray. As we cleared the perimeter, I could see five or six flashes just to the south, and I knew I had lucked out and spotted them firing just as we came to altitude. I started to ask for clearance to fire, but Mr. Peters beat me to the intercom and yelled, "You've got it! Go HOT!" and reached up and released the minigun sights without feeling the pilot's hands on the controls.

"BUD, See 'em?"

I rogered that and figured screw the clearance. I brought the sixty all the way up to my shoulder and squeeze off a burst of 100% tracer. I corrected slightly to the right

as I saw the mini gun on my side start to move. I corrected and pulled back the trigger and just held on. Mr. Peters followed my tracers and let rip a three-second burst from the minigun. I didn't hear the right gun fire or see the flash. Mr. Peters came up on intercom and said, "Follow my tracers;" and the pilot corrected to the left.

As we straightened out, my tracers were joined by a stream from both mini guns, and the pilot said, just as if he had been in country for months,

"I have the target, alternate bursts with my rockets."

This was because the minis would jam if the rockets were fired at the same time. He got off a quick pair and then our wingman yelled to break right, we were under fire from the left.

I spotted the tracers coming up at us, and then a second machine gun further south opened up. We continued to turn, and I stepped out on the skid to fire to our left rear. As we came around, Mike started firing in front of our wingman as he attacked the mortar position. I could see both door gunners firing in one long continuous burst as they dived at the mortar tubes. We were low enough that I could hear either RPDs or AKs, and there were a lot of them firing.

We finished the backside of the race track and started our second run as 37 broke out to the right. Most of the fire seemed to be coming from the east side of the target; but Mike was firing to his right, at almost 9 o'clock. I heard the first snick, snick, snick of rounds passing through the airframe, then a thump; and the whole right side of the airplane lit up. I ceased fire and looked right in time to see Mike key his helmet microphone.

"Sir, right rocket pod took hits, rocket motor ignited in the pod!"

I screamed "Blow the Pod!" and saw both pilots reach for the arm control panel to fire the explosive bolts that would jettison the rocket pods. The pilot hit it several times and then, still cool, said,

"NO JOY RELEASE IT MANUALLY!"

I pulled the lever on my sissy belt and started for the right side of the cabin. Mike was already reaching out for the cable that would manually release the right pod. The rocket motor had ignited at least one other rocket, and the pilots were beginning to feel the thrust on the right side.

Our wingman started screaming on VHF that we were on fire, and Johnny was now frantically yanking on the cable release. A stream of tracers suddenly erupted right on our nose and the pilot broke left. I lost my balance and hit the floor as Mike stepped out of the aircraft on top of the pod. I saw him take his spare machinegun barrel and hook it under the cable and use it as a fulcrum to pry the cable up off the mount as we continued our left turn.

Then he was gone. The flame and fire, the moaning scream of the rockets burning, were all falling behind us as the pod traced a comet's trail down.

There was no sign of my gunner. I was right there, and I couldn't see him. I fumbled for my microphone switch and said,

"He's gone, Sir, Mike fell out!"

I looked forward as Mr. Peters turned all the way around in his seat. Even in the dark I could see his eyes widen in horror. The shock and the grief just washed through me as I looked back at the empty seat where my friend had been just seconds before.

Out of the corner on my eye, I saw the hand from below the floor reach up and grab the aluminum cross members of the gunner's seat. I didn't even use the microphone as I screamed, "HE'S ALIVE!" and reached over and grabbed his hand. I could see his sissy belt stretched from the wall, downward, and then his other hand came up, grabbed the seat, and he pulled himself back into the helicopter.

That's how Specialist Mike Hernandez, a Crossbow Door Gunner, earned the Distinguished Flying Cross.