

LOSS TO INVENTORY

UH-1 SN: 66-01118

5/21/1969

Following are the events which led to the loss-to-inventory of UH-1 SN: 66-01118 on May 21st, 1969. A portion of our unit, The Comancheros, A Co. / 101st Assault Helicopter Battalion was assisting the Americal Division in the Chu Lai area south of Da Nang for a couple months.

The mission was a 2 ship resupply mission to an infantry unit in close contact with the opposition in the jungle west of Tam Ky. I, Andre Thomas / Comanchero 23, was the aircraft commander of the lead aircraft 66-16124. My co-pilot was WO-1 Edwin Sholar, Crewchief was SP4 Stephen Roberts, and Gunner was SP4 Donnie Franks. I was loaded with water and small arms munitions. Number 2 aircraft commander was Bruce McMorris / Comanchero 27. I don't know who his other crewmembers on this mission were. His aircraft was fully loaded with wooden crates of mortar rounds.

I was going to be the first to do the resupply. I had the unit pop smoke, and identified it. The unit advised that they were in very close "contact" but really needed the supplies. From the area where we were circling to recon the area I elected to reach the unit by going low and fast at tree top level, thereby reducing my exposure time. I dropped altitude as quickly as I could and stayed just above the trees. In some of the sparse areas I clearly saw members of the opposition try to get a shot at me but I was there and gone too fast for them to get a clean shot. I radioed 27 to come in the way that I did because they couldn't get any clear shots. I reached the unit, they quickly unloaded me with the help of Roberts and Franks, and we pulled pitch to make room for 27.

I grabbed altitude as fast as I could and did a hard right climbing turn, taking a course 180 degrees from my approach heading, so I could keep an eye on 27 as he unloaded. However, to my surprise, he wasn't on short final at all. In fact, he was slightly below me to my left, at about 800 to 900 feet AGL (above ground level) and a ¼ mile in front of me, looking to be what could best be described as on a base leg getting ready to turn final. Just as he was about to disappear from my view behind my instrument console I saw an explosion at the aft end of his right skid. When he reappeared on the other side of my console his aircraft was on fire from the point of explosion and aft. I radioed him "27, 23, you're hit and on fire". In retrospect that was a stupid radio call because I'm sure he was aware of the situation.

He was able to maintain control of the aircraft and I dropped in behind him, in a slightly high echelon right position, as he went down. It was quite clear to the opposition, and all concerned, that he was going to be on the ground shortly, so the opposition now concentrated 100% of their attention on trying to shoot us down and we were taking hits like crazy.

27's aircraft was quickly becoming more engulfed in flames so the crewchief and doorgunner climbed over the mortar boxes, getting between the boxes and back of the pilot seats. To his credit, 27 was able to maintain control of his aircraft, even as the mortar boxes in the cargo area also began to burn. If his aircraft held together long enough the only place for him to go was 2 small side-by-side patches of clearing divided by a single row of thin trees, each clearing only slightly bigger than the aircraft we were flying. All the way down we were taking hits on our aircraft, after all, they didn't need to waste ammunition on the burning aircraft.

27 was able to get 66-01118 on the ground in the right side clearing. Just as he was about to touch down I saw the aircraft literally bend where the tailboom met the fuselage as it melted, similar to heating a plastic spoon in the middle. As I went around the front of him I saw all 4 crewmembers exit the aircraft in the direction of the small clearing on the left. All this time we are still taking hits from small arms fire.

I did a hard left turn and dropped below treetop level into the clearing on the left of the tree line, expecting 27 and his crew to come through the tree line. At least no one was shooting at us, but the other crew didn't come through the tree line. So, I picked up to a hover over the tree line and immediately started taking more small arms fire hits as I descended next to the burning aircraft. 27 and his crew came running out of the tree line, jumped on my aircraft, and we grabbed some serious altitude again taking many more small arms hits.

We climbed to a safe altitude to watch 118 burn. An OH-6 arrived and hovered over the burning 118, staying below the tree tops. He put out a call on the emergency channel that an aircraft was down and on fire. I informed him that I had the crew on board my aircraft and that the burning aircraft was loaded with mortar rounds, at which point he nosed it over and quickly left the area. A few moments later we see about 12 to 15 of the opposition come through the jungle just off the nose of 118, firing on the aircraft and advancing (not knowing all the crew was safe). As they got quite close to 118BOOM!!! In the end, 66-01118 got its revenge and took them all out. As for we 8 crewmembers from the 2 aircraft, not a scratch, which was remarkable since my aircraft took so very many hits, and although close, no vital components were hit.

7 to 10 days later Ed Sholar and I received "Brave Eagle" coins for getting 27 and his crew out. Sadly, 2 weeks to the day after saving the crew of 66-01118, Ed Sholar my co-pilot and Stephen Roberts my crewchief of that day would die in the loss of 66-00819, with Capt. Greg Fuchs, Barnes the gunner, and SP4 Robert Jennings, passenger/artillery observer.

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