



## Shootout on the Cambodian Border

11 November 1966

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“CROC 6” 119<sup>th</sup> AHC

Pleiku, RVN

*SAIGON, South Viet Nam (AP).....” Headquarters also announced that three American helicopters were shot down Friday while supporting ground operations near the Plei Djereng Special Forces camp in the highlands close to the Cambodian border”. 11 November 1966 was a busy and dangerous time for US Forces in Vietnam. It’s not surprising that the AP made only brief mention to what I’m calling “The Shootout on the Cambodian Border”. That same day five U.S. planes were lost over North Vietnam; Viet Cong infiltrators inflicted heavy casualties on a platoon of*

American Marines near Da Nang; an ammunition dump near Saigon was blown up and the 45<sup>th</sup> Surgical Hospital was mortared. Add to this at least five other helicopters, two of them medevac flights, and an F-100 were shot down in the south and a CV-2 Caribou crashed in a rainstorm. This “War Story” looks in detail at the bravery, sacrifice and skill of the three crews shot down some forty- eight years ago at LZ “Red Warrior”.

Forty-eight years is a long time to remember an event that lasted no more than ten minutes, but for those who participated in the “Shootout on the Cambodian Border” or the “Pail Wail Doodle” as noted military historian S.L.A. Marshall called it, it was only yesterday.

On 11 November 1966 I was serving as the platoon leader of the gunship platoon (Call Sign Croc 6) of the 119<sup>th</sup> AHC. We were assigned to the 52<sup>nd</sup> CAB located at Camp Holloway in the Central Highlands. At the time we were providing general aviation support during Operation Paul Revere IV to American and Vietnamese units.

As the day progressed on 10 Nov 1966 the command became increasingly concerned that a CIDG company and their Special Forces advisors were in danger of being overrun. The company, located on a dry lake bed called Pali Wali, was in contact with a large NVA unit. During the day they had suffered 40% casualties while killing some 58 NVA attackers. The location of the battle was close enough to the border that the NVA could bring observed indirect fire on the defenders from Cambodia.

That afternoon the commander of the 119<sup>th</sup>, MAJ Bill Edwards received a warning order to provide 18 slicks and 6 guns to support the insertion of the 1/12<sup>th</sup> Infantry, into LZs approximately 15 miles west of Plei Djereng and very near the Cambodian border. Later that afternoon I conducted an aerial

reconnaissance of the area and reported to MAJ Edwards that although I did not receive any ground fire, there must be a large NVA unit in the area because of the many recently dug, but not occupied foxholes I had observed.

Early on the morning of 11 Nov the 119<sup>th</sup> AHC departed Holloway Army Airfield for Plei Djereng where we would stand-by while the necessary coordination was made with the ground commanders. As we shut down I noticed a very confusing and dangerous rearm and refuel operation underway. It was dusty, space was limited and at least 20 helicopters were all jockeying for refueling before getting in position for the first lift. It didn't help any that we were sharing the space with an artillery battery of 175 mm guns firing continuously. These conditions would have tragic results later in the day.

Because my gun platoon was in the process of exchanging our old, tired B Models for new C Models the 119<sup>th</sup> could only put up 2 gunships. The 117<sup>th</sup> AHC and the newly arrived in country D Troop 1/10<sup>th</sup> CAV would each provide 2 additional gunships. The plan that evolved was that D Troop and 117<sup>th</sup> guns would escort the initial lift and I would relieve one of the fire teams so that we would always have 2 teams on station. With hindsight, not a very good plan. Three gun teams, one on their first combat assault, who had never worked together before, was asking for trouble. Because of the urgency of the mission all coordination had been by radio. As it turned out the situation at Pali Wali became less critical and the ground commander changed the LZ. The new LZ was 3 KM from the battle at the dry lake bed. For the initial assault landing suppressive fires were put down, there was no return fire and for subsequent lifts the LZ was

considered cold. The first lift landed in LZ Red Warrior around 1305, much later than originally planned.

Meanwhile back at Plei Djereng I was standing by with my crew: **WO1 George W. Williams** (on one of his first RVN missions), **CE SGT Johnny F. Tompkins** and **G PFC Bohannon**.

My wingman in 8600 was: **AC CPT Walter R. Speare**, **P 1LT Dee W. Stone**, **CE SP4 Edmond D. Schoenig**, and **G SP4 Salvatore C. Gennardo**

At about 1315 I received radio call from Major Edwards to bring a fire team to the LZ at YA 590570 (Red Warrior LZ). I departed Plei Djereng with my wingman CPT Speare in 8600 a few minutes later. I received a second radio call reminding me that there were friendly troops on the ground and to consider the LZ "cold". We approached the area at tree top level over pretty dense triple canopy. This put us at a dangerous altitude as we transitioned from dense vegetation to a fairly open grassy plain with elephant grass and small islands of taller trees in the LZ area.

Arriving at Red Warrior LZ at approximately 1330 I saw friendly troops in the LZ and a team of gunships to the north. WO Williams had the controls while I attempted to make radio contact with the unit on the ground. Almost immediately CPT Speare in 8600 called, "Croc 6 break right, you are receiving fire". As I looked up from my map I saw a large straw mat directly to my front lift up exposing a 12.7 machinegun on a tripod with 4 or more NVA crew in khaki uniforms. Their first burst of fire was high, passing above us. I grabbed the controls and dove for the ground while sharply turning right to put some triple canopy trees between us and the fire. SGT Tompkins dropped red smoke and told me he thought CPT Speare had been hit and crashed. Looking back as I completed my turn I saw his

gunship on the ground, burning, but with the fuselage intact. It looked like a survivable crash. After putting some distance from the NVA positions and not being able to make radio contact with CPT Speare, I maneuvered to setup a firing run from a new direction. Using the red smoke as a target reference point I made one run, firing all 24 rockets at the gun position that had initially fired on me before shifting their fire to my wingman. As I completed the run I realized there were several more NVA gun positions\* in the area. With no rockets and not wanting to engage 12.7s with my 40mm grenade launcher, it was time to think about an exit strategy.

CPT Speare and crew crashed in the middle of at least two NVA battalions. A battle raged for the next 24 hours in and around the area where they crashed. There were airstrikes and artillery barrages from both sides. It was late the next day after 1/12 Infantry had secured the area that we learned that CPT Speare, LT Stone and SP4 Schoenig were KIA and SP4 Gennardo was MIA. Later that night Gennardo was found alive but in critical condition with burns over 75% of his body. He had tried to pull the crew out of the burning aircraft. When he discovered they were dead he crawled nearly 1000 meters through artillery barrages and airstrikes back to the LZ.

I owe my life and the life of my crew to the brave and selfless actions of CPT Speare and his crew. As my wingman they were in the perfect position to warn me that I was about to over fly an enemy position and then instantly put effective fire on that position causing the fire to be shifted from my aircraft to theirs.

\*It was later determined that two companies (12 to 16 guns) of 12.7mm anti-aircraft machineguns were in the immediate vicinity of the original landing zone. One of the first two helicopters shot down crashed directly on an enemy gun position, destroying the 12,7 anti-aircraft gun and killing three NVA soldiers.

As I started a turn to the southeast to get back to the relative safety of the triple canopy I heard a MAYDAY radio call from an unidentified helicopter that was on fire and going down. I learned later that this call was from 08663, one of the 117<sup>th</sup> AHC gunships I had seen on the north side of the LZ as I approached the area. They were apparently making a gun run on the same NVA 12.7 anti-aircraft positions that had shot down my wingman, and that I had just completed a rocket run on. A witness on the ground described it this way: *"08663 had just completed a gun run when they received 12.7 anti-aircraft fire. The aircraft was seen to slow down, settle in a level position toward the ground then disintegrate in the air and crash".* *The aircraft was burning in the air.* The crew members were: **CPT John Livingston AC, WO1 Terrence Rooney PC, SGT Maynard Humes CE and SP4 Loren Reeves G.** All were KIA. A fifth body was found in the wreckage. I was not aware of this until reading a statement by Pruet Helm. It seems that while we were shut down in the PZ at Plei Djereng, LT Hess\*, a young Special Forces officer was trying to get a ride to the LZ to show us where the "big guns" were located. Tragically, he found a ride on 08663.

Within seconds I received a call from Shamrock 544 on guard that "he had lost his wingman\*\* and was joining on me".

As I completed my turn Shamrock 544 called again saying I was being fired on from my 4 o'clock position and that he was engaging. As I was breaking left I looked back to my right and saw a C Model gunship less than 300 feet from me and between me and the enemy gun positions. Within seconds the gunship was hit by a long burst of 12.7 tracer fire causing the fuel cell to

\*There was some confusion about which helicopter LT Hess was on. He may have been on 8600.\*\*08663 was not Shamrock 544's wingman. Their wingman received combat damage earlier and made a successful emergency landing at Plei Djereng

explode and the tail boom to become partially separated. I saw Shamrock 544 not more than 100 feet above the trees, engulfed in flames, starting to go inverted and with both door gunners still firing. It was a sight you never forget. Only later did I learn that their helicopter had taken several hits and had smoke in the cockpit before coming to my assistance.

Once clear of the immediate area I contacted MAJ Edwards, the air mission commander, to give him a status report. I reported that CPT Speare's crash may have survivors but that there was no way we could get in there until the area was secured. I also told him the gunship I had just seen go into the trees on fire, did not look survivable. Edwards informed me he was pulling all gunships out of the area until TAC AIR and artillery could be brought in. I turned east and headed for Plei Djereng to rearm and standby. It had been a long day but the excitement wasn't over yet.

After landing back at Plei Djereng to rearm and refuel I was told to stand-by with the returning 119<sup>th</sup> Slicks. It was a long afternoon waiting for some word on the status of the three downed helicopters. Around sunset the standby was extended. It looked like we would be spending the night.

About 30 minutes after sunset I heard a Huey on approach to the field. As I mentioned earlier we were staging out of an unlighted, dusty and over crowded strip. The landing Huey was just coming to a hover when I heard a loud bang followed by the turbine running at a very high RPM. My crew chief came running to tell me that the landing helicopter had crashed.

When I got to the helicopter it was running at a very high RPM without a rotor or transmission. The crew chief and gunner were still strapped in and as far as I could tell uninjured. As I opened the pilot's door I realized what had happened. They must have landed hard because of the dust, causing

the transmission to break from its mountings. The rotor came forward thru the cockpit, killing both pilots instantly. I knew both pilots. They were due to rotate home in less than a week. They had to borrow flight helmets when flight operations asked for volunteers to make an emergency supply run. A bad day just got worse and it still wasn't over.

For **CPT Lawrence Beyer AC**, **WO Pruet Helm P**, **PFC John Fish G** and **SP4 David Pacer CE** the crew of 09544, the UH-1C gunship from D Troop 1/10 CAV, the challenge of their life was just beginning. Somehow the flight crew managed to maintain enough aircraft control to get the nose up and skids level, so that as they crashed through the trees some control was maintained. In other words a "controlled crash". Considering that the helicopter was engulfed in flames, the loss of all torque control and change of CG when the tail boom was blown off, this was a true demonstration of skill and airmanship.

This is how **PFC John Fish**, the door gunner, described the last few seconds before the crash: *"There was a lot of talking on the radio. We went over an area of tall grass and it was full of NVA regulars with grass and branches in their hats, all carrying rifles. I shot into them for a few seconds then we were past them. The helicopter was taking some hits. I could hear them and feel them but they didn't seem to be having much effect except there was an electrical fire. White smoke was coming back between the pilots and it smelled really strong of electrical wiring on fire. Bullets were coming through the helicopter and pieces of metal were flying around inside. The pieces of metal seemed to be just floating in slow motion. Something came up through my left leg and tore it open. Something came up and went through the side of my face, eye and helmet. The radio still*

*worked. The helicopter was on fire and was spinning around and flames were coming in the door. I was shooting at some smoke in the trees. Someone was calling mayday, mayday, this is Shamrock 544, were going down. We went into the trees and there was dirt and leaves everywhere, even in my mouth.....Helm was just sitting there and I couldn't figure out why he didn't get out. I thought he was shot in the chest or stomach but he wasn't bleeding. We couldn't get him out because his legs were sort of tangled around the pedals and things in the nose of the helicopter. I was really stupid not realizing his back was hurt. When he came loose we all just sort of fell back a little ways. The helicopter was sizzling so we put him down by a log or hump of dirt. Then the helicopter either blew up or just burned really hot and fast".*

**WO Helm**, the pilot, describes the minutes just after the crash: *"The aircraft did not explode until approximately two minutes after impact; however, it was a blazing inferno. My back was broken in three places, and I was immediately paralyzed. CPT Beyer's back was also broken, but he didn't sustain any nerve damage. Both **Fish**, the door gunner and **Pacer**, the crew chief, were severely burned. Fish also had a shattered femur. On impact I was momentarily knocked unconscious. I came to with the crew chief and door gunner yelling at me to get out. I tried moving my legs, but they didn't respond. I don't know exactly what I said, but they didn't hesitate to grab me and pull me out with seconds to spare. Injured as they were, they still managed to drag me a short distance away from the burning aircraft. A few moments later the aircraft exploded, leaving only the tail rotor intact. To this day I cannot express strongly enough how I feel about my crew. With the fire raging and ammo starting to cook-off they had every right to leave me*

*in the cockpit. I would not be alive today had it not been for their actions and bravery”.*

Things did not look good for the crew of Shamrock 544. They had crashed less than 500 meters from the guns that had shot them down and in the middle of two NVA battalions. They were alive, but with injuries that seriously limited their ability to move from the crash site. Only **CPT Beyer** could move any distance. **PFC Fish** remembers that “*right after we got **Helm** out of the helicopter it burned completely up. We tore the white Kevlar pieces out of my flack vest and laid them out flat on the ground to make an SOS of sorts. We hoped it would be visible from the air and not noticeable from the ground. The bombing and shelling was starting, so we knew the NVA must be pretty close. So we crawled into the brush and waited.*

**WO Helm** describes the next few hours: “*Even though my back was broken, I was not in very much pain, but I definitely was in shock. Both the crew chief and door gunner were badly burned and in a great deal of pain. We had no idea as to our exact location and were extremely worried who would find us first. With only one .38 revolver and one M-16 rifle with 20 rounds, we weren’t capable of putting up much resistance in our condition. I remember hearing the attacking jets overhead, and having the expended brass dropping down on us. Later in the afternoon and throughout the night artillery fire landed in and around our position. It was terrifying, to say the least, to hear the distant whump when the guns were fired then the familiar whistle and explosion. The worst sound was the thunk when the shrapnel embedded into the tree trunks and limbs near us. Our main objective was to stay as quiet as possible, hoping not to attract the NVA’s attention”.*

Artillery and mortar fire from both NVA and friendly units continued throughout the night. There is no evidence that anyone, friend or foe, knew exactly where the crew of Shamrock 544 was located. Late the next morning **LTC Foy Rice**, the Commander of the 52<sup>nd</sup> CAB, was airborne in his command and control Huey looking for survivors. Concurrently, A Company 1/12<sup>th</sup> INF was conducting a ground search for the downed crew. LTC Rice spotted the wreckage first. When he realized there were survivors he arranged for a CH-47 Chinook to land and pick him up at the near-by artillery fire base. He needed an aircraft with a hoist and the Chinook had one.

**PFC John Fish** describes the long night and morning rescue: *There were a lot of artillery explosions, especially when it got dark. A DC-3 gunship (Puff the Magic Dragon) orbited overhead at a very high altitude. When he fired a lot of 20mm brass came down through the trees. I either slept or passed out during most of the night.*

*In the morning I wasn't doing real well. There were a lot of ants in my leg wound and I was getting terribly thirsty. I couldn't use my hands much by then. Some fingers were broken and my partly burned gloves had shrunk up so I couldn't move my fingers or get my gloves off. Probably just as well. Then there was a big helicopter hovering over us. They were shooting out of their doors and side windows. A guy came down on a basket sort of standing on it and hanging onto the cable. I remember him as a smallish guy with white hair, a fatigue cap, no rifle, just a .45 pistol and he was a lieutenant colonel. I don't remember who went up first but going up was the only time I was sure I was going to get shot".*

**WO Pruett Helm:** *“By morning we were extremely thirsty. Not knowing when we were going to be rescued **CPT Beyer** decided to go look for water. He thought he had seen some in some bomb craters not too far away as we went down. Armed with his .38 revolver, he departed on his search. We never saw him again.....several hours later a CH-47 Chinook pulled to a hover over our site and **LTC Rice** came down in the basket and loaded the three of us up, one at a time. Rice wanted me to go first as I was the most seriously injured, but I refused. He was not real happy with me, but he took the others before me. I was the third one to go up. He just rolled me into the basket. He came up last. I told **LTC Rice** that **CPT Beyer** was still out there looking for water. I don't know how long the extraction took, maybe eight-to-ten minutes... I bet to the pilots driving the CH-47 it seemed like a life time. I was told that toward the end of the rescue we began to receive enemy fire.”*

**CPT Beyer** was found and picked-up later the same day by **LTC Rice**. He was slated to give up his command of the 52<sup>nd</sup> CAB in a few weeks. I've always been impressed with his bravery in finding and rescuing the crew of Shamrock 544. Especially when you know that the crew was not part of his battalion.

The CH-47 rescue took place during a brief lull in the battle but the NVA were still in the area and would launch a major attack against the 1/12th Infantry that night with two battalions and supporting fires from Cambodia. The NVA attack would eventually fail with the help of over 100 sorties from the U.S. Air Force and massive artillery and mortar fires to help blunt the attack.

Finally, in my opinion, what made the “Shootout” different and so deadly for the aviation units was that for the first time, at least in the Central Highlands, the NVA set up a deadly trap by placing twelve to sixteen 12.7mm antiaircraft weapons in the middle of the LZ rather than in the tree line around the perimeter of the LZ. They must have known that with no concealed route of withdrawal their chances of survival were slim. Each gun was on a tripod, manned by a crew of 4 to 6 men, well dug in and camouflaged with large straw mats. This tactic gave the gunners the ability to place deadly, unmasked fire in 360 degree circle. After the battle intelligence reports confirmed that the 88<sup>th</sup> NVA Regiment had been given the mission of destroying an American landing zone. By the NVA’s own admission they failed but it could have gone the other way. Had the slicks landed where the NVA thought we would, we could have suffered the greatest single loss of helicopters in the war. The trap was set up in the best, largest LZ in the area. They even took the prevailing winds into consideration. I don’t know why the first sortie of slicks choose to land short of the better LZ, but thank God they did. The LZ chosen was smaller, on uneven ground with elephant grass resulting in some slicks having to unload from a 10 foot hover. No slicks were lost. However, this put the gunships directly over the NVA positions. When the NVA realized the slicks were not going to use the LZ where their trap was set-up, they opened up on the gunships with deadly results.

In the “RED WARRIORS” BATTLE REPORT”, quoted in part....”The Red Warriors had five men killed in action and 40 wounded over the course of this battle, while the aviation support unit lost three helicopters and at least eight personnel. Because of the heroism of the three helicopter crews,

many Red Warriors' lives were saved that day. These helicopter crews "took the bullet" for the Red Warriors".

Phil Courts

DuPont, WA

17 JULY 2014

## Epilogue

- This "War Story" is based on my participation in the events on 11 November 1966. I have not attempted to tell the story of the ground combat experienced by COL Lay's 1st Battalion 12<sup>th</sup> Infantry "RED WARRIORS". There is excellent coverage of this in S.L.A. Marshall's book WEST TO CAMBODIA and Roger A. Hill's outstanding "RED WARRIORS" BATTLE REPORT 11-13 November 1966
- I have tried to use the terms, language and acronyms familiar to readers who were there to avoid cluttering up the narrative with footnotes.
- Up until 2002 the events of 11 NOV 1966 were pretty well buried on my hard drive. That year I received an email from Gary Rogers, a former Croc in the 119<sup>TH</sup> AHC. Gary was responding to a request from Jerry Ewen (VHPA Family Contact Committee) to make contact with Rick Speare's sister Stephanie Peterson. We corresponded and talked over a period of several months. This turned out to be a good experience for me and I believe also for Stephanie. It certainly reinforced my feelings about the value of the VHPA. I mention this because before corresponding with Stephanie I had to do some research on the 119<sup>th</sup> AHC and this started a background file that has been my reference for much of this war story.
- In the Spring of 2011 I received an email from Pruet Helm asking if I had any knowledge of the events of 11 Nov 1966. I told him I did and a few days later we talked. When he told me he had been the pilot in Shamrock 544 my first

comment was “you are lucky to be alive”. Later, when I learned about his long road to recovery I had to wonder if maybe “lucky” was a poor choice of words.

- Following my conversation with Pruett Helm I talked to Colonel (Ret) Tom Shaughnessy, the former commander of D Troop 1/10<sup>th</sup> CAV during the 11 Nov 66 mission. Tom asked if I would be willing to write a witness statement that would support upgrading the awards given to the crew of Shamrock 544. Trying to upgrade an award 48 years after the event and with only one witness has been frustrating to say the least, After two submissions to DA Awards Branch it doesn't look hopeful. However, with the endorsement of General Wallace Nutting, the former Commander of 1/10<sup>th</sup> CAV, maybe there is still hope. I told Pruett that regardless of the outcome on the upgrade, I wanted to tell this story. I am probably the only the only living person who knows the bravery and skill the crew of Shamrock 544 displayed on 11 November. They had extensive battle damage before coming to my rescue. They had every reason to be heading back to Plei Djereng, but they didn't.
- **CPT Walter (Rick) Speare**, Aircraft Commander of 08600-Rick was one of the two section leaders in the 119<sup>th</sup> gun platoon. Like all members of the platoon he volunteered to fly guns. His quiet, steady, no-nonsense style of leadership was just what the Croc's needed during those demanding days in the fall of 1966 when the NVA was making a major move in the central highlands. Rick had a dry sense of humor and a fierce loyalty to those he cared about. The morning before he was killed we spent several hours on standby in the PZ at Plei Djereng. I noticed he was very quiet. I thought he may have had some premonition. Years later I came across a note from Fred Ferlito, a former 119<sup>th</sup> pilot, to Rick's sister, Stephanie. In the note he said that when Rick's locker was opened to send his belongings home, an envelope had been propped up so that it would fall out when the door was opened. The envelope read “I'm going to be killed today” with instructions inside. As someone said about the British pilots during the Battle of *Britain: Where Do We Find These Brave Men?*



CPT Walter (Rick) Speare at Camp Holloway

- **1LT Dee W. Stone, Jr.**, Pilot of 8600- After graduation from West Point in 1964 Dee attended flight school before joining the 119<sup>th</sup> in July of 1966. As I recall he made it known the day he arrived that he wanted to fly guns. As the 119<sup>th</sup> SIP I gave him his initial in-country checkout. Unit policy was for new pilots to fly slicks for several months before considering them for the guns. For a new pilot just out of flight training he was good enough to be assigned directly to the gun platoon. By the time of this mission Dee was ready to be an aircraft commander.



1<sup>st</sup> LT Dee Stone ( above second from right)

- **SP4 Sal Gennardo**, was the gunner on 8600. He was the only survivor and although severely burned managed to crawl nearly 1000 meters through an

airstrike and artillery barrage to the landing zone. Millie Gennardo, Sal's sister wrote this about his survival: "Sal had managed to escape the aircraft and, though burned over 75% of his body, tried to drag the crew out. When he discovered they had all perished he grabbed Dee Stone's .45 and tried to kill himself before the enemy captured him. The pistol jammed\* and in a desperate attempt to get away, crawled through the elephant grass to a stream where he tore off his shirt and sent it downstream, while he went upstream. He heard shooting downstream but was able to come upon the Special Forces. (these facts were verified in West to Cambodia) When asked how the rest of the crew were, he became hysterical and passed out. Sal returned home physically and emotionally wounded, leaving his "mind in Vietnam". He was under psychiatric care, and then disappeared for years until his sister found him on a ranch in Wyoming. Convincing him to come home, he eventually married her sister-in-law and had a lot of support and assistance from the family. He had a son whom he named Walter and lived a relatively good life for several years. He was finally overwhelmed at the age of 36 at which time he did take his own life. His son later died in a motorcycle accident and all of Sal's pictures and medals were buried with him".

*\*Author's note: when Dee Stone's body was recovered his .45 pistol was found several feet away with a jammed round in the chamber. Speculation at the time was that Dee had survived the crash and been involved in a fire fight on the ground. Sal's story makes more sense.*

- **CPT Larry Beyer**, Aircraft Commander of Shamrock 544 was not your typical Army Aviator. He spent 5 years in the US Air Force flying B-47s and B-52s with SAC before transferring to the Army. When asked why he transferred to the Army he jokingly responded, " Air Force flying was boring, he wanted something more exciting". I doubt if those were his feelings after 11 Nov. He suffered serious back injuries in the crash. CPT Beyer did a hell of a job maintaining control of the helicopter. I was positive no one could have survived. For his actions in the air and on the ground he was awarded the Silver Star. He would return to RVN for a second tour and retired as a LTC with 21 years' service. After retirement he

started a second career as an attorney in Florida. At age 65 he lost a courageous battle with cancer.

- **WO Pruetz Helm**, Pilot of Shamrock 544 suffered a compression dislocation of the T12, L1 & 2 vertebrae, resulting in paralysis from the waist down. He spent 13 months undergoing rehabilitation, including 60 days on an artificial kidney machine in the 3rd field hospital in Saigon. In 1972 he married his wife “Sherrie”; they have been married for 42 years, and have 2 children and 7 grandchildren. One year after completion of rehabilitation, Mr. Helm became the first Air Traffic Controller in a wheelchair, and in 1976 he was the FAA’s outstanding Handicapped Employee of the year. In 1982 Mr. Helm retired from the FAA due to health problems associated with his injury. He and his family then relocated from Parker, CO to Polson, MT where they continue to live. After moving to Montana, Mr. Helm designed and began marketing “Equalizer Exercise Machines”, which is weight training equipment equally accessible to both the able bodied and disabled users. This equipment is now found in most major rehabilitation facilities in the United States and Canada. Pruetz Helm and John Fish have maintained contact with each other and remain close friends.



Pruitt Helm and John Fish at 1/10<sup>th</sup> CAV Reunion

- **PFC John Fish**, Door Gunner of Shamrock 544 spent about four months in various hospitals. Most of that time was in the burn ward in Japan. After his discharge from the army he and his wife Susan moved to Alaska and have lived there ever since. They primarily made their living commercial fishing. Now retired, they still actively hunt fish, hike and generally enjoy the outdoors.



**PFC John Fish in Shamrock 544 shortly before being shot down  
Nov 1966**

- If you are still reading this rather long story you have probably noticed there are many names mentioned only briefly or not at all. If you have anything that would make this story more accurate and complete my email address is [courtship@comcast.net](mailto:courtship@comcast.net). I am more than willing to update both the story and especially the epilogue.
- The “Shootout” participants all saw the events of 11 Nov from a different perspective. I believe it’s fitting to end this “War Story” by looking at how the North Vietnamese viewed the battle. By pure luck I had lunch a few weeks ago with Mr. Merle Pribbenow, a retired CIA employee with extensive in-country experience to include speaking fluent Vietnamese. Merle was one of the last to leave our embassy in Saigon, flying out on a USMC CH-46. After retirement he has been involved in the translation of North Vietnamese documents. I’ve included parts of several documents he recently provided to

make my argument that as bad as they were, our aircraft losses could have been much worse. It's interesting to note that the NVA had their own "body count" problems.

- History of the 66<sup>th</sup> Regiment – the Plei Me Group – 1947-2007”

[Lịch sử Trung Đoàn 66 – Đoàn Plei Me 1947-2007]

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Engineers and signal personnel from Front Headquarters worked with the 95<sup>th</sup> Regiment to build two hanging bridges [suspension bridges] across the Poco River as a diversion, and they ran a phony field telephone line along the western bank of the river. Taking the bait, the enemy used B-52s to carpet-bomb the area of the suspension bridges and sent in commandos [CIDG] to search the area. The U.S. 4<sup>th</sup> Division then launched Operation Paul Revere 4, attacking the areas east and west of the Sa Thay River.

On 10 November the soldiers of 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion/66<sup>th</sup> Regiment conducted a maneuver attack that completely annihilated two commando [CIDG] companies on the western side of the Sa Thay River. Our soldiers learned three lessons from this battle: First, when fighting the Americans, you have to gain a grasp on your enemy quickly; Second, you have to surround the enemy quickly; and Third, you have to quickly eliminate the enemy's command element and his communications.

The more we attacked the enemy, the deeper he sent his forces into our area to "search for and destroy" our units.

On 11 November, the U.S. 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion/2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade/4<sup>th</sup> Division, reinforced by one 105mm howitzer battery and one battery of 106.7mm mortars, landed by helicopter at Landing Zone C1. The Americans had landed right in the center of our pre-planned battle area, where we had deployed the 32<sup>nd</sup> Artillery Battalion, armed with 120mm mortars, to await the enemy. At 1657 hours on 12 November 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion began a ferocious bombardment of the concentration of American troops on Landing Zone C1. Many of our 120mm mortar rounds landed in the middle of the American artillery position and the American headquarters command post. The American ammunition dump caught fire and burned violently. The 105mm howitzer battery, the 106.7 mortar battery, and the headquarters of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion were all destroyed, and the enemy infantrymen also suffered heavy casualties.

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The 88<sup>th</sup> Regiment and 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion/66<sup>th</sup> Regiment had to cut their way through the jungle and through the thick barbed-wire perimeter, but just before they reached to top of the hill the

enemy's 105mm ammunition dump exploded, preventing our troops from advancing further. As a result, we were not able to completely annihilate this American battalion.

On the 13<sup>th</sup>, after heavy air strikes, one American company landed to collect the bodies of their dead and then hastily evacuated Landing Zone C1. That same day, in an area south of Landing Zone C1 9<sup>th</sup> Company/9<sup>th</sup> Battalion under the command of Deputy Company Political Officer Luu Thanh Tan, supported by the companies of 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion, completely annihilated one American company. During the days that followed, we continued to conduct ferocious attacks in the area east and west of the headwaters of the Sa Thay River, and these attacks completely disrupted the over-optimistic plans and calculations of the American troops.

With the victory of the Sa Thay Campaign, the 66<sup>th</sup> Regiment had helped, along with the rest of the Central Highlands and with our forces throughout South Vietnam, to defeat the second American strategic counteroffensive. The Central Highlands Front's direct rear base and logistics support area expanded into the area east of the Poco River. ...

As the combat period, the winter-spring of 1966-1967 began, the armed forces of the Central Highlands were in a good, solid position. We had spent months preparing for months for the coming battles, and Huu Duc and I, along with a number of our regimental cadre, had reconnoitered the terrain from Plei Djereng all the way to the Vietnamese-Cambodian border, a distance of almost 60 kilometers. We had found locations for fortified blocking positions where we could deploy forces ahead of time, and we had discussed battle tactics on the actual terrain - How, when we lured the enemy to Fortified Position A, Position A would have to lure them on to Position B, and Position would have to lead them on to Position C, etc., forming a daisy-chain of battles designed to lure the enemy down the path we intended straight into the area where we had decided to fight the decisive battle. The location we selected for the decisive battle was a rather large and fairly flat clearing right next to the border. If the enemy wanted to prevent our forces from escaping across the border, he would have to land a least one battalion of troops in this location. We massed our largest force at this location, and the 88<sup>th</sup> Regiment sat there, waiting, determined to completely destroy the enemy battalion. We planned that this would be the final battle of the campaign

Campaign Objectives: Lure American forces out to annihilate them, and at the same time help to shatter the American imperialists' intentions to conduct a dry season counteroffensive.

Requirement: Lure one American battalion into Decisive Battle Point "C1" and completely annihilate that battalion (Footnote: "C1" was the designation we gave to an open field cleared for slash-and-burn farming. We would induce enemy helicopters to land at this location so that we could annihilate them).