

Twenty Minutes of Terror

By [Stan Gause](#)

My unit, the 134th AHC based out of Phu Hiep, had a fire team on temporary duty at An Khe Golf Course in the summer of 68 to provide convoy escort and support Highway 19 defense from An Khe Pass in the east to Mang Yang Pass in the west. I was fire team leader with two Charlie model gunships. We were scrambled one night around 1 am to provide fire support to a ground unit protecting one of the bridges roughly 20 minutes west of An Khe. The weather was poor with low clouds, intermittent rain, patches of fog and maybe 1000 feet ceiling. But what the hell, when our guys are getting shot at and ask for help, you don't pay much attention to the weather. You just get your butt out there as fast as possible, no matter what.

We made it to the bridge and identified the friendly positions. We could see muzzle flashes and tracers from both the friendlies and VC. We worked over the VC positions with rockets and hosed it down with miniguns until the firing stopped. Our folks on the ground said the fire was on target and had stopped the attack. We remained on station another half hour or so to see if anything else would happen and then started back to the Golf Course around 2:30 am. Meanwhile the weather had gotten worse with a ceiling of 200-300 feet, drizzling rain and increasing ground fog. We almost immediately flew into a patch of fog, lost ground contact and sight of each other. The old pucker factor was rising fast. Fearing I was too close to the ground, I stayed on course straight east, sucked up the collective, and started climbing at 1000 feet per minute. I told my wingman to turn 30 degrees to the south and also start climbing. I hadn't flown much IFR and was praying I wouldn't get vertigo.

We kept climbing through the soup hoping to break out of the clouds and by some miracle be able to see An Khe. I finally broke out at a little over 7,000 feet and found my wingman but there was a solid floor of clouds beneath us. I realized there was no way we were going to make a VFR landing and then terror set in. I could see us splattered all over the mountain beside the Golf Course (the one with the 1st Cav patch, I forget the name). I tried not to panic but fear was rising. My first thought was to try to make it to another airfield. I called Qui Nhon tower, the closest airfield 35-40 minutes away, and learned it was still VFR there. However, we had been flying almost 2 hours and I knew we didn't have enough fuel to make it to Qui Nhon. After another minute or so my 20 minute warning light flashed

on. The Peter Pilot looked over at me and didn't say anything. I could see the fear in his eyes and I'm sure he saw it in mine.

I got on the horn and talked to the tower at An Khe to prepare for my last straw, a tactical ADF approach. I wasn't aware An Khe had a radar but the tower operator informed me of it and said they could give me a GCA approach (afterall, gunships don't fly in the clouds!). However, there was one hitch—the radar was turned off and had to warm up for 5-10 minutes and the radar operator was in bed. At that point the 20 minute light had been on for 2 minutes. I told the tower operator it was an extreme emergency and if he wanted to save the lives of 8 people to PLEASE turn the radar on and send someone god'awful quick to find the radar operator. He sent someone for the radar operator but didn't know how to turn the radar on. We waited for what seemed like an eternity, becoming more terrified by the minute. What if they couldn't find the radar operator? Finally the radar operator came on and said he needed at least 5 more minutes to warm up the radar.

At that point we were circling over An Khe at 7,000 feet. The 20 minute light had been on just over 10 minutes and I decided we had to start down. My wingman had roughly 10 minutes more fuel than I did so I began descending first, homing in on an FM radio in the control tower. Sweating like crazy, I stayed in a race track pattern on the east side of the radio signal since I knew there were no mountains on that side. Descending initially at 1000 feet per minute, I slowed to 300-400 feet per minute after passing 3000 feet (field elevation itself was a little less than 2000 feet I believe). Just after passing 2500 feet the radar operator came on and said he had my position just east of the airfield. He set me up on approach and we broke out of the fog at less than 50 feet right over the runway. I hovered over to the POL pad and set down. The engine ran out of gas just as the crewchief was putting the nozzle in the tank. I sat there in my seat listening as my wingman came in on a GCA. I was shaking so bad and so weak that I just sat there for another 15 minutes or so.

I had planned to go see the tower operator and radar operator the next day to thank them in person and buy them a beer but we were called back to Phu Hiep the next morning and I never saw them. To this day I fell bad about not being able to thank them in person.