A Few Good Men

by

Michael J. Brokovich B/4/77 ARA (1969)

Over the years I have taken a lot of flak about being an Aerial Rocket Artillery (ARA) pilot. The constant yapping about the ARA guys flying so high they needed oxygen is the most prevalent. What many of these critics don't know is that the ARA batteries of the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) were avid participants in the famed Command and Control North (CCN) missions out of Quang Tri and Hue Phu Bai. For those detractors who state that only the gun companies of the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) - the D/101 Hawks and D/158 Redskins - flew the CCN missions, they obviously weren't there. The distinctive crossed cannons in red bordered in yellow on our ammo bay doors were difficult to miss. Additionally, the 2.75" FFAR (Folding Fin Aerial Rocket) was the CCN weapon of choice, and the ARA standard configuration for its Cobras consisted of four 19-rocket pods. The standard gun company configuration was two 19-rocket pods and two minigun pods.

I had the honor of leading the first B/4/77 ARA (Toros) section on its first CCN mission out of Quang Tri in April 1969. We were flying UH-1C's with two 19- rocket pods each as our new AH-1G's had not yet arrived. I was sent as the section leader as I was a second tour gun pilot. My section consisted of WO1 Al Hansen (my peter pilot), CW2 Barry Shreiber, AC of my wing ship and a recent transfer from the Hawks, and 1LT Willie Lawson, Barry's peter pilot, and myself. Willie, Al and I were original Toros, having formed up with the unit at Ft. Bragg, NC and then deployed with it to Vietnam.

We flew north from Camp Eagle and landed at the CCN pad at Quang Tri and walked past the other players' aircraft. There were two VNAF CH-34's (Kingbees) led by Dai Uy Ahn, a number of UH-1H slicks from B/101 (Kingsman), and two Marine UH-1E's. We went into the operations hooch and were welcomed and told to take a seat for the initial briefing. Until then, none of us had a clue as to what CCN missions were all about. When the CCN folks uncovered a map with no large body of water to the East showing (South China Sea) and sprinkled liberally with red indicating the enemy anti-aircraft positions and Top Secret labels all over it, I began to feel a little uneasy. My other three compatriots were poker-faced, but then again, only Barry Shreiber had ever heard a shot fired in anger. (Al and Willie later admitted they were scared to death but thought Barry and I looked calm and cool so they tried to do the same. We all had a good laugh on that.) We also were assigned different call signs for the mission. The ARA birds were called "Yellow jackets" when they flew out of Quang Tri and "Dragonflies" when flying out of Hue Phu Bai. The first mission went well, and we started a solid working relationship with the Marine gun pilots; the slick drivers, who were frequently rotated by unit; and, the VNAF, particularly Dai Uy Ahn.

We quickly became part of the team, and our pilots eagerly volunteered for the CCN

missions because there were fewer restrictions on rules of engagement and they knew there would always be action. This thirst for action became more intense when the unit was fully equipped with our Snakes. The Toros and the Griffins (C/4/77 ARA) flew many exciting CCN missions; in fact, I flew a bunch myself. Rather than bore you with details, I've opted to describe one mission that I'll never forget. I call it "A Few Good Men".

The Marines flew UH-1E gunships which were a lot like our old UH-1C gunships except theirs had an odd turret mounted on the nose with two 7.62 mm machine guns mounted side-by-side. They carried a crew of four, had a very short range, and were a whole lot slower than our Cobras.

This particular CCN mission was to locate a platoon-sized element in Laos for extraction. The Marines normally flew "low and slow" to locate the troops while the ARA section (two Cobras) provided overhead cover and fire support, if needed. On this mission we had four Cobras because of the size of the extraction. On this day, the other Toro Aircraft Commanders were CPT Bob Davis (my wingman), CPT Bert Lanstra, and CW2 Jim Dailey. When the troops were located, slicks (I don't remember which 101st slick company was providing the UH-1H's this day.) would be brought in to lift them out. Since the platoon was deep in Laos, the mission would become more difficult if the NVA found them before we could get them out. As we passed to the west of Marine Firebase Vandegrift (a Marine base near the "Rockpile"), the Marine UH-1E's dropped in to top off their fuel tanks prior to crossing the border. Our flight of four Cobras flew on and planned to rendezvous with the Marines in the vicinity of the extraction site.

When we arrived in the general area, the platoon frantically radioed, "Prairie Fire! Prairie Fire!" This meant they were in contact and needed some support right then, essentially an SOS call. The Marines were about thirty minutes behind us so I told Bob Davis to cover me as I went down to positively identify the platoon's position. I flew down to the treetops and flew as low and slow as I could to pinpoint the platoon. I flew down among the branches for what seemed to be forever and didn't even realize I was being shot at until Bob Davis yelled over the VHF, "Get out of there, Yellow jacket Lead; you're drawing fire!" I nosed over and pulled in more power as I quickly accelerated away from the ridge line in a hail of automatic weapons fire. On the way out I heard the platoon radio that I had just flown over them. Now we knew exactly where they were.

About this time, the two Marine UH-1E's arrived, and I briefed the flight leader on the platoon's location as well as the enemy situation (I translated this into "heavy automatic weapons fire") on the ridgeline. He acknowledged my transmission, and, to my amazement, flew across the same ridgeline, only he was lower and slower and presented a fatter target. He immediately drew heavy ground fire. We were unable to lay down suppressive fires because we were too close to the location of the platoon on the ground. Our four Cobras fell in behind the stricken UH-1E, two on each side and to his rear. He apparently had been hit several times by automatic weapons fire as he radioed, "Mayday! Mayday! I'm hit and losing power." He started to turn east and head back to South Vietnam. He had been hit in the fuel cell and a cloud of fuel vapor began billowing out

the left side of his helicopter. At this point I yelled to my front seat pilot, Bill Gurski, to start taking pictures with my Kodak Instamatic camera. I figured he might as well be doing something useful as the turret was totally inoperable. (Neither of us dreamed that we were about to get some fantastic shots of a helicopter going down in flames.) Meanwhile, the UH-1E started heading toward a clearing by a bend in a river to get on the ground. Our Air Force O-2 controller, Covey, told him not to land in the particular clearing he was approaching as there was a large unfriendly village nearby and that he would be better off landing on the near side. He started to make a descending right turn away from the village area, and the fuel vapor cloud burst into flames. He slipped the helicopter to keep the flames out of the crew compartment and lined up with the river intending to put it in the water to extinguish the fire. As the helicopter descended to about seventy-five feet, the tail boom fell off. The helicopter inverted and crashed into the river upside down.

Pieces of rotor blades and helicopter went everywhere along with large amounts of water and debris that splashed up when the helicopter hit. When everything cleared, the helicopter was underwater. Kingbee Lead, commanded by Dai Uy Ahn, flew down to the river to look for survivors while our four Cobras put a wall of steel around his CH-34. They picked up two survivors (the aircraft commander and the crew chief) about one hundred yards downstream. Kingbee Lead (Dai Uy Ahn) then hovered back up the river to the crash site to check on the other two crew members. His crew chief hung out of the side of the CH-34 with his monkey straps and determined the pilot and gunner were still belted in and obviously dead. This was an outstanding demonstration of bravery on the part of Dai Uy Ahn as he was under heavy fire the entire time. Since there was no more that could be done for the two KIA's and the ground fire was becoming quite heavy, we all departed the area to get the two survivors out and for us to refuel and rearm.

We told the platoon to hold on as we would be back to get them and flew back to Quang Tri to rearm and refuel. At the rearm point, I checked over my Cobra for hits and found seven holes. (I harassed Bill Gurski at this point as he had been in the front seat of my wingman on a CCN mission less than a month before and had been shot down deep in Laos with Bob Davis. I called him a "magnet ass", and this nickname haunted Bill for a long time.) Several rounds had gone through the rotor blades, but one had missed the 42 degree gear box by less than an inch. An AK-47 round had gone through all the longerins and stringers, which provided structural strength to the tail boom, and effectively grounded the aircraft. Since I was the TC Detachment Commander and unit maintenance officer at the time, I approved a one-time maintenance flight to get the Cobra back to Camp Eagle. The other three Toros ("Yellow jackets"), led by Bob Davis, went back to Laos with the slicks and covered the extraction of the platoon without further incident.

The flight back to Camp Eagle was routine as I carefully watched for strange vibrations and unusual instrument readings. When I landed at the Bull Pen (the Toro helipad), I discovered I had been luckier than I originally thought and had cheated fate once again. My maintenance people thoroughly inspected the Cobra and found that another round had entered the bottom side of the aircraft. It had exploded several rounds of my linked 7.62 mm minigun ammunition in the ammo boxes and had stopped, fully spent, at the last

layer. I was lucky the round had not hit me in my right leg. Ironically, during my preflight inspection that morning, the crew chief for #086, SP4 Jacobs, reported that the grenade launcher didn't work. I directed him to remove the grenade drum and fully load the minigun ammunition boxes. Our ARA Cobras normally only carried a half load of grenades and minigun ammo as our primary weapon was the 2.75" FFAR. The extra ammo he loaded made up the layers of linked ammo the AK-47 round had come through before expending its energy short of the floor beneath my leg. If that ammo had not been there, the round would have come straight through unhindered and hit me. I was greatly relieved but had to contend with a very upset crew chief as he felt I had hurt his "baby". The tail boom did have to be replaced on #086 as well as the rotor blades and a lot of other sheet metal work, but at least we still had the aircraft to return to action a short while later.

This was the last CCN mission I flew on with Marine participation. Subsequent missions had the Hawks or Redskins flying the low recon portion of the mission while the ARA Cobras provided cover and firepower. CCN missions were truly exhilarating to all our pilots as we felt we were accomplishing something and were truly appreciated by the CCN people. I'm proud to have been associated with this outstanding team of pilots, soldiers, and Marines. This particular CCN mission was not an unusual one. This was just one of my more exciting ones; I'm certain there are many untold CCN adventures that are worthy of being put down on paper. The bottom line of this story is that one should not deride ARA pilots without knowing the whole truth of what we did for a living during our time in Vietnam. Contrary to popular belief, we weren't always at altitude in air-conditioned comfort.