

The Rescue
By C. A. Powell
In collaboration with Jeff Bounds and Fred Jackson

Memorial Day, May 30th, 1969
B Troop (Dutchmasters)
7th Armored Squadron, 1st Air Cavalry
Vinh Long Air Base, Republic of Vietnam

Most combat units were in a Memorial Day stand-down. B Troop scheduled one visual recon along the Vietnam/Cambodia border. The preflight briefing included an intelligence report suggesting minimal enemy activity because they were in observance of Ho Chi Minh's birthday.

Scout and weapons platoons, commonly called a Hunter/Killer team, would conduct the recon. The team consisted of 2 OH-6A Light Observation Helicopters (Loaches), and 2 AH-1 gunships (Cobras). *AND 1 uh1, C&C*

The Scout's normal mission was to fly low and slow, draw enemy fire, and then mark the contact with red smoke. Cobra Gunships would then roll in with high-speed dives, saturating the target area with lethal fire both covering the rapid exit of the Loaches and hopefully killing the enemy.

Loaches were lightly armed with a port (left) side mounted six-barrel 7.62mm minigun, which was capable of a cyclic rate of fire of either 2,000 or 4,000 rounds per minute, as well as various grenades, and the observer's CAR-15 — a modified M-16. Cobras carried a full weapons array, including chin-turret mounted 7.62 mini-gun, or a 40mm grenade launcher, and a mix of aerial rockets, that could include fleshetts, HE (high explosive), or willi-peet (white

phosphorous) with either PD (point detonating) or VT (proximity detonating, fuses.

The team's mission that day was to report any enemy movement or buildup, after which they would return to base for an afternoon of R&R, a time to kick back and enjoy a few beers with the rest of the guys.

Warrant Officer Fred Jackson, whom everyone called Jack, readied his Loach, doing his pre-flight check. Though only in country 4 months, Jack had earned respect as a proficient scout pilot whose diligence was appreciated by others who flew missions with him. His observer that day was SP4 Craig Myers. They often paired together because not only was Craig an excellent observer, but he was also the OH-6's crewchief, and he cared for the Loach as though it were his own.

In the other Loach 1Lt. Jeff Bounds, the Scout fire team leader, and SP4 Vinnie Costello* as his observer, readied their aircraft. Along with their observers, Jeff and Jack had developed firm friendships, and respect for each other's abilities. Their mutual admiration was further honed as they frequently worked combat missions together.

On the Weapons half of the team was 1Lt. Roy Sudeck, the Cobra fire team's leader. Sudeck's "front seat" was handling map reading duties and guiding the scouts from above.

The border recon included, among other areas, the "Parrot's Beak" (an area of Cambodia that juts into South Vietnam west of Saigon and north of the

Mekong River). This area was always difficult to work because the irregular border had few distinguishing landmarks.

The mission began with the Loaches dropping 'down on the deck,' flying low and slow, looking for anything that would suggest suspicious ground activity. The Cobras stationed themselves at altitude, out of range of any small arms fire, while directing the scout ships in their search.

Unknowingly, the scouts crossed over the border into Cambodia by about 2 clicks (kilometers). Unaware of the misdirection they had taken, they came upon a small village adjacent to a dense wood line. As they overflew its southern perimeter, both Scouts noted that there were a number of young, military aged men, and it was the largest concentration either had ever seen. Their movements were not so unusual as to draw immediate alarm, but their presence suggested further investigation.

After receiving confirmation (later discovered inaccurate) that they were on the Vietnam side of the border, the scouts were given permission to overfly it again. This time there was more activity within the village. Jack called over the radio, reporting that he had seen something - possibly a weapon.

A C&C (Command and Control) Huey had the immediate responsibility of the Hunter/Killer team, but it was on the ground at Bac Chien. The questionable ground activity and possible weapon sighting were relayed by having Roy's wingman climb to altitude to the 7/1 Squadron TOC (Tactical Operations Center), who passed it up to the 164th Group HQ. Shortly thereafter, the Scouts were instructed to do a third go around and verify the sighting.

Jeff Bounds later said that this was a major mistake and was probably one of the worst orders he had ever been given. They had followed the pre-flight briefing orders, had observed and reported, and had not made any engagements. A Hunter/Killer team, although a formidable force, couldn't carry a fight very far with no backup and only four aircraft. Both Scout pilots had that uneasy feeling learned from hours of scouting; their instincts told them this was a mistake. They both radioed their concerns, and then reluctantly went ahead with the go around. Despite their apprehensions, orders were orders.

The third and final pass began. With Jeff as the lead ship, and Jack on his wing, they picked up ground speed, flying fast and low, as speed was always the best ally in this sort of situation.

On returning, they found the village and surrounding area eerily quiet, and still. Jeff spotted a man who was crouched close to the ground, facing down, as though praying. Requesting cover from his wing ship, Jeff slowed down in front of the man to see what was going on. The man suddenly looked up in the direction of the approaching Loach and drew an AK 47 from under his body. Jeff decelerated, hit the pedal, and turned Vinnie, who was an excellent shot, toward the man. Vinnie, armed with a CAR-15, let out a few quick and accurate rounds, neutralizing the enemy soldier.

All hell broke loose. The village, and nearby wood line, exploded with enemy troops firing 50's, 30's, and all the small arms they had. None of the scouts had even been under such intense fire. It was the largest group of enemy military personnel that any of them had ever seen. Later intelligence reports

revealed that this concentration of enemy troops was part of a 9th Division, NVA [North Vietnamese Army] buildup, massing for cross-border infiltration.

Both pilots called in receiving hits to their aircraft as they pulled all the collective they could get, slammed the cyclic to the forward stop, and tried to build airspeed. Jack triggered his mini gun with streams of suppressive fire as he provided cover for Jeff's escape. With no shortage of targets, he was firing at anything that moved.

On the way out Jeff heard the words a pilot never wants to hear. "Jack's down, Jack's down," Vinnie shouted.

Jack had been hit. A round had entered his left thigh, shattering his hip, and then taking out much of his left buttock. Craig attempted to take control of the aircraft, but the ship took more hits and headed into the ground, bouncing several times after the initial impact, finally coming to rest on it's left side with the blades digging in and disintegrated with ground contact.

Meanwhile, Jeff wasted no time positioning himself to rescue the downed crew, it was what a pilot did, and it required no second thoughts, just action. Get his buddies out no matter what the risk. Vinnie pointed out that enemy troops were moving toward the downed helicopter.

The gunships sealed off the downed aircraft in a ring of mini-gun and rocket fire to keep the enemy troops at bay. Jeff asked for a brief cease-fire so he could get in close to Jack's Loach. Roy Sudeck's fire team gave him the window he needed, and he settled into a hover near Jack's aircraft; firing on the converging NVA troops with his mini gun, spitting out 4000 rounds a minute.

Just as Jeff's mini gun jammed, an enemy soldier popped up out of a spider hole a few meters in front of them and opened fire with an AK 47. Jeff's only option was to drop down rapidly, try to avoid the bullets, and get Jack and Craig out of there. Just as the enemy soldier fired a full AK clip above Jeff and Vinnie's heads and through the doghouse, control assemblies, and upper bubbles, Jeff's Loach took a hard bounce, sending the frag grenades that they kept between the seats into the air, almost to eye level.

Jeff struggle to keep his six foot one inch frame behind his chicken plate resulted in a permanent back injury that was to flare up later and stay with him through the rest of his life. At the time, though, his back injury, like the small splintering shrapnel wounds he sustained, went unnoticed.

The enemy soldier who had been shooting at Jeff and Vinnie disappeared in a hail of fire from the gunships above. In the downed aircraft, which had rolled hard to the left, Craig figured that he'd never be able to pull Jack up and out of the right doorway, which was now above him. Craig took his CAR-15 and blew out the bubble, scaring the hell out of Jeff and Vinnie, who had landed close by.

Precious seconds passed as Craig, covered with blood and debris, fumbled to locate Jack's seat belt. Finding it, he pulled the release, and Jack fell into his arms.

Vinnie didn't hesitate. He leapt from the Loach and ran to help Craig pull Jack through the blown bubble. Together the men carried and dragged Jack to Jeff's aircraft. Despite protests to hurry and get on board, Craig returned to the downed Loach and retrieved the radio and assorted personal equipment, keeping

it from falling into enemy hands. Throwing what he had retrieved in the back seat of the Loach, Craig climbed into the aircraft and put his arm around his pilot to secure him for the escape.

Jeff prepared to lift off. Between the numbers of hits his Loach sustained, added to the hard landing, and the additional weight of two passengers, he had good reasons to worry that it might not fly.

With gunships providing cover, by a miracle, the Loach lifted off. Jeff's objective now was to return to base with everyone still intact. Flying no higher than 100 feet above the ground, he milked as much speed as possible from the aircraft by holding the TOT [turbine outlet temperature] up to the redline and then dropping it back for a few seconds as per the operating limitations of the aircraft, nailing the air speed at nearly 130 knots for the 45 minutes return trip to Vinh Long.

Jack was in excruciating pain and bleeding profusely. Vinnie got both Craig and Jack's helmet jacks plugged into the intercom system, and Craig told Vinnie that they needed to find something to stop Jack's bleeding. Vinnie struggled to release the First Aid kit. When he finally got it open, he frantically dug through it. Finally, at the bottom of the box, he found a gauze pad that was big enough to apply pressure to wound. Jack's left leg, attached only by muscle and tissue, bounced and was twisted by his position in the aircraft.

Craig worried that his friend might die. Stopping the bleeding was almost impossible, Jack's face was ghostly pale, and he kept losing consciousness. The forty-five-minute flight seemed infinitely longer.

Jeff radioed Vinh Long Tower (Air Traffic Control) that they had a medical emergency and needed clearance for a straight-in approach. ATC cleared all air and runway traffic and vectored the surviving Loach to the medical pad. When they set down, Craig stayed with Jack as the medics transferred him to a waiting Medevac to be airlifted to the nearest MASH unit in Binh Thuy.

Jeff and Vinnie took their damaged aircraft to the Loach revetments, threw all their gear in, did a quick preflight on another aircraft, and returned to the crash site. In the area adjacent to the village, a large number of soldiers were picking through the remains of the Loach, while many more were scattered throughout the area, apparently tending to their casualties. The Cobras were orbiting several clicks from the crash site and Jeff queried Roy as to why they weren't firing on the enemy troops when word came over the radio that they had inadvertently crossed the border into Cambodia.

There would be no recovery of the downed Loach and Jeff was ordered to remain clear. They couldn't even blow the aircraft in place! Jeff prayed that the mini-gun on Fred's aircraft had been rendered inoperable in the crash. He didn't want it shooting at him, or anyone else, some day in the future.

Returning to base, Jeff and Vinnie learned that Jack was out of surgery, stabilized, but in critical condition. The OH-6A that had brought all four back safely was signed off as unsalvageable with over 130 bullet holes in it - virtually

every critical component other than the engine and the transmissions had sustained such damage that any of them alone would have rendered it unflyable! A crew chief gave Jeff one of the bell cranks that had a bullet hole completely through it. He still has it today.

WO1 Fred Jackson was to spend the next 3 years in various hospitals, ending up at Walson Army Hospital at Ft. Dix, NJ. For the first year he was in a full body cast. Over the next two years he had multiple surgeries to enable him to walk again. He was awarded the Air Medal for Heroism.

Observers, Craig Myers and Vinnie Costello* were also awarded the Air Medal With "V" For Heroism. Jeff Bounds and Roy Sudeck received the Distinguished Flying Cross for their part in this rescue. A day that was to have been uneventful would forever impact the lives of those who participated in the rescue mission.

Fred Jackson, (Jack) was medically retired from the Army. He now owns an organic citrus grove in Florida, where he lives with his wife and children. Jeff Bounds is a retired FAA Air Traffic Controller, and resides in Salisbury, Maryland with his wife. Both men are grandfathers. This article has been written for the children and grandchildren of all these men so they will know of their father's, or grandfather's, contributions that day when bravery and loyalty saved two lives.

*Note: The name "Costello" is fictitious, as Vinnie's real last name is unknown. The authors would welcome information about Vinnie, Craig, or any of the other participants.