

THE FINAL FLIGHT OF CURIOUS YELLOW



JUNE 4, 1971

QUANG TRI AIRFIELD, SOUTH VIETNAM

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Nov. 10, 2006
St. George, Utah

Tomorrow is Veterans' Day – a beautiful weekend lies ahead. The sky is brilliant blue against red-orange sandstone cliffs; the desert air is clean with a light scent of sagebrush. This is an afternoon worth living for.

The cell phone rings – an unfamiliar caller ID.

“Dave, this is Eddie Iacobacci in Florida. You won't believe who just called!”

Whoa. Eddie and I had recently exchanged numbers at the 237th Medevac reunion after a gap of 35 years, yet I am surprised that he is actually calling.

“You remember the pickup on Hill 950?”

My pulse rate begins to increase. Of course I remember. No one involved could have forgotten.

“One of the guys we picked up, a Green Beret named Roger Hill, well, his nephew Bobby Hill has spent three years searching for the crew. He wants to talk to you. TONIGHT!”

Unbelievable! Characters from a distant life-and-death drama, suddenly reconnecting. What did we each remember?

After 35 years what real, dependable memories remain of the events at Hill 950 on June 4, 1971? They are like a group of bone fossils spread on a lab floor, some hard and well defined, others damaged and splintered. Some are missing entirely. Crackling radio voices, ominous vertical rocks forming the pinnacle; frantic anxiety trying to find a spot to touch the skids down, and explosions so close that the windshield should have shattered. Sensory and emotional recollections like these are the building blocks of this story, which like a museum dinosaur may not be perfectly accurate, but is pretty close to the real thing.

Sgt. Roger L. Hill
Special Forces, Hill 950, north of Khe Sanh
June 4, 1971

“It began at dawn when a Bru Striker anxiously entered my bunker, exclaiming ‘Trung Se, VC #10... Trung Se, VC #10.’ I immediately followed him to the Northwest corner of our hilltop location. As I peered over the wall, about 20 feet in front of me, hidden in the weeds, was a 20-pound Claymore. This sight scared the hell out of me, and it felt like my knees just gave way. I went straight down into the slit trench, pulling the Montagnard with me, and calling to everyone on the wall to come to alert. After the initial scare, I immediately began moving around the perimeter to survey the situation, and observed seven Chicom Claymores set up in positions where helicopters would approach the hilltop. They were set to knock down helicopters, because they go off like a giant shotgun.



Front: Sgt. Roger Hill. Background: SSG. Jon Cavaiani, June 4, 1971

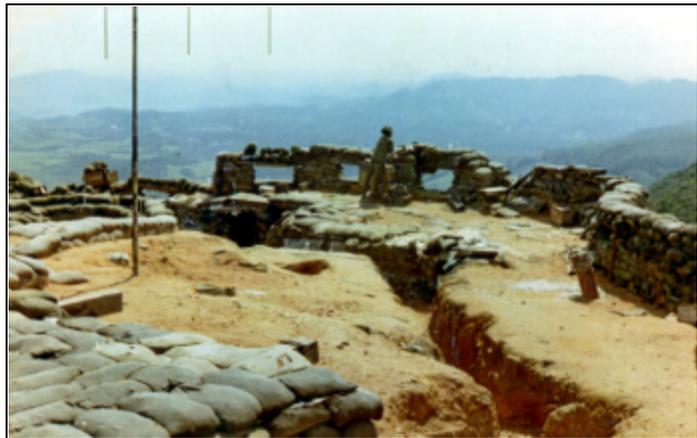


Hill 950 looking east

“We decided that I would go outside the perimeter with three Montagnards, trying to approach the back of the Claymore, and attempt to capture or kill the North Vietnamese soldiers who had to be somewhere close by the mine. They would be observing us or any helicopters that would come into view, at which time the mine could be activated. I exited the North East edge of our perimeter, and was approaching an area behind the mine, when an RPG (B40 Rocket) was fired, coming from my left rear and exploding on the ground directly in front of me. When the explosion occurred, I was facing South, and after the dust cleared, I realized I had been blown approximately 10-15 feet to the North, and was facing in the opposite direction. I was wounded, as were two of the Montagnards with me, one at the base of his tailbone, and the other in his neck, so the only thing we could do was get ourselves back inside the perimeter.

“After the first B40 rocket exploded, the action intensified. SSG Jon Cavaiani (who received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his action on this day) was stationed above me on the perimeter wall, with a .50 cal. machine gun, which covered us, as I gathered the Montagnards, and scrambled to get back inside the perimeter. Additional B40 rockets exploded around us. Once inside the compound, we moved down the slit trench on the North side, to a bunker located on the North wall. I went inside the bunker with the wounded Montagnards, so our indigenous medic could treat our wounds. After receiving care, we moved to the slit trench on the North side of the compound, as the entire camp was receiving intense fire from heavy machine guns and 75mm recoilless rifles. The majority of the fire was coming off the top of Elevation 1015, approximately 1000 meters to our East.

“We were taking direct fire into our compound, our bunkers were being flattened, and the entire Eastern end of the camp was almost instantaneously destroyed. The North, South, and West end of the camp became our defensive position, since we no longer controlled the East end of the compound. After a while, the artillery fire abated because the Communist soldiers had entered our camp on the Eastern end, apparently lifting



East end of Hill 950, the ground attack came here

their heavy weapons fire so their infantry could move in. Because of this, a hand grenade battle ensued. Although there was a limited amount of automatic weapons still being fired sporadically, we proceeded to toss hand grenades at the North Vietnamese as fast as we could over the crest of the hill, as they did the same to us. The Communist soldiers were close, and they couldn't bring their artillery fire in any closer than what they had already done, so we continued to toss grenades over the North, South, and West walls in an attempt to kill anyone who may be approaching from those directions.

“The brunt of the battle came from the East, as the South side was a sheer cliff facing the Khe Sahn Combat Base. The camp was not very big and the Communists had no trouble throwing hand grenades almost the full length of the camp from the East end, so explosions covered the entire area. I can't say for sure how long the hand grenade battle lasted, but it appeared to me we had quite a fight going on. At some point, a 'Fast Mover' (jet fighter) aircraft did come overhead and used some machine gun fire or cannon fire – whatever they had – and spread Napalm between 950 and 1015 in the saddle. As the battle continued, I also moved along the wall of the North slit trench, checking on the Montagnards, making sure their weapons were loaded, and they were safe and undercover.

“At one point I was in the trench line with the two Montagnards who were wounded with me earlier, when we received word a Dustoff (medevac) was on its way. We didn’t know where it was going to come from or where it was going to put down, but we had decided we would get as many wounded people as possible on the helicopter when it arrived. All I know is I was in a slit trench on the North side of the camp, facing to the East, when I heard the helicopter. As I looked in the sky, the ‘Curious Yellow’ helicopter was coming over the South West wall, and it was flaring. Its nose was up in the air, and I could see the whole belly of the helicopter. Just like that, it set down on one of the low, flat top bunkers in the camp.

“The sight of the helicopter was like a religious experience for me. It was like coming back from the dead – I can’t even describe in words how I felt at the time. I moved towards the helicopter, with the two wounded Montagnards, and with assistance from other Montagnards we entered the helicopter on the left side. It happened so quickly, amid the explosions, the helicopter suddenly lifted up and rolled to its right, heading South off the cliff on the South side of our camp. I remember looking out the left side of the helicopter at the mountain falling away from me and traveling past the trees and rocks . . .”



Dustoff 702 arrived and departed over the south wall of Hill 950

Excerpt from the Congressional Medal of Honor citation for S/Sgt. Jon Cavaiani:

. . . On the morning of 4 June 1971 the entire camp came under an intense barrage of enemy small arms, automatic weapons, rocket-propelled grenade and mortar fire from a superior size enemy force. S/Sgt. Cavaiani acted with complete disregard for his personal safety as he repeatedly exposed himself to heavy enemy fire in order to move about the camp's perimeter directing the platoon's fire and rallying the platoon in a desperate fight for survival. S/Sgt. Cavaiani also returned heavy suppressive fire upon the assaulting enemy force during this period with a variety of weapons. When the entire platoon was to be evacuated, S/Sgt. Cavaiani unhesitatingly volunteered to remain on the ground and direct the helicopters into the landing zone. . .

Specialist Eddie A. Hopper
Crew Chief aboard Dustoff 702
June 4th, 1971



*SP5 Eddie A. Hopper,
Crew Chief*

“I had just finished cleaning and checking our air filters when I looked up and saw Specialist Eddie Iocabacci and Sgt. George Shaughnessy coming over to the ‘Curious Yellow.’ Sgt. Shaughnessy had an M60 machine gun and said to me that he was going along on this one. Specialist Iocabacci briefed me on the mission; it was a Special Forces camp being overrun by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong. As Specialist Iocabacci was looking over his aid bag and checking his weapon, our pilots came over. We were flying with Aircraft Commander CW2 David Hansen and co-pilot W01 Milton Kreger.

“The weather and sky were clear, just about perfect conditions for flying. Within a couple of minutes and a ‘clear left’ and ‘clear right’ we were airborne. After a few minutes above highway QL1, we came to the ‘Rock Pile.’ I then locked and loaded my Thompson, and checked my .38 caliber pistol and my knife. I was thinking of a hoist mission Iacobacci and I had pulled at the Rock Pile not too long before.

“After a few more minutes of flight, Hill 1050 came into view, and then Hill 950. After getting a little closer, we went into a holding pattern. I could see smoke coming off the east side of Hill 950. Gunships were on station and after they had made a couple of runs, it was time for us to go in.

“Our approach was from the southwest and fast. As we came in along the tree line, it was quiet, too quiet. No one was firing at us! Everything changed in the blink of an eye; as Dave landed the helicopter, all hell broke loose! Explosions were going off in front and to the east side of the helicopter along with a lot of shrapnel flying in the air. I moved to my left next to our medic to help get the wounded on board. Specialist Iacobacci was taking shrapnel hits in his ‘chicken plate’ body armor, and the wounded were being wounded again. Sgt. Shaughnessy got his M60 going just as the F4 Phantom jet with heavy machineguns came in.



Sgt. George Shaughnessy, Volunteer Gunner

“After loading as many wounded as we could, our AC David Hansen lifted our helicopter and dropped off the side of the cliff. As soon as we departed, both east and west sides of the hill opened fire on us with machine-guns and small arms. Sgt. Shaughnessy, Specialist Iacobacci, and I returned fire. I then checked to my left for our medic and our pilots. Part of my job as Crew Chief was to keep eyes on the helicopter and crew at all times.

“Once we were out of range of the small arms fire we needed a place to land, and fast. Both of our pilots were on the controls at the same time. Talk about flying by the seat of your pants! All of the hydraulics were shot out, and white smoke was coming from ‘Curious Yellow.’ Somehow, our pilots found an old airstrip. The landing was beautiful and just in time, for we had lost all of our fuel.

“Sgt. Shaughnessy, Specialist Iacobacci, and I got off the helicopter and formed a line to defend our position and our wounded. The Dustoff that came in to pick us up was from the 571st. The Dustoff’s Crew Chief’s name was Bowmann.”

SP5 Edward Iacobacci
Medic aboard Dustoff 702
June 4th, 1971

“It was a nice day for flying. There were five crew members on board. We stayed in a holding pattern that seemed too long. We were the first Dustoff to go in. We were to get the most serious-wounded out first.

“When we were loading the injured, I remember looking to the rear of the ship and seeing a line of other choppers. Dave Hansen said that we had to go, and I said, ‘Just one more.’ There were explosions going off and small arms fire. As the last wounded was on board I yelled, ‘Let’s go!’



SP5 Edward Iacobacci, Medic

“As we lifted out, the emergency lights on the center control panel lit up with the alarm going off in the helmet headset. I yelled, ‘Fly the chopper!’ There was no keying the mic, as hands were too busy. As we went over the edge of the firebase, small arms increased, and I told George to fire. As we cleared the area, Dave got control of the craft with the help of the co-pilot. They were both on the controls as it was very difficult to direct the motion of the chopper. George did not know what was going on; he had lost his mic hook-up. I told him we were going down, and I said it may not be a good landing.

“Dave and the co-pilot got the chopper to the old air strip at Khe San. I told the injured to hang on; it could be bad. When we landed, I unhooked the co-pilot. Ed Hopper, the Crew Chief, got the injured out while George and I set up security. The only other nearby Dustoff came in and picked us up.

“We left the yellow-nose chopper at the air strip. I believe it stayed there for several months. All the injured and the crew were taken to the 18th Surgical Hospital in Quang Tri. About two or three weeks later, the medic and pilot of the dustoff that picked us up were killed in a LZ not far from Khe San.”



*WO1 Milton Kreger, Pilot; and CW2 David Hansen, Aircraft Commander
circa 1971*

CW2 David Hansen, Aircraft Commander
Dustoff 702
June 4, 1971

“...we decided to make a top speed run straight at the LZ from the Southwest, coming in about 50 feet below the top of the pinnacle and flaring upward over the wall to lose the forward airspeed. The pandemonium in the LZ was contagious and I couldn’t find the exact landing spot. Precious seconds were lost in confusion, and finally I just set the helicopter down on a low bunker top and had the patients thrown in the side door. At the same moment, multiple blasts exploded immediately in front of the helicopter – no doubt about it – we had to get out of there *now*, and not the way originally planned, which would have taken us into the explosions.

“I picked the Huey up and dropped it sideways off the edge of the pinnacle in an extreme maneuver we called the ‘falling leaf.’ Looking straight downward through the side window at green foliage about a thousand feet below, we would fall erratically past rocky crags sheltering NVA soldiers, making it hard for them to lead us with rifle fire. Unfortunately, we were not lucky.

“In the midst of this gambit – falling through the air like a pickup truck – we took heavy fire and the emergency panel began to light up. The hydraulics went out and suddenly we couldn’t control the position of the ship. We were falling faster and faster toward the ground; it now seemed certain that we would crash at high speed, killing everyone.

“Somehow the ship leveled out, and as soon as the crisis was over, analytical thinking resumed – the next problem was fuel. At the start of the approach we had just enough to return to Quang Tri, and now the gauges seemed to have dropped markedly. Had the tanks been ruptured? Would we run dry before getting back to the airfield? We couldn’t safely land at any of the small firebases between Khe Sahn and Quang Tri without hydraulics, and Steve Woods (Dustoff 509) reported seeing white smoke coming from our aircraft. The only solution was a ‘hydraulics off’ landing at the abandoned runway at Khe Sahn, even though it was now surrounded by NVA forces.

“The wind was out of the west, so Kreger and I working together, lined up an approach from the east and brought ‘Curious Yellow’ down for a running landing, like an airplane, on the rusty, perforated steel plates of the old Khe Sahn runway. With the screeching grind of metal sliding on metal, the aircraft slowed to a stop. Now the problem was how to avoid becoming POWs.



View of Hill 950 from Khe Sanh

“Shaughnessy, who had insisted on coming along as a gunner after listening to the mission request in the radio shack, jumped out and ran to the edge of the runway, kneeling with his M60 machine gun to set up a perimeter. Others joined him. When I opened the door and looked back, there sat Steve Woods’ helicopter, our angel of mercy. They had touched down the same moment we slid to a stop on the steel plates. The crew worked rapidly, moving the patients to Steve’s bird and in only a few minutes we were ready to go. Shaughnessy was the last one aboard, closing out his perimeter.

“The abandoned rotor blades were still slowly turning as we lifted off over the top of ‘Curious Yellow’...”

One Generation Later....

R. W. “Bobby” Hill, Ptlm./ Forensic Sketch Artist
Erie Police Department, Former 16th MP Brigade (ABN)
November 2006

“I grew up not only as the son a Vietnam Veteran Green Beret, but also the nephew of a Vietnam Vet Green Beret, and the grandson of an original “Merrill’s Marauder”. Like every other kid in a military family, I began hearing “war stories” as a small child, and kept listening to them into my adult life. I became amazed by all the people, the places, and especially by aircraft, mainly the Huey helicopters. My Dad and Uncle Roger both insisted that Hueys in Vietnam had saved their hides on several occasions.

I decided to conduct an “official” interview of my Uncle one night. I wanted the actual first-hand account of an incident, which had occurred six months before I was born. All I knew is that the story took place on June 4, 1971. It involved a Huey Medevac, and that my uncle had been wounded and picked up while the base was being overrun by NVA. The interview was slow and deliberate, with every detail explained and every emotion described. He stated that the helicopter was named “Mello Yellow” or something to that effect, and I could tell that it was very important to him. After I left that night, I thought, “Man, that helicopter crew is still young if they’re alive, and I wonder how hard it would be to find them”.

I drove home and decided I would start a secret project to try to locate any of them, and simply say “thank you”. I determined which medevac units were working in the area during that time, and began making phone calls and sending emails. Many Vietnam nurses and soldiers were very helpful, but I still had no luck until June 5th, 2006 when a guy named Phil Marshall emailed me. Phil was with the 237th Med Det (DMZ Dustoff), and said he thought that Huey had been in his unit. I emailed Phil for more info, and my heart raced. A couple of days later, a medic named Wayne “Doc Gordie” Gordon also emailed me and confirmed I had the right unit. I was literally in shock! Not long after that, one of the nurses from Quang Tri, Sandy Peterson, identified the crewmembers, and before long, I had some of their email addresses.

It was all happening quickly. They were all alive, and all within my reach. I wasted no time in making contacts, and making sure they were the ones. They made it clear that their bird was called ‘Curious Yellow’. It turns out that none of them had ever spoken again with anyone they had picked-up in Vietnam. That idea shocked me, and I knew they had to meet my Uncle . . .”



Bobby Hill displays his artwork on a hand-painted bomber jacket

Roger Hill and David Hansen
Erie, Pennsylvania
December 14th, 2006



“At about 7:00 p.m. there is a knock on the motel room door. I’m a little anxious about this first meeting. I haven’t seen Roger since we unloaded him at the 18th Surgical Hospital in Quang Tri. But as soon as the door opens, Roger and I are smiling and hug each other like old friends. We have a lot to talk about and soon feel very comfortable with each other.

“Roger told me all about his experiences on Hill 950, and filled in a lot of missing details. I told him what it felt like from the left seat of ‘Curious Yellow.’

“The next morning Bobby Hill, Roger’s nephew who located us, and Roger’s sons Kirk and Kevin, joined us for a wonderful day of camaraderie, ending with a special dinner including the wives and grandchildren. We took some photos and, before parting, decided we would definitely stay in touch.”



After dinner at Roger’s house

Bobby Hill – April 2007

“Think about this: If the crew of ‘Curious Yellow’ had not crossed paths with my uncle for a few stressful moments thirty-five years ago, half my family tree would not exist! Yet, they never saw him again, and he was only one of thousands that they had saved, none of which they ever saw again. Furthermore, that UH1-H helicopter was only one of many Medevacs flying on one terrible day in Vietnam. I would like to thank ALL of you for doing a great job, past and present, and I would strongly encourage people to find the people they owe their lives to and thank them. They deserve it.”



Dustoff Hueys headed for Khe-Sanh