

In the spring and early summer of 1967, I was assigned as a Marine helicopter pilot with the Red Lions of HMM-363 at Dong Ha in the northernmost part of I Corps, Republic of Vietnam. Flying tough and reliable UH-34D helicopters, our squadron had the mission of providing support for the Marines facing the NVA along the DMZ. A combat base, which had recently been occupied by a Marine battalion on the Khe Sanh Plateau, was an important part of this responsibility. To serve the units at Khe Sanh and on the surrounding hills, HMM-363 rotated a section of two 34's in and out every two days.

Sometime in June of 1967 I was "fragged" with a 34 and crew along with another 34 to fly out of Khe Sanh under battalion control resupplying, medevacing, and doing whatever else might be asked of us. Our first day at Khe Sanh was quiet but busy. We were occupied primarily with resupplying Hills 861, 881 north, 881 south and 950. I remember that as we made our approach into Hill 881 south on that warm June morning that when a smoke grenade was popped to give us wind direction, the yellow smoke hung like a cloud over the landing zone. As we roared in, flared, and dropped on to the pad, the smoke was caught up with the dust and debris, and twisting like a small tornado thrown violently into the air. Ponchos erected over foxholes and trenches as protection against rain and sun flapped in the rotor wash, as young Marines stripped to the waist, dirty and unshaven, rushed to receive our cargo of C rations, water and ammunition. A Marine with his hand wrapped in dirty blood stained bandages ran bent over and helped by our crew chief climbed on board bound for treatment of his wound at Khe Sanh's aid station. Near the front of the LZ as it dropped off to the valley below was a skull propped on a stick with a cigarette clinched between his teeth. The grunts, who in April had fought their way up the steep slopes to the top, had mounted this totem as a reminder that they were now "kings" of this hill.

Following a full day of flying, we parked our birds between rows of sand filled 55-gallon drums and walked across the landing strip to the battalion headquarters area in search of a C ration supper and a place to "bed down". As darkness settled over the valley, we sat on the communications bunker, finishing our meal and smoking cigarettes. The first flare of the night floated down throwing dancing shadows across the base and illuminating the surrounding perimeter. Suddenly, without warning, a sound like giant hammers striking the ground came to us from somewhere on the other side of the base. As the incoming rounds continued to fall, diving and scrambling, we did what other Marines and soldiers have done since the Chinese introduced the world to gunpowder; we sought the nearest cover we could find. For us, cover was the bunker we were sitting on. Built out of concrete, several steps led below where Marine communicators sat radio watch maintaining contact with the lonely radiomen in the fighting holes on the hills and with the bored rear echelon types at Phu Bai and Danang. At the time we were told that the bunker was part of an old French fort, but since I have been informed that it was built by Seabees to house the US Army's Special Forces teams who patrolled out of Khe Sanh prior to the Marines' arrival.

The bunker quickly filled with dusty, sweaty men who with us waited out the mortar attack as others wait out a rainstorm. When nothing came our way and the silence of night returned, we climbed back aboveground and walked over to a sandbag covered enclosure where several dirt stained sagging canvas cots had been set aside for visitors such as us. We stretched out on the cots fully dressed with knee boards and flight gloves as pillows and soon

the room was filled with the sound of sleeping men.

Sometime after 2:00 a.m., at a time we referred to as O-dark-thirty, we were shaken awake by a helmeted Marine from Battalion Operations. The grunts, we were told, had wounded and captured an NVA officer. Division Intelligence wanted a chance to interrogate the man and fearing that he might not survive the night, it was decided that our bird was to fly him to Phu Bai as soon as we could get airborne.

Barely awake we stumbled through the base and back across the runway to where our 34 sat with drooping rotors. It was a dark night with clouds and fog obscuring the moon and stars. Naval Air Training Operations Regulations normally require a careful preflight, run-up, and engine check prior to flight, but all of this was forgotten in an effort to get off the ground as soon as we could. There wasn't another light showing in the entire Khe Sanh valley until I threw the battery switch and the inside of the cockpit lit up like a Christmas tree covered with red lights. We could almost feel the NVA' looking down on us and imagined that we heard the "clunk" of a mortar round being fired at us. All checklists were ignored as the other pilot, in the H2P seat, and I threw switches, flipped toggles, pushed in circuit breakers, and started the engine. The sound of the engine was louder than ever before, and as soon as it came to life, the RPM was run up to 1700 turns, the rotor brake released, and the rotor engaged. The wounded enemy officer, carried on a stretcher and accompanied by an armed guard, was placed on board, and before his escorts could step back from the helicopter, I added throttle, raised the collective, edged the cyclic forward and took off.

To hell with navigation and landing lights, we had surely awoken the entire valley and were now on center stage. As a few tracers, which must have been aimed at our engine noise, arched toward us from the north, we flew south. Climbing on instruments into the black sky, we leveled off at 3000 feet and contacted Landshark Control. Landshark advised that a Puff (C-47 gunship) was getting ready to work over an area directly in our flight path where some grunts had been caught in an ambush. No sooner had we heard this when at our 12 o'clock position and at our approximate altitude, a steady roar of fire could be seen spewing downward.

Feeling safe enough from ground fire now that we were at altitude, but not so sure about our Air Force buddies concentrating on their ground target, we turned on our navigation lights and detoured from our direct route of flight. We flew between Dong Ha and Quang Tri and as the Puff's fire receded behind us, altered course again towards the coast and then proceeded south passing Hue with lights shining brightly as if in a peaceful time warp. Approach and landing at Phu Bai were uneventful, and after turning over our passengers to an unconcerned Division Intelligence Officer, who appeared to have now lost interest in the whole matter, we grabbed a cup of coffee, refueled, and took off heading north. As heat waves began to rise from the rice paddies, we lowered our helmet visors and began another day In-Country.

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