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21st INFANTRY DIVISION ADVISORY DETACHMENT
Advisory Team 51
APO 96402

MACTN-BL-ALO

11 December 1967

FROM: Senior FAC, 21st Infantry Division, APO 96402

SUBJECT: After Action Report

TO: Commander 22nd TASG, APO 96320

Commander 504th TASG, APO 96227

Commander 35th TAC Fighter Wing APO 96227

Commander 336th Assault Helicopter Co., APO 96296

Commander Det 10, 38th Rescue Gp., APO 96320

IN TURN:

1. NAMES OF OPERATION AND DATE: Helicopter rescue of two Americans shot down at Nam Can outpost on 25 November 1967.
2. REPORTING OFFICER: Major Chester A. Walborn, FH 27154, Division FAC, 21st Infantry Division APO 96402.
3. AREA OF OPERATION: Nam Can outpost, An Xuyen Province, Republic of Vietnam.
4. FORCES IN OPERATION: 2 H-43, 3 UH-1D, 1 O-1G and a hostile force of battalion strength.
5. BACKGROUND: On the night of 24 November, Nam Can outpost was hit with approximately 100 rounds of 82mm mortar fire killing one soldier and wounding nine others. Nam Can is an isolated outpost which sits 30 miles south of Ca Mau, the Capital of An Xuyen Province, and can only be resupplied by helicopter. The outpost is surrounded on all sides by the densely wooded, triple canopied Nam Can Forest which is strongly held by the Viet Cong.

On the morning of 25 November, the Senior FAC of An Xuyen Province, Captain Charles J. Louvorn, and LTC Culpepper (USMAC), the Deputy Senior Advisor for An Xuyen Province, were on a visual reconnaissance mission trying to locate the Viet Cong mortar positions when they were hit in the engine of the O-1 severing their oil line. Knowing their flying time was now limited to a few minutes they crash landed on the helipad at Nam Can rather than chance going down in Viet Cong territory enroute to Ca Mau.

I was flying in the Bac Lieu Province evaluating the results of harassment and interdiction artillery fire when I was advised that a FAC was down in the Nam Can area. I flew to Ca Mau, refueled, and took off enroute to Nam Can. I was working with Playboy Control and I was in contact with Pedro 39, and Pedro 91, 2 H-43 rescue helicopters who were scrambled from Binh Thuy to rescue the down crew. Pedro 91, flown by Captain Larry Conover, was low on fuel and I directed that he land at Ca Mau to refuel prior to proceeding to Nam Can. I was in contact with Thunderbird Chief the flight leader of a heavy fire team (3 UH-1D Gunships) who had been scrambled to support the rescue effort and was enroute to the outpost. I asked his fuel state and was told it was 800 lbs departing Ca Mau. Knowing this would permit only 15 minutes at Nam Can I advised him to land at Can Mau and top off with fuel. About 10 minutes prior to landing at Ca Mau I had requested two flights of F-100 aircraft with M117 bombs, rockets, CBU and 20mm to suppress what I was sure would be intense automatic weapon fire. I also expected simultaneous mortar attack on the outpost as soon as the helicopter touched down on the helipad. (On 18 June, during an operation to change the RF company at Nam Can with one at Dam Doi, the Viet Cong bracketed the helipad as the first Chinook touched down and then badly shot up the "Lancers" Gunship Platoon as they tried to suppress, wounding four members of the platoon). When I arrived in the target area. I closely checked the positions where I had found VC strongpoints on 18 June and while I could see several freshly made well constructed VC bunkers and four sampans I did not draw any ground fire nor did I see any VC. I could see the two American crew members on the helipad but I was not sure of their physical condition and I expected the VC to soon renew their attack. I was confident the VC were concentrated south of the river. I elected to clear Pedro 39 in to the outpost without delay and without fire suppression in an effort to utilize surprise. I selected an approach path for the rescue attempt,

directed Pedro 39 to approach from the north and marked the IP with a smoke rocket. I told him to start down from 2500 feet at this smoke and marked a point on the river by the outpost where he was to turn into the wind toward the helipad. After observing that his flight path was perfect I moved south of the river and held over the area from which the hostile fire was expected in an effort to draw fire away from the rescue attempt. As Pedro 39 flared and touched down, the outpost was hit with a 6 round barrage of mortar fire. One round fell in the water, on the west end of the helipad, one in the river to the east, and four went over the outpost impacting about 100 meters north of the outpost perimeter. At this time I came under intense ground fire and I estimated the volume of fire at more than 20 automatic weapons plus small arms. I took one round through the cockpit. While I have received a lot of ground fire in my tour this was the best fire disciplined Viet Cong unit I have seen. The volume of fire could not have been from a unit smaller than a heavy weapons company. This rescue attempt would have been successful except that the crew to be picked up ran for a bunker rather than get aboard the helicopter. I told Pedro 39 to get out of there and go to Ca Mau because I would not consider another attempt without strong fire suppression on the south bank.

Although I had requested two flights of F-100 aircraft very early, it was 40 minutes before a flight was scrambled in support of the rescue operations although the request did not require a parallel at either province or division. I had requested the fighters under the provision for suppressing fire against a rescue helicopter. This great delay in getting tactical air was beginning to complicate the rescue effort because I was now faced with the alternatives of either delaying the recovery and conducting the rescue under cover of an air attack but without the gunships who would have to return for fuel, or to act immediately and suppress with the gunships and conduct the rescue amid enemy reaction that I knew could not suppress without tactical air. To add another element of uncertainty to these two unattractive alternatives I could see the crashed aircraft was upside down and I was not sure the occupants were unhurt. I thus elected to proceed immediately and suppress with the Thunderbirds.

Thunderbird Chief advised me that he had two 25-minute smoke pots that are normally used to mark landing zones prior to an airmobile troop insertion. We elected to use them. He made one pass down the south bank of the river and put out the two smoke pots in an effort to screen the rescue effort from the Viet Cong on the south side of the river. He and I drew heavy automatic weapon fire as he made this pass as I again held over the Viet Cong concentration to attempt to divert fire from the gunships. One of the smoke pots ignited and one did not which provided at best minimal screening for the extraction, but after quickly talking the situation over we chose to proceed.

The extraction plan involved the approach of Pedro 91 from the north breaking east into the helipad on the north bank, coordinated with the Thunderbirds approaching from the north to a point 600 meters east of the target laying down heavy suppressive fire on the VC position, and breaking west down the south bank and attempting fire suppression while I held over the Viet Cong guns synchronizing the effort, and diverting fire from the helicopters. When the first attempt was made in this manner, both the gunships and I received heavy automatic weapons fire and the Viet Cong hit the heliport with another mortar barrage. On this pass the VC were also mortaring the path used by the gunships, damaging one aircraft. The downed crew again was not at the pad and I told Pedro 91 to come off to the north and the Thunderbirds also came north of the river to get set to try again. On the second attempt we used the same tactic and the Thunderbirds again laid down a superbly positioned cover of machine gun and rocket fire to screen the rescue effort. The helipad was again mortared and all the aircraft again came under intense ground fire. This effort got the FAC aboard but the Marine LTC did not because he was trying to get the five wounded Vietnamese aboard as well. I did not know there was wounded Vietnamese there and there was not enough room in the tiny H-43 to bring them out. I had been unsuccessful at getting radio communication with the outpost because no American was normally on the ground there which is why I did not know there were wounded at the outpost. There were also about 30 ARVN soldiers trying to get aboard the helicopter. I told the pilot of Pedro 91 to "get out" again after the mortar barrage resumed and when LTC Culpepper did not get aboard. We made a third effort synchronized as before and were successful this time in completing the rescue although the helipad was again mortared and all aircraft involved again received intense ground fire.

I feel the gallant performance of the Thunderbirds and the two rescue pilots in the face of determined Viet Cong resistance merits the award of the Silver Star. This action was conducted 30 miles into strongly held Viet Cong territory in the face of desperate attempts of a well armed hostile battalion to prevent the rescue effort. It was completed without prestrike by tactical air which would have reduce greatly the volume of gunfire on the aircraft taking part in the rescue. I do not feel that a lesser award than the Silver Star would do justice to the courage and

gallantry of the aircraft involved who completed a daring rescue with minimal resources against heavy resistance by the VC.

The Pedro crews displayed great courage and determination to succeed when they could not have been criticized for declining to enter the inferno of fire until multiple tactical airstrikes had been put on the Viet Cong positions. It is truly reassuring to me to see dedication to duty and their willing acceptance of great risks on the part of these men, in their unarmed aircraft.

The Thunderbirds, heavy fire team, could also have called the effort off as being too hazardous and they also displayed great courage in pressing on. Their four passes, first laying the smoke screen down and then screening the rescue effort with the most devastating fire suppression I have ever seen. They were simply superb. Although I do not believe the performance of any of the aircrews involved could possibly have been improved. Each one sensed the urgency of the situation, evaluated the risk involved, and pressed on the complete mission. There was not one tiny bit of dissention from anyone as I outlined the situation and suggested a plan. Each element understood his function in the plan and executed in a manner which reflected the highest traditions of the American fighting man.

While there may be interservice bickering at some echelons, this was a classic example of determined cooperation to complete an extremely difficult task in a most gallant manner.

6. AFTERMATH: Shortly after this rescue operation I expended two flights of F-100s (Blades 03 with 8 750lb bombs, and 20mm, and Blade 05 with 4 500lb H Drag bombs, 2 Lau-3 rocket pods, 2 CBU-2 and 20mm). These flights saturated the area where I had observed one mortar to be located and where most of the automatic weapon and tracer fire had come from. This area was simply devastated with dropable ordnance and strafing, and the mortar position was hit by the first 750lb bomb and five other bunker weapon positions were destroyed. Two more flights of F-100s and a flight of A-1Hs were later expended in the area to neutralize other hostile strong points.

The Vietnamese interpreter who was on the ground during this action and that night told me the next morning that the wounded Viet Cong could be heard screaming with pain all throughout the night. The hostile unit was reported as the U-Minh II Battalion of Viet Cong reinforced by a heavy weapons company. There is little doubt that they were badly crippled as a fighting unit.

When the helicopters went into the area the following morning to bring out the Vietnamese wounded, they did not draw a round of ground fire.

Fragmentary intelligence report from the area credit the initial airstrikes with 35 VC KBA with 83 wounded, two mortar positions destroyed and four machinegun positions destroyed.

The action was concluded at approximately 1500 hours on 25 November 1967

Chester A. Wallborn, Major USAF
Division FAC, 21st Infantry Division