

FIREBASE DELTA
by
CW4 (Ret.) Dan Jones

On 31 March 1972, I was flying as an aircraft commander of a CH-47 'Chinook' in support of the 2nd Airborne Rangers. While on short final to Firebase Delta, hill 421, my aircraft was hit by fire from a large caliber weapon, crashed and immediately burned. My crew escaped with only one injury, a broken leg.

- CW2 Walter Zutter -

Now guests of the ARVN forces atop Firebase Delta, CW2 Zutter and his crew hunkered down and waited to be rescued.

In late March of 1972, the big Chinook and other helicopters were the only source of re-supply available to the half dozen or so fire bases arrayed along the higher peaks of what was then called Rocket Ridge, strategically located mountainous terrain northwest of Kontum City, Kontum Province, Republic of Vietnam. The firebases were manned by rangers and paratroopers of the 22nd ARVN Division and were placed there primarily for the purpose of occupying the attention of the invading forces of the Peoples Army of Vietnam (PAVN).

The Paris Peace Accords were in session and the North Vietnamese wanted to gain control over as much South Vietnamese territory as possible before a settlement was reached in Paris. The push southward into the Central Highlands of South Vietnam by PAVN forces became known as the *Easter Offensive* but was officially regarded as the 1972 Spring-Summer Offensive.

My unit, the 361st Aerial Weapons Company (AWC) worked out of Camp Holloway, a large U. S. Army encampment located just to the south of Pleiku Air Base. The unit's 12 *Cobra* gunships stayed busy, supporting ground and air operations in and around Kontum Province.

But the primary mission of the 361st was to support TF2AE (Task Force Advisory Element 2), formerly known as Command and Control Central (CCC). Operating out of FOB 2 at Kontum these small recon teams were made up of mostly indigenous mercenaries and their American Special Forces advisors. Using either VNAF CH-34's (Callsign *Kingbees*) or American flown UH-1's covered by 361st *Cobra* gunships, these recon teams were strategically inserted into enemy territory along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. And since the trail meandered in and out of South Vietnam from both Laos and Cambodia, many of these missions were "cross border" even

though *officially* there were no American troops conducting operations in either of those countries.

The 361st was populated by a slew of experienced and seasoned pilots so I was nothing special when I reported for duty in April of 1971. I had spent a first tour flying mostly 'H' Model Hueys with the 1st Cavalry Division in 1968-69, followed by a stint instructing at Fort Wolters before going 'indefinite status' and heading back for another tour. Enroute, because of a fortuitous conversation with a cooperative chap at Warrant Officer Assignments, my orders routed me through both AH-1G transition and the Aviation Safety Officers Course at the University of Southern California.

Near the end of my first tour in early 1969 there remained in excess of 500,000 U.S troops in-country which meant joint combat operations with ARVN forces were rare. But in the early spring of 1972 that had changed. Now American troop strength hovered in the area of less than 30,000 which meant that a good portion of our missions were in support of Vietnamese units and their American advisors. The war was not going well for our South Vietnamese allies.

There was serious stuff going on throughout the embattled country during the early months of 1972. Enemy activity was increasing everywhere south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and especially Kontum Province. For me, it had gotten personal. Only a few days before Zutter's shoot-down, a stray AK-47 round had passed through the front canopy area where I was seated as co-pilot/gunner for CPT Bill Reeder, my new Platoon Leader. Bill was getting experience in the back seat before being designated an Aircraft Commander (AC). We were providing gun cover for a recon team engaged in a running firefight with enemy forces near the southern end of the infamous ridge line. The projectile just missed my head but the plexiglass shards trailing it bloodied my face. It stung like hell, providing another sobering moment and the realization of how vulnerable you were to unpredictable events; like some meandering AK-47 round with your name on it. I was short and ready to go home.

Over the next few days there were several attempts by other helicopter crews to snatch Zutter from the hilltop and deliver needed supplies to the firebase. Those efforts were thwarted as the intrepid pilots were met with heavy anti-aircraft and small arms fire from well placed enemy positions now entrenched along nearby slopes, gullies and ravines.

The firebase had become encircled by North Vietnamese regulars and the situation there was in many ways comparable to the months long siege at Khe Sanh. In this case the soldiers occupying Delta, instead of American Marines, were Vietnamese Rangers of the 2nd Airborne Battalion along with their Senior American Advisor, Captain O'Brien (Callsign 65B). And, of course, CW2 Walt Zutter and his crew.

Several days passed as the situation was discussed and debated up and down the chain of command, from II Corps Headquarters and through the various battalions and companies who would potentially be involved. Then, in the late afternoon of 2 April, a plan was hatched that appeared both sound and workable. If successful, it would ensure the rescue of the Chinook crew along with some wounded rangers and, perhaps more importantly, offload critically needed ammunition and supplies.

The plan was simple enough. At first light on the following morning three *Hueys* - covered by six *Cobra* gunships - would sweep into Delta, quickly off-load their cargo, then gather up the downed Chinook crew and wounded rangers. Executed correctly and with a little luck, they would be gone before the enemy could effectively react.

At the Camp Holloway Officers Club that evening as many of us sat consuming our .25 cent beers and .35 cent cocktails the plan was laid out. Those wanting to volunteer were asked to do so at that time and four 361st *Cobra* crews were quickly recruited as testosterone fueled by alcohol worked its magic. Two more *Cobras* crews along with the *Huey* crews would be provided by the 57th AHC; callsigns *Cougar* and *Gladiator* respectively. We knew the *Gladiators* to be an excellent group of pilots since they worked with us on the FOB 2 mission. The volunteers from the 361st were as follows:

CPT Lynn Carlson (*Panther 20*/Air Mission Commander) and co-pilot/gunner CPT Robert Gamber.

CPT John DeBay (*Panther 32*/Aircraft Commander) and co-pilot/gunner CPT Bill Reeder.

1LT Mike Sheuerman (*Panther 15*/Aircraft Commander) and co-pilot/gunner 1LT Ronnie Lewis.

CW2 Dan Jones (*Panther 13*/Aircraft Commander) and co-pilot/gunner CW2 Loy Maples (DAT).

All of us were up early the next day, 3 April. We had pre-flighted the night before but did another quick walk-around mostly checking armament loads and fuel. Cranking on the cue of the lead aircraft, we completed our run-ups, hovered to the runway, then departed Camp Holloway turning north in the direction of Kontum. The plan included *hot refueling* at Kontum Airfield before continuing with the mission.

Not long after departure the aircraft crewed by DeBay and Reeder was forced to turn back after they were confronted with a *Master Caution* light accompanied by a transmission *Chip Detector* warning. With a bit of luck, they would attempt to re-launch and join the flight after company maintenance personnel dealt with the issue. Chip lights were a common

problem with helicopters and often easily remedied by simply removing and cleaning the chip detector plug.

Meanwhile at Kontum City, the eastern horizon was just beginning to glow with the dawning of the new day as our gaggle of helicopters, now refueled, began lifting off from Kontum Airfield. The *Panther* and *Cougar* gunships, operating at maximum gross weight with full loads of munitions and fuel, lifted off one by one behind the *Gladiator* Hueys. The loose formation of helicopters then climbed slowly to the north along the *Red Ball* (QL14) toward a pre-designated rally point east of Firebase Delta.

Still fairly confident that DeBay and Reeder would be rejoining our flight of five gunships, CPT Carlson, as Air Mission Commander, made the decision to split the anticipated six Cobras into two *heavy fire teams* which would provide for more effective control once the action at Delta began. Maples and I would now be the third element in the *Cougar* team being led by *Cougar 36*. Though not particularly excited about flying with anyone but the Panthers it was a good idea nonetheless.

Our rescue force of gunships and slicks continued northeast towards the rally point in the vicinity of *LZ Concord*. Everyone was ready to go, nervously anticipating that we would soon retrieve CW2 Zutter and his crew from Firebase Delta. Commo checks were again completed using pre-designated VHF and UHF frequencies. Somewhere between our group and Delta were the *Command and Control* (C&C) aircraft being flown by LTC Charles Bagnol, the 52nd CAB Commander, callsign *Dragon 6*, and MAJ Thomas Walker, the 57th AHC Commander, callsign *Gladiator 6*.

Using a small tape recorder with the earpiece plugged into the microphone jack instead of the output port, I was able to record a good number of the many conversations being transmitted over various radio frequencies during the remainder of the mission. Some of those conversations will be used here to describe the events that were about to transpire.

Now positioned far enough east of Delta to avoid announcing our presence we await the command to execute the mission. All of us continued to circle while listening in on the various conversations that were being transmitted over our UHF and FM radios. The dialogue that appeared most relevant took place on FM. It was between Captain O'Brien and the II Corps Senior Advisor, John Paul Vann, callsign *Rogues Gallery*. Vann's presence in the area was unexpected. But from their dialogue, it was apparent that events taking place at the firebase were likely to effect the mission as planned.

As they had on previous nights, the enemy dispatched patrols to probe the perimeter encircling the firebase in order to find weaknesses that could be exploited. These incursions by the enemy, most often under cover of

darkness, generally ended with the light of day. On this morning, however, the probes continued and in the gathering twilight there appeared to be a massing of forces in the terrain to the north. We all listened with increasing interest to the conversation underway between Vann, O'Brien, and others over the FM radio:

Rogues Gallery: *Six-five, this is Rogues Gallery, I'm back at your location. Uhhh, the area just to the west of your next higher or your previous next higher, uh, to the north, uh, is also under attack this morning... it's still...(pause)*

Then, a few minutes later,

Rogues Gallery: *Tell your counterpart there are plenty of gunships available in case there's an assault...but in the meantime that artillery is hitting the positions all around you and seems to me to be very effective...Rogues Gallery, out.*

Vann continues his dialogue with those on the firebase while coordinating artillery fire from nearby support bases hoping to discourage the NVA from carrying out any planned attack on Delta.

The circling Gladiator Hueys were getting low on fuel. Most likely they had planned to arrive at the firebase with just enough gas to complete the mission and return to Kontum Airfield. Being lighter than usual, they would thus be able to climb more rapidly after retrieving Zutter and the others. The delay in execution hadn't been factored into anyone's plans. Also, it had now become obvious to everyone involved that the rescue attempt was gradually being relegated to the back burner - at least for the moment. We all waited for something to develop, not sure exactly what our roles would now be.

There was another change. *Panther 32* (Debay and Reeder) had cleared their transmission light and were scrambling towards to the rendezvous point when confronted with still another chip light. They had reluctantly reversed course again and headed back to Camp Holloway. Now a flight of two aircraft, *Panther 20* (Carlson/Gamber) requests that my ship (*Panther 13*) return to the Panther flight. The Panthers are now a *heavy* team of three gunships with *Panther 15* (Sheuerman/Lewis) in the two slot and Maples and myself in trail.

Rogues Gallery is still on frequency with 65 adjusting artillery fire around the firebase perimeter in hopes of discouraging any enemy attack. Over the intercom, I am heard to remark to my front seater, Maples, '*This is*

when we should be goin' in there. Right now'. After our flight of three join-up, Carlson requests fuel status:

Panther 20: *One-five and one-three, say fuel.*

Panther 15: *One-five's fat with twelve.*

Panther 13: *I've got a thousand.*

We continue to listen as *Rogues Gallery*, still in a dialogue with 65, has the following exchange which will ultimately prove ironic with respect to events that will soon define the day:

Rogues Gallery: *Six-five, Rogues Gallery.*

65: (Unintelligible)

Rogues Gallery: *Roger, the only tracers I noticed all morning were those coming out of the position. I didn't notice any going into it and I'd say with the amount of daylight now it's highly unlikely there is going to be an infantry assault, over.*

65: (Unintelligible)

Over the intercom I am heard remarking to Maples, '*Thats ol' John Paul Vann himself, right up here where the action is*'.

At this point we have been circling east of Delta for 30-45 minutes and there is a momentary lull in radio activity on all frequencies. I tell Maples, who has control of the tape recorder to '*..turn it off for now*', not wanting to use up too much space on the device. The lull was most likely due to the friendly forces at the firebase gearing for an enemy attack.

The sun had just risen above the eastern horizon when the radios again light up with excited voices on several frequencies. It is now apparent that the rescue mission will have to wait. Delta is under attack by human waves of North Vietnamese regulars. The enemy's force would be later estimated at two reinforced battalions.

Over VHF, Maples and I listen to the following exchange between Carlson (*Panther 20*) and Sheuerman (*Panther 15*) who has been monitoring another frequency:

Panther 15: *... northeast and southeast of Delta.*

Panther 20: *Say again.*

Panther 15: *Northeast and southeast of Delta...bad guys in the open.*

Panther 20: *Roger.*

Panther 15: *..and according to the guy on the ground, it's many, many, many.*

From his gunners position in the front seat, Maples asks if we're *hot* yet, meaning are the guns ready to fire. I tell him, '*Not yet...safe*'. Almost immediately after our exchange we listen as Captain O'Brien (65B), urgently transmits the following request to 65 who is at another location, possibly LZ Concord, and further up the chain of command:

65B: *Six-five, six-five, give me those gunships ASAP, over!*

Over the ICS I say to Maples, '*Let's record*'. Maples replies, '*You've been recording for about two minutes*'. Several miles to the east at Firebase Delta, CPT O'Brien and company are in serious difficulty. He repeats his call for help:

65B: *...ASAP, to my northeast and northwest. ASAP, and get 'em off my ass!*

Panther Lead (Carlson) has been busy on several different radio frequencies as he coordinates with others involved in the execution plan. It's time to go:

Panther 15: *OK, are we going to Delta?*

Panther 20: *Roger*

Maples, after completing his operational checks, announces '*..and the turret seems to slew right and left*' to which I reply, '*..okay, we're hot*'. This was a normal exchange in a Cobra gunship preparing to fire weapons since the front seater had no way of knowing armament status unless told by the back seater who is in control of the Master Arm switches. John Paul Vann, still in the area and in spite of all the excitement, continues a droning dialogue with O'Brien:

Rogues Gallery: *Rogues Gallery, I say again, uh, if you don't have anything to control them, you can have them just hosing down outside the perimeter, over.*

65B: *Uh, uh, say again, over.*

Rogues Gallery: *Rogues Gallery, I say again, uh, if you don't have anything to control them, you can have them just hosing down outside the perimeter, over.*

Our trio of gunships, led by Carlson, are now headed at max airspeed in the direction of Firebase Delta, just minutes away. The Cougar gunships are close behind, led by *Cougar 36*. It is obvious by the following exchanges

that there is an abundance of excitement and confusion, not to mention a bit of fear permeating the moment:

Panther 20: *We'll work the north sector, one-five.*

Panther 15: *Uh, run north-south, OK*

Panther 13: *One-three, roger*

Panther 15: *OK sounds to me the bad guys are to the northeast and northwest now.*

Panther 20: *Roger, I say we'll work the north sector, uh...*

Panther 15: *OK*

Rogues Gallery: *... have, uh, wha... say again.*

65B: *I say again, they say, uh, we're takin' the, uh, the assault from the northeast, over!*

As we approach the firebase Carlson checks in with 65B, speaking directly with CPT O'Brien for the first time:

Panther 20: *Six-five, Panther two-zero.*

65B: (Garbled).. *bravo, Over.*

Panther 20: *Uh, roger, this is Panther two-zero, we'll be in with you in about zero-one here.*

65B: *This is Bravo, you better hurry. They're all .. they're comin' in the perimeter now, over!*

Panther 20: *Uh, roger, we're in.*

Panther 15: *I'll shoot on you.*

Panther 20: *Roger. You guys stay in the bunkers, there..*

65B: (Unintelligible)... *come and get 'em... northwest and the northeast, over!*

All weapons on our gunship are now armed and ready to fire. I give a quick brief to my front seater, Maples, *'OK, I want turret on the breaks...and watch the perimeter'*.

Panther 20: *... and Cougar, Panther will take the northeast.*

Cougar 36: *OK, roger that, two-zero, I got the southwest.*

Panther 20: *Roger, we'll be right pulls*

Cougar 36: *I'm gonna be left, I guess, probably..*

We are now probably a mile behind Sheuerman (*Panther 15*) on our inbound run when Maples blurts, *'I see 'em takin' fire down there..you see it?'* I've momentarily lost sight of Sheuerman in the ground clutter and ask Maples, *'Where's the second ship?'* Maples replies, *'He's still in the ... OK,*

he's rollin' right. Got him?' To which I reply, 'Yeah'. Then, 15 calls out as he turns outbound:

Panther 15: ... and I'm takin' fire on the right breaks, uh, should be a little bit to the southwest!

As Sheuerman transmits his 'taking fire' call, the sound of multiple launches of 2.75 rockets is heard on the tape as we try to cover his outbound turn. Ahead of him, Carlson is well into his own outbound track when he is also heard to proclaim, 'We're taking fire, too!' (More sounds of rocket fire from our ship). Then, as I suck up a hand-full of pitch for our turn away from the firebase, I urgently instruct Maples to 'Put turret down!'.

We are both relieved a bit as we listen to the comforting sound of the mini-gun delivering a seemingly constant trail of lead in the direction of our adversaries on the ground. At 4000 rounds a minute a six second burst dispenses 400 of the three thousand rounds carried in our ammo bay. We fully expect anti-aircraft rounds to slam into us but experience nothing of the sort; only the ever present sound of the main rotor system now pounding the air at near max angle of attack and 48 pounds of torque.

Sheuerman's aircraft has been armed with nails (flechette warheads) and as he prepares to turn inbound for his second pass he is heard to transmit, 'I'll be droppin' some nails'. Then:

Panther 15: I just got... got a number one hydraulic, uh, light. I'll be going to, uh, uh, Dak To.

Panther 20: Roger.

Panther 20: Drop it down so I can have a look there, fifteen.

Panther 15: OK. I'm goin' to, uh Dak To.

His ship has apparently sustained damage to the hydraulic system on account of the anti-aircraft fire directed at us during our initial pass on the firebase. He breaks out of the attack pattern and turns in the direction of Dak To, a relatively short flight north of our position.

With the number two spot in the pattern vacated, *Panther 20* is now well ahead of us in the pattern. We search for him to our front, knowing he is somewhere ahead and below us in the clutter of smoke, dust and terrain. Satisfied that he must now be well established in his outbound turn I punch off several volleys of 2.75 into and around the Delta perimeter which is now mostly obscured by the swirling amalgam generated from our rockets and turret weapons.

Rolling into our second outbound turn, Maples opens fire with the mini-gun which lasts less than two seconds. 'I'm jammed', he says with a

fair degree of frustration and anxiety in his voice. The turret weapons were notorious for malfunctioning when you needed them most. Nonetheless, we still had about half a load of rockets on the wings and a full complement of 40 mm grenades in the ammo bay that could prove useful.

An unknown aircraft in the area apparently listening in on our frequency is heard to say, *'Panther 15, this is (unintelligible) niner-four-five, suggest you go to Tan Can instead of Dak To - they've been under attack most of the morning'*.

Now well established on our second outbound leg we try to close the gap between us and Carlson in the lead aircraft when he instructs Maples and I to *'...break it off and assist him (15), please'*. With that, we break out of our attack pattern and set off to catch up with Sheuerman.

With the loss of #1 hydraulics, pedal control becomes problematic in a Cobra and will necessitate a *run on landing* since controlled hovering becomes almost impossible. The landing must be made to a runway or other suitable surface with plenty of length - like an airplane. Carlson, knowing that Sheuerman's ship has taken some hits, wants to insure his safe arrival at that location wherever it might be. Based on reports of enemy activity, Sheuerman has decided to avoid Dak To and is now headed in the direction of Vo Dinh, which is apparently not under attack at the moment. At Firebase Delta there is a momentary lull in the battle and the following radio exchanges provide a snapshot of the moment:

65B: *Quick, Panther, see if you can get a tally on those people up there on the north, northwest.*

Panther 20: *Roger that.*

Panther 15: *... uh, Red Baron, this is Panther one-five, I'm trying to make a running landing in front of Vo Dinh.*

65B: *Roger, uh, Alpha wants to know if you can get a tally on those people up to the northeast and the northwest of us, over.*

Panther 13: *One-five, say your location. (We were still trying to catch up to 15)*

Panther 15: *This is Panther one-five, I'm half way between Dak To and Vo Dinh at this time.*

Panther 13: *Okay.*

Panther 20: *We can get a tally for you.*

As we try to catch up with *Panther 15*, I say to Maples, *'You see him out there anywhere?'* But neither of us are able to get a 'visual' on Sheuerman's aircraft. The morning is hazy and locating a single helicopter a mile or two ahead can be difficult. Also, at 36 inches wide, a Cobra doesn't present much of a profile viewed from the front or rear. The front seat pilot

in a Cobra has a good deal more visibility since there is little except the canopy rails to block his vision. The back seat view is restricted by the larger instrument panel, sighting system and everything forward. When landing from the back seat, the torque pedals are periodically used to yaw the aircraft in a way that allows the pilot to sneak a view of the approach path.

Back at Firebase Delta, Carlson is occupied with completing the recon requested earlier by 65A northeast and northwest of Delta. He advises the Cougar team who are circling in the vicinity looking for enemy gun positions:

Panther 20: *... and, Cougar, Panther'll be comin' in from the west here to have a look.*

In the middle of everything, a callsign *Red Baron* aircraft is trying to make contact with Sheuerman to offer help. On a typical day, there could be dozens of aircraft of all types within a fifty mile radius of where you might be engaged in an operation:

Panther 15: *...and, go ahead, Red Baron.*

Red Baron: *Red Baron, go ahead.*

Panther 15: *OK. I understand you were calling me?*

Red Baron: *Roger, I was wondering if you want me to pick you up or something - if you need some help, over.*

Panther 15: *OK, Good buddy, when I get to Vo Dinh I should be pretty straight. I can just hop in the compound there.*

Red Baron: *OK, no sweat. You got enough gunships to handle the situation over here?*

Panther 15: *Yes, and say again, please.*

Red Baron: *I said, you gonna have enough gunships to handle the situation over here?*

Panther 15: *OK, we've got four of 'em there now,.. two Panthers and two Cougars.*

Having completed his recon, Carlson, still single ship, has decided to take a shot at one of the anti-aircraft positions. As he does, several other enemy gun positions return the favor. He broadcasts to anyone listening:

Panther 20: *Two-zero's takin' fire!*

We are several miles away but I respond to his call:

Panther 13: *Two-zero, you're not working that thing by yourself, are you?*

Panther 20: *I made one pass but I'm going to hold high and dry.*

Knowing that there are others in the area he can call on if needed, Sheuerman makes a decision as Aircraft Commander:

Panther 15: *OK, let's go ahead and break off. I'm OK. I can get to, uh, Vo Dinh. I've got plenty of power and everything's, uh, OK except the pedals.*

Panther 20: *Roger.*

Panther 13: *OK, keep us posted.*

Panther 15: *OK. I'll let you guys know what's goin' on.*

Panther 15 is now well on his way to Vo Dinh where he will attempt his running landing on a nearby road and then 'hop into the compound' there. *Maples* and I turn and head back in the direction of Firebase Delta so that *Carlson* won't have to go it alone there. Typical gunship tactics dictate that you have a wing man who is positioned to cover outbound turns in a standard racetrack firing pattern if at all possible.

As we approach the firebase I ask *Maples*, 'Did you try some chunker?' (40 mm grenade launcher). It is apparent that we have no turret weapons. We check in with *Carlson*:

Panther 13: *... eh, two-zero, one-three, where are you?*

Panther 20: *Okay, I'm inbound now.*

Panther 13: *Okay.*

The *Cougar* team is also nearby working their designated sector of the firebase perimeter. We continue trying to locate *Carlson* somewhere in the smoke and haze ahead of us. He is talking with one of the *Cougars*:

Panther 20: *...and uh, Cougar, I'll work east, again.*

For the moment, there seems to be a bit of an impasse as we await more requests from any of the 65 elements on the firebase. *Rogues Gallery* has departed the area to refuel. The entire top of the knoll is a quagmire of black smoke, fire and dust. It is difficult to identify exactly where the firebase perimeter is - or was.

From the relative quiet and comfort of our helicopters, there can be no way to fully appreciate what is taking place on the hilltop below us. It has to be utter chaos with each wave of NVA attempting to storm through the

perimeter with its defensive array of *claymores* and other explosives; all guns blazing from both sides. Add to that the firepower of our four Cobra gunships firing multiple 2.75 inch rockets, each with the equivalent explosive power of a 105 mm artillery round. Not to mention the mini-gun fire at 4000 rounds a minute and 40 mm grenades from the turret weapons in the nose of each gunship. Except for ours of course.

Somewhere amongst the chaotic scene below us is Zutter and his crew, hopefully safe for the moment, no doubt hunkered down in one of the many bunkers inside the firebase. We check in again with lead:

Panther 13: *Two-zero, one-three.*

Panther 20: *Go ahead.*

Panther 13: *OK. I'm on an inbound right now, where are you?*

Panther 20: *OK, I'm right at your twelve o'clock. Let's go high and dry at four point-five.*

Panther 13: *Roger that.*

From the front seat, Maples gets a tally on Carlson's ship and we join up. The momentary lull continues and I tell Maples, '*Turn that recorder off*'. Within minutes, however, the lull has ended and the recorder is back up and running:

Panther 13: *..and, uh, two-zero, uh, is that the same fifty shootin' that you put the nails on?*

Panther 20: *Yea, I know it. Climb to five (thousand).*

Panther 13: *OK*

Over the VHF radio we hear a faint transmission from Panther 15 who has apparently bypassed Vo Dinh and is now approaching the more suitable runway at Kontum Airfield:

Panther 15: *... and here goes the running landing. See you guys in a minute.*

Lead doesn't hear Sheurman's voice but Maples and I do. We acknowledge his distant transmission:

Panther 13: *Good luck.*

Cougar 36: *OK, two-zero. I'm, uh, behind you here.*

Panther 20: *OK, three-six, uh, I'll give you a tally on this fifty.*

Rogues Gallery is back on station over the firebase. Though we regard his presence as a nuisance, he is apparently determined to be a part of whatever happens for good or ill at Firebase Delta. Also, unknown to anyone in our flight, Vann is coordinating the ARVN response to an increase in enemy activity throughout the area that morning. He calls Panther Lead:

Rogues Gallery: *Panther two-zero. Rogues Gallery.*

Panther 20: *Go ahead, Rogues Gallery.*

Rogues Gallery: *Roger. Let me know about, uh, zero-five before you're gonna be running out of ordnance...and if you do not have some another relay so that when you have to lift we can get artillery in here, over.*

Panther 20: *OK, uh, we're getting short now. Uh, can you put some artillery down on this hill where these fifty cal's are?*

Rogues Gallery: *Are you talking about to the north of you? Over.*

Panther 20: *Roger that.*

Rogues Gallery: *Roger, I watched you taking, uh, uh, tracers from down there. I will go to work with six-five now.*

Panther 20: *Takin' fifty, breaking left....*

Following is the dialogue back and forth with my front seater, Maples, as we discuss the location of the .51 cal that just shot at Carlson:

'Where's he shootin' from? Do you see him?'

'Naw, I seen, OK, you see the green hill right on the other side of the fire base?'

'Yeah'

'O.K...right at the base of the dark spot on that green part on the other side...is where I seen the...'

'On the west side?'

'OK.. it's on the south...south side of it there. The brown part on top of the green ridge there'

'Yeah'

'See the green hill? It's right on the northern side of the firebase there. You might put a pair down on the other side there. Come around from another way... OK you're headed straight for it. Do you see the...?'(sound of rockets being launched). *OK...down to your right... down here'* (sound of more rockets).

Panther 20: *How's your ordnance, three-six?*

Cougar 36: *..uh, roger. I've got quite a bit of ordnance left.*

On the ground at Delta, O'Brien (65B) and company again have their hands full and are trying to make contact with our gunships. *Rogues Gallery* is in another droning dialogue with 65 as he attempts to coordinate artillery. A frustrated O'Brien breaks into the conversation, obviously agitated:

65B: *Rogues Gallery...get off the net! Get off the net so I can talk to, uh..!*

Once again I ask Maples if he has lead in sight. There are too many distractions below us and I have been looking for muzzle flashes from any of the many .51 positions around the firebase. Maples replies in the affirmative. *Cougar 36* is still trying to get a tally on one of the .51 cal positions.

Cougar 36: *OK, two-zero, I'm comin' right up on ya and I still don't have a tally on those guns.*

Panther 20: *OK. ... uh, the guns are on the west side of the ridge.*

Sheuerman (15) announces to anyone on the VHF frequency who might be listening:

Panther 15: *...and... I'm down (at Kontum)*

Cougar 36: *...uh, roger. I can see tracers from both of 'em but I couldn't seem to...*

We seem to have a better VHF antenna on our aircraft. No one appears to hear Sheuerman's call but Maples and me. I respond to the call:

Panther 13: *OK, one-five, I copy that.*

Carlson continues his dialogue with the *Cougars* regarding the position of the anti-aircraft guns:

Cougar 36: *...see where they was comin' from.*

Panther 20: *OK. I'll tell you what...how much fuel you got, three-six?*

Cougar 36: *I've got about seven hundred, how about you?*

Panther 20: *OK. I'm eight plus.*

Panther 20: *I need to check this aircraft, though, we took a lot of rounds.*

Rogues Gallery: *Two-zero, Rogues Gallery.*

Panther 20: *Go ahead, Rogues Gallery, this is two-zero.*

Rogues Gallery: *Uh, roger. I would suggest that..uh... you make a few passes right in to the position...they're all in their bunkers, over.*

Maples and I continue to discuss the exact location of the .51 cal position we've been exchanging fire with:

*'OK...you were on the ridge line on the other side of where I seen the fifty...one of the fifty positions'
'It was where?'*

Our conversation is interrupted by an urgent plea from 65B over the FM radio:

65B: *Panther two-zero, make a run right on the top of the hill with your mini-guns and anything you got, they're right in there, over!*

Panther 20: *OK...uh, hold tight...we're in. did you monitor, three-six?*

Cougar 36: *Uh...roger that, we'll see what we can do.*

Panther 20: *OK. I'll be in about one niner zero, left pulls.*

In the chaos, Carlson seems to have forgotten that we have returned from assisting Sheuerman and now occupy the two slot. I quickly tell *Cougar 36* of our position:

Panther 13: *...and three-six, this is one-three, I'll be behind my wing..uh, my...uh, lead.*

Cougar 36: *OK. I'll be right behind ya'.*

Driven by the desperation of the moment our four Cobra gunships set up to fire any and all weapons available directly into the center of the firebase. Maples, now relegated to passenger/observer status in the front seat, comments as I follow lead for another pass on Delta, *'OK...you see where that blew up on that ridge line on the other side of the hill...?'* Simultaneously, there is the sound of rockets launching from our wing stores. *Lead* transmits a terse call as he turns outbound:

Panther 20: *...two-zero's takin' fire on the break!*

I continue pressing the red button under my right thumb until the sound of our firing rockets ceases on the tape recording. We are expended now,

turning hard right as we break away outbound again. We long for the sound generated by an operational turret system but there is nothing there to comfort us. *Rogues Gallery* chimes in once again:

Rogues Gallery: *Alpha, they just dusted down the whole top of your hill very well, over.*

Panther 20: *...and three-six, uh, two-zero's out of rockets.*

Panther 13: *...and same same, one-three.*

Our flight of two gunships move off to the east where we discuss options for fuel and ammunition. The Cougar team has not yet expended completely and continue working the firebase. Several minutes have gone by and the recorder is back on again. We have several choices as to where our fire team should go. Neither of us are certain that our aircraft are airworthy. Carlson is sure of having taken several hits and it seemed reasonable to assume ours was also hit, at least by small arms fire. Maples and I agree we seem airworthy for the moment.

It is likely there are other air assets enroute to the scene since what was supposed to be a rescue attempt had turned into a full scale battle involving hundreds - possibly several thousands - of NVA regulars. Once the A-1E's got there and most likely some F-4's from the Air Force, the situation at Delta was likely to stabilize - maybe. Maybe they could even find a way to get Zutter and his crew out before the end of the day. Carlson and I continue our discussion about where to go for fuel and rearming.

Then events take an ominous turn as we listen to the Cougar team on UHF. *Cougar 38* has taken a bad hit in the area of the front cockpit.

Panther 20: (unintelligible)...*at this time should it? Thought they came on at seven.* (Possibly talking about Dak To II re-arm and whether they were 'open for business'.)

Panther 13: *...uh...yeah, they should be open. Did you copy one of the Cougars took a bad hit? One of the front seaters, I guess...*

Panther 20: *Yea, we want to get a dust-off at Kontum.*

Gladiator 6: *Cougar three-six, Gladiator six, over.*

Cougar 36: *Roger...we need a recovery ship...on, uh, we're north of Dak To, we're uh...got a wing man hit bad.*

Gladiator 6: *...uh, roger on the recovery.*

Cougar 36: *...and he'll be settin' it down at Concord.*

Gladiator 6: *roger.*

Gladiator 26: *...and three-six this two-six...(unintelligible)*

Cougar 36: *OK, get some people out there to get him out, would you, two six?*

Gladiator 26: ...uh, roger, I'll be waiting.

As we maneuver to get into position behind Carlson, Maples asks, 'You got him below you, Dan?' Maples is a good pilot and knows that it should never be assumed both crew are seeing the same thing. 'Yeah', I reply. I am frustrated and angry but starting to unwind a little. We are exhausted by the entire process. I'm too short for this shit.

I am then heard to transmit:

Panther 13: *I'm on your wing just above you. Comin' over to your right, two-zero.*

Panther 20: *Roger.*

'Son-of-a-bitch!' I proclaim to no one in particular over the intercom. Only Maples can hear me. Carlson wants to check in with Cougar *lead*:

Panther 20: *...and, Cougar 36, Panther 20 will hang with you here for a coupla' minutes.*

Cougar 36: *OK... and...*

Panther 20: *We're trying to get you a dust-off here into Kontum but no luck yet.*

Cougar 36: *OK...uh, I got, uh, one of my ships here.. two-six*

Panther 20: *OK.*

The ever present John Paul Vann continues to loiter in the area as he converses with some unknown station nearby, probably artillery:

Rogues Gallery: *Rogues Gallery, uh, roger, uhh, we had gunships work the area over...one of the them has taken a hit..they're having to leave...if you could... (blocked)*

Dragon 6: *Gladiator six, this is, uh, Dragon six on uniform, over.*

Gladiator 6: *Gladiator six, over.*

Dragon 6: *This is Dragon six, uh, are you inbound to pick up the wounded man? Over.*

Gladiator 6: *..uh.. roger, two-six is inbound. He'll be pickin' 'em up, uh.. (unintelligible).*

Me: 'Son-of-a-bitch!'

Maples: 'Yeah'

Me: 'Ahh, turn that thing off. Turn it off!'

At that particular moment I had no more interest in recording current events. A fellow Cobra pilot was injured and bleeding in one of the Cougar gunships.

Carlson has decided that our team should go to Kontum to re-arm and re-fuel since the closer sites are quite possibly not secure due to all the enemy activity throughout Kontum Province. Also, his ship has taken several hits and may have to be grounded. If so, it will be more easily recovered there. After landing in the refueling pit, lead walks around his gunship giving it a careful inspection, finding several holes in the airframe and rotor blades. He also decides they are not serious enough to preclude further flight given the apparent urgency of the moment. Our ship only has one or two small arms holes. After refueling, we quickly hover to the re-arming area and load up with more rockets. Then our fire team launches and heads back to Delta.

On arrival at the firebase we find the scene to be much as when we departed. The fierce battle for control of the hilltop has continued. For the moment, our people have been pushed from their bunkers and now occupy a defensive position to the north. There is an array of attack aircraft in the queue for fire support. *Covey* (Air Force Forward Air Controller) is there, along with some VNAF A-1E's, probably *Jupiters* out of Pleiku. But no one seems to know who is controlling the *Skyriders* so we have to assume it is the ARVN forces from their new defensive position to the north.

Gladiator 6 is on station and has apparently taken control of all helicopter assets including an arriving heavy fire team of *Cougar* gunships who are told by the 57th Commander to circle and stand by. Carlson checks in on UHF and we are also told to stand by as well and that the friendly forces will soon attempt to retake their own bunkers. But first, *Covey* will work a string of arriving F-4's who will soften things up for the counterattack. We have become spectators.

Our team of Cobras continue circling to the north while awaiting our turn in the queue. For the moment, all we can do is watch and listen as *Covey* works several flights of F-4's, probably *Gunfighters* out of DaNang. They put on their usual spectacular show.

We ponder the events of the day.

That there were five fully armed and fueled Cobra gunships in the vicinity when the NVA chose to attack Firebase Delta was indeed a stroke of good luck for its inhabitants. Conversely, it was proven to be a costly endeavor for the attacking North Vietnamese forces who lost scores of soldiers in the early morning assault. The attack had apparently been initiated with full confidence of its probable success. These were seasoned

NVA soldiers - and determined. In fact, despite devastating losses sustained courtesy of our five fully armed gunships, they did not withdraw but continued their assault of Delta. This back and forth would continue through the day and into the night as the combatants fought for control atop the beleaguered firebase. There would be no rescue of Zutter and his crew that day nor even the next. But they *would* be rescued.

The battle for control of Firebase Delta would mark the beginning of what would become known as *The Battle of Kontum*, an epic struggle between PAVN forces and the ARVN 22nd and 23rd Divisions for control of Kontum Province. It would continue well into the summer of 1972.

For the moment the Panther's contribution at the battle was now history after Carlson declares 'bingo fuel' (only enough left to get us home) and our team is cleared to RTB (return to base). We departed the area and took a southerly course for Camp Holloway; our services no longer needed due to the continuous array of aircraft lining up for air support at the embattled firebase.

Two days passed but on 5 April as I and other 361st pilots sat once again enjoying bargain beer and cocktails at the Camp Holloway Officers Club someone stuck their head in the doorway and yelled, 'Hey, Zutter's here!' Those of us who knew the significance of that pronouncement jumped to our feet and hurried to the club entrance.

There stood CW2 Walt Zutter, five days growth of beard and still in the flight suit he was wearing when he was shot down on the last day of the previous month. He was also sporting a tired grin and an outstretched hand. The handshakes soon turned to hugs all around amongst the circle of pilots there. How he and his crew had survived their ordeal at Firebase Delta and finally been rescued is still another story for someone else to tell.

It was an emotional moment as he thanked us all for being there when the NVA began their early morning assault on the firebase. According to Walt, the bodies of the NVA were 'stacked like cordwood' in and around Delta's perimeter. There were more than a few wet eyes amongst the group of us there when Walt stated categorically that we were the reason he, his crew, and a great many of his fellow occupants at Delta were still alive. It was a happy group of helicopter pilots.

Statement of CW2 Walter Zutter (cont.)

On 3 April 1972, we were scheduled to be extracted on a first light rescue operation. All previous rescue attempts had failed due to heavy enemy fire. As the early morning rescue attempt was about to begin, the enemy, estimated at two reinforced battalions, launched an all out ground attack to seize and destroy Firebase Delta. The enemy overran the northern

sector of the perimeter and were well inside the firebase's defensive wire when CPT Lynn A. Carlson, Air Mission Commander, 1LT Michael H. Sheuerman, and CW2 Daniel E. Jones arrived on station. We had all given up hope. The gunships started making firing passes on our own bunkers and the northern sector of the firebase in order to stop and if possible make the enemy retreat. The enemy, sensing the danger of the gun ships, immediately directed a fierce hail of small arms fire towards the gun ships. During this battle 1LT Sheuerman's aircraft received extensive battle damage, forcing him to depart the battle area.

CPT Carlson and CW2 Jones, disregarding their own safety, made numerous rocket and mini-gun firing passes and stopped the enemy attack.

It is my opinion that without those 'Panther' gun ships we would never have survived the attack. I therefore recommend the pilots involved be decorated in an appropriate manner.

Statement of LTC Charles W. Bagnal (52nd CAB Commander)

On 3 April 1972, I witnessed many heroic actions by AH-1G crews of the 361st Aerial Weapons Company and the 57th Assault Helicopter Company.

On this date an operation was planned using 4 UH-1H and 6 AH-1G helicopters to rescue U.S. and Vietnamese wounded personnel from Fire Support Base Delta, Hill 421. The rescue was planned for first light; however, the enemy had also planned a two battalion attack on Fire Support Base Delta at the same time. While the gunships were orbiting to the east, the fire support came under heavy artillery attack followed by a ground attack just at dawn.

The gunships were called for and delivered devastating fire around and on top of the fire support base to effectively stop the attack. Set up around the fire support base were at least five NVA .51 caliber anti-aircraft positions. Despite the devastating fire, all gunships involved were hit by enemy fire, but this did not deter them from accomplishing their mission. The gunships were credited with preventing the fire base from being overrun and were credited with 200 NVA killed in action by body count.

The gallantry in action and devotion to duty of the following named personnel on this date saved many friendly lives:

*CPT Lynn A. Carlson
CPT Robert R. Gamber
1LT Michael H. Sheuerman
1LT Ronnie G. Lewis
CW2 Daniel E. Jones*

CW2 Loy D. Maples

Narrative accompanying A & D Citation on Behalf of the 361st AWC Pilots

On 3 April 1972, a heavy fire team of three AH-1G Cobra gunships of the 361st Aerial Weapons Company (Airmobile) arrived in the vicinity of Fire Support Base Delta, Kontum Province, RVN, prior to dawn to participate in a voluntary attempt to extract the five man crew of a CH-47 Chinook helicopter shot down on the fire base four days previously. The Cobras were flown by air mission commander, CPT Lynn A. Carlson, and his copilot/gunner, CPT Robert R. Gamber; by 1LT Michael H. Sheuerman, and his copilot/gunner, 1LT Ronnie G. Lewis; and by CW2 Daniel E. Jones and his co-pilot/gunner, CW2 Loy D. Maples.

The rescue attempt was abandoned when an NVA force estimated at two reinforced battalions launched a dawn attack on Firebase Delta. CPT Carlson immediately reacted to the changed situation and initiated a firing pass on the northeast approaches to the firebase with the fire team under his command. All three Cobras were brought under intense light automatic weapons and large caliber anti-aircraft fire as they accurately delivered their ordnance and CPT Carlson's and 1LT Sheuerman's aircraft were hit. Even as he turned to continue the attack, 1LT Sheuerman's aircraft suffered a hydraulic failure due to the severe damage it had received and he was forced to depart the area, and CW2 Jones provided him with an armed escort to Highway 19 prior to returning to the battle. 1Lt Sheuerman successfully flew his crippled aircraft to Kontum airfield where he executed a successful running landing with no further damage to the aircraft.

Shortly after the departure of the other two AH-1G's, CPT Carlson was informed by CPT O'Brien, the American advisor on the ground, that his position was being attacked from the northwest as well as the northeast and that the enemy was located in the firebase's defensive wire. Without hesitation and with complete disregard for his personal safety, CPT Carlson engaged the enemy with his lone aircraft and identified three .51 caliber anti-aircraft weapons firing at him and at another light fire team of Cobras attacking the southwestern approaches to the beleaguered firebase. Still single ship, CPT Carlson attacked two of the weapons, effectively suppressing their fire with a volley of 2.75 inch rockets and 40 mm grenades as CW2 Jones returned to the area and positioned his aircraft to cover the vulnerable lead ship. Despite the continued heavy volume of enemy fire, the two aircraft made repeated firing passes on the northeast and northwest approaches to the firebase. When CPT O'Brien requested fire directly on the

bunkers of his position, CPT Carlson and CW2 Jones, undaunted by enemy fire, completely expended their aircraft on the position.

CPT Carlson and CW2 Jones refueled and rearmed their expended aircraft as quickly as possible, then, despite extensive damage to CPT Carlson's aircraft, both returned to FSB Delta and remained on station until order was restored. The 2nd Airborne Brigade have credited the 361st Cobras with saving the defenders of FSB Delta from total annihilation and with accounting for at least 100 of the 204 confirmed enemy kills. The accuracy and devastation of their attack is confirmed by the fact that none of the enemy succeeded in breaching the northeastern section of the perimeter.

-END-