

OUR NVA FLAG[©]

By: Al Moore

The following recounts the unlikely circumstances that led to the capture of an NVA flag in Kien Tuong Province, South Vietnam on March 27, 1969.

The participants: Capt. Cort Stark, Pilot; Spec/5 Al Moore, Observer.

I wasn't even scheduled to fly that day, and certainly not as the lead Observer in a hot area. I had only been a member of the A Troop Scout platoon for two months. I was one of the newest Scouts in the platoon and still learning the ropes. "Apache" Troop took the role of the lead observer seriously, having the new Observers spend many weeks flying in the "wing" position to gain experience before moving into the lead ship.

A Troop was operating in an AO (Area of Operations) very close to our home base of Vinh Long. The AO was so close that we were using Vinh Long as the staging area, where the ships and crews would come to rearm, refuel, grab some food, and stretch our legs. Typically, the staging areas were an hour or so away from Vinh Long, but very close to the AO.

Around noon, two Loaches (OH-6As) and two Cobra gunships returned to base to rearm and refuel. The crews were trucked into the Troop area. The rest of the platoon, who were not flying, had already returned to the Squadron mess hall to get lunch. I had stayed at the flight line to assist the flight crews when it was time for them to return to the AO and relieve the two Loaches that were still operating there.

With nothing important to do, I was reading a book when a jeep slid to a halt in front of our line shack. Capt. Stark came in and said that one of the Loaches had been shot down and we had to get a ship to the AO ASAP. There was only one problem, his assigned Observer, Steve Holmes, was still back at the Troop area. Evidently, he was having some stomach issues and was stuck in the latrine.

Cort looked at me and asked, "Moore! You fly, don't you?" I said, "Yes sir, I do". "Grab a helmet and let's go", he said.

We cranked the Loach and away we went. I did not mention that I had never flown lead before.

It seemed that we got to the AO instantly. As we dropped down to the deck, it was not an ugly scene. In the middle of a dry rice paddy lay one of our ships. In fact, it was a brand new ship that had only a few hours of flight time on it. It was on its side, with the main rotor wrapped around the mast, a fractured tail boom, and the tail rotor nowhere in sight. Lying to the left of the ship was a dead VC, face down in the grass stubble and dust.

How the Loach got into that position was a story in itself. The lead ship, with a new Scout pilot flying in the observer seat, had caught a VC crawling across the paddy, trying to escape the ARVN troops sweeping the area. As the Loach hovered above the VC, the observer attempted to shoot him with his CAR-15. It jammed. Rather than backing off and letting the wing ship come down for the kill, the observer pulled his sidearm and shot the VC. The VC, probably surprised at being shot at with an underpowered .38 revolver, rolled over onto his back, showing that he had an AK-47. He immediately fired a burst of automatic fire into the Loach's engine, dropping it on the spot. Because the Loach was hovering about 5 feet off the

ground, it was a quick trip to the ground. Luckily for the observer, the VC had aimed at the engine and not into the cockpit, where he could have easily killed both men.

He was not the only dead VC on the ground. Several others were scattered around the paddy, a few creating some pretty gruesome, and memorable, scenes. As we circled the paddy at about 20 feet high to make sure no VC were approaching, we noticed one VC lying face down, with his arms fully extended and perpendicular to his body. His neck was slightly extended with his chin on the ground and his face tilted skyward. His entire forehead was missing, back to the middle of his head, and the interior of his skull was visible. His head looked like a blown egg. His mostly-intact brain was on the ground in front of him. Evidently, he had been struck in the back of the head with a high-power bullet, blowing out the front of his head and ejecting his brain.

We then saw four ARVNs kneeling on a wounded VC, lying on his back and close to the canal that bordered that side of the paddy. He was struggling and it took a few orbits of the paddy to figure out what was happening.

Two ARVNs were holding his arms while a third was lying across his legs. The fourth ARVN was in the process of removing his heart while he was still alive. After a couple of minutes, they jumped up in celebration, while the "surgeon" triumphantly held the heart high in the air.

A feeling of utter disgust swept over me and I thought, "These are the guys we're fighting for?"

With the paddy secured, we began sweeping the area at low level. This carried us a couple of miles to the north east. After a few minutes of this, I spotted a flag and banner flying in the corner of a rice paddy. The flag was attached to a thin bamboo pole and the banner appeared to be attached to trees that came together in a 90-degree angle, forming the corner of the paddy. The banner was white and about 6 to 7 feet long and a foot wide. A long phrase was written in Vietnamese.

We reported the find to Apache 6, who immediately told us to ignore it. We went back to checking a canal that ran off to the northeast. We flew a slow slalom pattern from one bank to the other, looking for VC who might be hiding in the long grass that grew out of the water and hid the banks from view.

After 15 minutes of flying this pattern, I spotted a VC on the left side of the canal. He was trying to pull the grass over his head and shoulders to stay out of sight.

I stepped on the floor switch and yelled into my mic, "I got a man! Break left and get over the canal!"

We did a quick circle to the left as I kept an eye on the guy to make sure he did not slip out of sight. Cort reported to Apache 6 that we'd found a VC and he had a gun. 6 gave us the OK to engage him, which I did with my CAR-15. He never got off a shot.

We had now been on the AO nearly two hours, and our relief ship came in. We climbed out of the AO and Cort thumbed his mic, saying, "Which way to that flag? I said, "I think we go southwest to the third canal and turn right". I have no idea how I remembered that, because I'd forgotten about the flag, once we left it behind.

Because we were cruising and not zig zagging down the canal, the flag and banner came into site in about three minutes. I pointed it out to Cort. He said, "What do you think?"

I said, "Just hover as close as you can get to the trees and I'll stretch out and grab it".

As we descended, I placed my CAR-15 into the space between the side of my seat and the armor plate, where we stored the weapon when we were not in the AO, unbuckled my harness and prepared to snatch the flag.

I noticed the grass in the corner of the paddy was unusually high, but thought nothing of it. I should have. Cort flared the Loach into a hover, at what we thought was four feet above the ground. However, the Loach slammed to a stop and we were now on the ground. Worse, my CAR-15 flew out the door!

Surprisingly, rather than going down into the tall grass, the muzzle stuck into the mud, with the carbine sticking straight up in the air and allowing me to simply grab the weapon by the butt and put it back in the Loach.

With that crisis averted, I got half out of my seat and reached for the flag. The corners of the flag were twisted into rubber bands on the bamboo.

Just as it was close enough to grab, the rotor wash blew it off the bamboo and about four feet into the tree line! Fortunately, it hung on a branch at about the same height. All I had to do was guide Cort to hover closer to the trees.

It was obvious that I'd never reach it if I stayed in my seat, so I stepped out, placing my left foot on the skid. The rotor blades were snipping the small branches and twigs as I called out the distance to Cort. He gradually slid the ship to the left with the touch of a brain surgeon. We hovered as steady as a rock. Amazing.

When I finally had it in hand, I yelled, "Got it, let's go!" Cort gently slid the Loach to the right to clear the trees, did a quick pedal turn and climbed quickly away from the tree line. I grabbed doorframe with my left hand as I swung back into my seat, waving the flag so Cort could see it.

As we headed back to Vinh Long, Cort asked, "OK. Now who's going to keep it?" I said, "Why don't you take it and we'll both own it. You be the caretaker". Cort immediately agreed and said, "Yes. We'll co-own it and I'll take care of it for both of us".

We flew a couple more sorties that day, as the maintenance crew came out and air-lifted the broken Loach back to the base. We realized later that we had each scored our first confirmed kill.

When we landed back at Vinh Long at the close of the day and Cort shut down the engine, he pulled off his helmet, looked at me and said, "Apache Six doesn't need to know anything about this, right?"

"No sir", I said.

Later, we realized that the flag was probably set up as a trap, and our "surprise" landing placed us on top of a very recently-built bunker, with transplanted grass for camouflage. That would explain the wet mud in which my CAR-15 was stuck. March was the dry season in the Delta and fresh mud should not have been there.

I flew many more missions with Cort Stark before I returned to the States in late July 1969. I thought of Cort as one of the best officers I had. He treated all of the enlisted men with a great deal of respect and made sure the Scouts were well taken care of.