

Destiny Joins Fate

by

J. Bruce Huffman

The sun pushed its way over the horizon of the South China Sea, that September morning in 1968, as I wandered down to the TOC (Tactical Operations Center), with my map under my arm, to get the final briefing for the 'first light' mission that morning. WO Burns was my 'Red Bird' and would drive his UH-1B to always be in a position to rain hell on any foolish NVA unfortunate to find his way into his gun sight reticule and threaten my low bird.

Ernie and I reviewed the final details of the mission and covered the tactical frequencies we'd be operating on, who would monitor the emergency radio channel, and what frequency we'd communicate in VHF on to stay out of each other's way. The mission was a simple one; check in with a D Troop platoon that had been in an NDP (night defensive position) monitoring trail activity between the 'Street Without Joy'ⁱ and the distant NVA base camps in the mountains west of Camp Evans. I was to be on the alert for military age males, without proper ARVN identification, and we would 'snatch' them for detailed interrogation at the base camp. Our Blues (Infantry Platoon) were standing by, in a lager at Evans, with the Lift (assault helicopters) monitoring the operation from the TOC.

We finished the rest of the coordination briefing and made our way to the revetments to preflight and get cranked up and begin the hunt. My crew was already there and loading up 'Zero Seven Niner' (OH-6A, 67-16079) with the tools of the trade (e.g. fragmentation grenades, white phosphorous, a few thermite and concussion grenades, ammo for the 'chunker' (M-79), clips for the M-16 (1 tracer - 3 ball), a half load for the mini-gun, and enough M-60 ammo for Gossages' free gun to give him plenty to work with.

We weren't going on a bear hunt but if we saw a bear; it would be in some serious shit. I loved my crew and was proud of the way we'd come together to fly safe, fight hard, and come back home at the end of the day to yet another cold Balantine beer. My crew chief and gunner was SP4 Douglas Gossage. Doug came from Missouri and could throw a grenade, from any combination of bank and airspeed, through the opening of a bunker with predictable consistency. When his M-60 would talk, six rounds later the target would be down. Doug had just turned 19 years old. Our observer was SSG John States who had been trained in armor reconnaissance at Ft. Knox. John was from Baltimore and got airsick frequently and had trouble reading the map early on. SSG States had the heart of a lion though and on those days when we would 'find 'em' he was skilled at sending the bad guys on a very long 'dirt nap'.

As we began the mission, we flew east over the featureless terrain of the costal plain toward Quang Tri. The crews had 'checked' their guns and our 'Pink Team' was in the hunt. The mission was a success. We bagged no less than 6 guys, who later turned out to be NVA, which had been in the villages the night before and failed to get home before we turned them into prisoner pumpkins the following morning.

We had refueled and armed at LZ Jane earlier and had completed our last refueling at Camp Evans. All in all it had been a good morning and I was looking forward to shutting down and pulling out my lawn chair to work on my R&R tan.

I landed to a hover on the nasty oiled dirt strip we shared with Bravo Troop and saw WO Wallace running toward my bird. WO John Wallace was relatively new but had shown skill and aggressiveness. I sat the bird down and Wallace leaned in said "Get out!" "I need your bird and crew." "Lobes Echoⁱⁱ is in contact and the snakeⁱⁱⁱ is cranking." I said, "We've already been up for 3.8 hrs. Give me the damn brief or get your own bird up!" John replied, "We don't have time, it looks like it could be a Prairie Fire!"^{iv}

I stepped out of the LOH, picked up my 'chicken plate' and helmet, and watched as John flew over the concertina wire and turned west headed for the foothills leading to the Ashau. Less than thirty minutes later Cavalier 'White' (1Lt. James G. Ungaro) walked into my hooch to tell me that "Wallace is down and they are all dead!!".



Charlie Troops tribute to our missing warriors: WO1 John C. Wallace, SP4 Douglas E. Gossage, and SSG John Wayne States. KIA, 26 September, 1968.

WO Wallace had 'checked in' with Lobes' Echo and found out they felt they were engaged with at least a Battalion of NVA troops. Echo was under canopy on the high ground that overlooked a depression held on three sides by the NVA. Echo was a company sized unit against a much larger enemy force but they had the high ground and they also had the 'great equalizer' on their side; firepower.

John made the initial pass and discovered a 12.7 mm heavy machine gun in a doughnut bunker and had Gossage mark it as they blazed by. The AC^v of the snake refused to shoot due to the proximity of the friendly positions. He had recently been involved in a 'short round' incident that had wounded US troops and had been badly reprimanded and humiliated by an officer that should have known better for doing exactly what the US ground commander had requested. While the high bird was fooling around trying to get some artillery cranked up, Wallace decided to take out the gun.

He flew in and with a combination of M-60 fire and fragmentation grenades got

the 12.7 mm. Unfortunately the other two positions that were protecting the NVA regimental CP got him. The aircraft landed in the wrecked position of the first gun. SSG States stepped over what had once been the front console and canopy and went head to head with an NVA who got in the first shot. WO Wallace un-strapped and went out the right door and began a run for his life, toward Lobes' Echo who was laying down an intense base of fire to cover him as he ran uphill with less than a 100 meters from the downed bird to the ARVN position. Wallace was hit in his legs 40 meters from relative safety. He went down hard and before he could get up an NVA officer, in full view of the US advisor working with the ARVN troops, shot him in the neck with a pistol. SP4 Gossage had everything he needed; lots of ammo and plenty of targets. The ARVN Rangers said that the sound of the M-60 rattled on until finally the NVA fired an RPG-7 into the downed bird and the gun went silent. When our recovery was completed, the bodies of 12 NVA were found in and around the remains of 'Zero Seven Niner'. Gossage had done his duty!



Plaque given to Charlie Troop by Company E, 1st ARVN Ranger Division commemorating the heroism of WO1 John C. Wallace, SP4 Douglas E. Gossage, and SSG John Wayne States. KIA, 26 September, 1968.

I often reflect on 'what if?' about their loss but realize that on that day their fate intersected their destiny with terrible consequences. It was an honor to have served with them; warriors to the end!

ⁱ **Street without Joy** [Bernard B. Fall](#)
[George C. Herring](#) *Format: Hardcover, 416pp*
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ⁱⁱ *‘Lobes Echo’ was Company E, 1st ARVN
Ranger Division operating in I Corps RVN*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Snake –Bell AH-1G Cobra helicopter*

^{iv} *Prairie Fire – a code phrase used when
friendly forces are in danger of being
overrun.*

^v *AC – Aircraft Commander*