

Thanksgiving 1967

By CW3 [Donald S. Lewis](#)

By the middle of November, 1967 I had already become a seasoned Combat Pilot after only 6 weeks in Country. I had made almost all the initial assaults during the battle of Dakto. The first of these battles was Hill 1338 just south of the airstrip and the 4th ID sustained heavy casualties. There were numerous other assaults including Hills 1001, 900, 724, 882, and the Dogbone. Rocket Ridge was held by the NVA 66th and 124th Divisions and from this high ground they mortared and rocketed the airfield daily for weeks. 2 C130's and numerous helicopters had been hit and destroyed on the tarmac. The amount of air traffic in/out of Dakto was mind boggling. It was busier than O'Hare..perhaps the busiest airport in the world for a few days.

November 17

The hills nearest the airstrip at Dakto were eventually taken by the 4th ID with a total of 1,100 US casualties. It was during these battles and the cleanup battles in December that we lost Bikini Pilots Tom King, Laurus Roland, and Raymond Chase from the 119th. Many other pilots were seriously wounded. I was still a peter pilot on Nov 17th and was flying with Tom Roy. We were told to stage at Ben Het and take Sky soldiers from the Herd into an LZ at the bottom of Hill 882. The flight was mostly Cowboys from the 335th with a few Bikinis from the 170th and a couple of Gators from the 119th. All told we had about 20 lift ships and we would airlift a complete company in to support another company of the 173rd that had made contact between 882 and 875. There was no LZ at 875 and the Herd would have to hump about 3 clicks to join up with the other elements of the 173rd.

I still remember the look on the faces of the grunts as we waited at Ben Het for word to crank. No smiles, no talk, just a solemn blank look. I had been in country long enough to know that these guys had been briefed and it wasn't going to be a picnic. Grunts also had an odor....not the odor of poor hygiene but an odor I could never place until recently. I was in an army surplus store and saw the mosquito repellent the guys were issued. I smelled it and it took me back to that day and those smells.

Finally the order was given to mount up and I remember listening to the radios as Tom was flying. We were the 7th ship. It was a fairly large LZ for the highlands accommodating 2 ships at a time. The first two ships went in without incident. Then all hell broke loose. The LZ was being hit with mortars from NVA positions on top on 882. Furthermore, as the aircraft broke to the SE, they were receiving small arms fire. Chalk 5 and 6 were inbound just ahead of us and we could see the tracers heading up towards them on short final. One of the cowboys was shot down and the chase ship was going in after him. It appeared to me that he was OK as we flew by. They had managed to put the Huey down in a small clearing to the north of all the bad stuff. We landed and off loaded all but one our troops and departed the LZ breaking hard to the east and apparently right over an enemy squad hitting us with small arms. We took numerous hits and made it back to Dakto to refuel. The one skysoldier that didn't get off had been shot in the leg inbound. During the confusion we didn't even know we had taken hits inbound. I turned to look and this poor grunt looked pale and had lost a little blood but I knew he was going to survive. The CE was tending to him and we dropped him at the aid station at Daktop. All the Herd that made it into the LZ did so without injury. They were apparently after the helicopters in the LZ.

November 18

I was working ash and trash with WO Leopold and we had a call to pick up a chaplain at the FSB 16 and take him and hot meals into the LZ at 882. I would learn later that it was Charlie Watters. Capt Watters was going to go in to 875 and give a mass at the base of the hill for the guys we had airlifted the day before. We didn't actually land because of the stumps but came to a low hover. The moment we settled in a B40 rocket hit about 30 feet below us on the hill and shrapnel was sprayed all over the right side of the aircraft. The CE and DG kicked out the merrimac containers (probably spilling them) and Capt Watters dove out the left side of the aircraft. It all happened in just seconds but it seemed like an eternity. I remember to this day how bad I felt about the hot meals not getting to the guys in the field. We flew back to FSB 16 and waited for the 405th TC to come inspect our bird. There were about 30 shrapnel holes in the cowling but nothing of any importance was damaged and we were told to fly it home.

Nov 19th

I was supporting the 4th ID but everyone in Dakto soon got the word about the tragedy on Hill 875. The F4 dropped two 500 pounders and killed 25 NVA and unfortunately 40 of the sky soldiers from the 173rd. Capt. Watters was killed instantly as were most of the others. One of the men Steer (Don Joyce's friend) was in the foxhole near Watters and he was badly wounded and lost an arm. The bad news was we had no LZ near the area of the fight. After we had dropped off the Herd at the LZ on the 17th, they joined up and proceeded halfway up the hill. It was here on the 19th that they made contact and were in a trap. The NVA held the top and also had circled in behind these two companies catching them in a deadly crossfire. This was the circumstance that created the confusion which led to the errant bomb.

Nov 20

I understand there were numerous attempts to drop an LZ kit into the Herd..including our own James McLaughlin. Over 6 of the cowboys aircraft were either shot down or shot up so seriously that no relief was possible from the air.

We had C rats and attempted to drop them but it was impossible to see thru the triple canopy. I remember taking fire and we kicked out the supplies and were never sure if the 173rd got them or if they fell into enemy hands. The fighting continued thru the night.

Nov 21

I heard today that a German journalist was trapped with the Herd on 875. To further complicate matters, it was a female. She had gone in with the reinforcing element the day we made the initial assault. She was unhurt but no one could get her out. I cannot substantiate this story because I have never seen anyone corroborate it..but I do know that it was told as gospel during the battle. It was on the 21st that the Herd finally got a one ship LZ cut about 2/3 the way up the hill. They had also secured the area below them and were able to walk out many of the wounded to the original LZ for pickup. The new LZ was completed about dark.

November 22

Dustoff was finally able to get in to the new LZ. Resupply ships from the 335th began to resupply and reinforce the beleaguered sky troopers. I made one trip into the LZ that day and it was a hell of a tight hover hole. When I got to the bottom. I saw no one alive. I was unable to land because of body bags. The 173rd had stacked them and were fighting from behind the bodies. Everyone was prone and I felt extremely vulnerable. The F4's were still pounding the NVA position 50 yards just to the west and slightly up the hill. I could see the napalm canisters as they flew through the air tumbling end over end. The explosions were tremendous and could be heard over the whirl of rotors and radios. I could feel the heat and smell the fumes. A photo journalist with the Herd snapped a picture of us as we hovered in the LZ and 66-16170 was made famous in The Thanksgiving day issue of Newsweek. CE Larry Schultz of this net owned that bird and flew with it wherever it went. We climbed up and out of the LZ and did not take any hits...but the sights and smells of that LZ lingers with me to this day.

November 23,1967 Thanksgiving day

The Sky Soldiers topped the hill and ran what was left of the NVA back into Cambodia. It was a hard earned victory. Westmoreland said nearly 2000 NVA lost their lives. Intelligence claimed that two divisions of NVA were participating in the battle for Dakto.

On this particular day I was flying with Capt. Stanley Kiyuna. Capt Kiyuna did not smoke and I did. He was one of these guys who didn't even want to smell your smoke. We were sent into 875 to bring out the dead heroes and start them on their journey home. The majority of these were killed 3 days earlier. The odor in the LZ was unbearable. Stan asked me for a cigarette and asked me to fly. The stench was so overwhelming he was sick. He continued to smoke all morning as I flew out 40 bodies, including MOH winner Charlie Watters. We took them to Dakto and then they were loaded on a Chinook for the trip to graves registration.

One week later supporting the 4th ID I was wounded just north of 875. On December 12th I was made an aircraft commander. I had the privilege of going to Chaplain Watters grave at Arlington last year during the VHPA Reunion. 386 men were killed during these battles..more than any other battle during the Vietnam war. I highly recommend the book "DAKTO" by Edward F. Murray. Think of these men as you enjoy your meal this Thursday.

Happy Thanksgiving

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