

STING OF BATTLE

Swift MedEvac Team Mission 5-Mike 9 May 1969



by Joseph P. Donovan & Kenneth A. Altazan

In close combat, death and casualties never take a holiday. In May 1969 the brave Marines of HMM-364, the Purple Foxes, experienced another 'day at the office.'

In August 1968 1stLt Bill Beebe and I arrived in Da Nang, fully qualified to serve our tours in Vietnam as Huey gunship pilots. We were both disabused of that notion and given duty involving flight or training orders to Marine Aircraft Group 36 (MAG-36) and then to HMM-364, the Purple Foxes, in Phu Bai as CH-46D pilots. In that capacity we would fly resupply, reconnaissance inserts and extracts, as well as medical evacuation (MedEvac) missions for the duration of our tours in Vietnam. This entry in the *Gazette* "Sting of Battle" series describes an emergency MedEvac mission, "5-Mike," we received at our flightline at Marble Mountain near Da Nang, Republic of Vietnam in the early afternoon of 9 May 1969.

For this type of mission we flew as a section, two CH-46Ds. On this mission I was the section leader and Bill Beebe piloted the chase aircraft. In support were two OV-10A aircraft from VMO-2 and four Huey gunships. Artillery and A-4 Skyhawks were also in the area. We were responding to a call from 2dLt Tom Fong of Company A, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. The company had initially sustained 2 killed in action and 10 wounded Marines, and the unit was still engaged with the enemy.

Having spent 6-plus hours on morning MedEvacs at An Hoa, we had returned to Marble and refueled, expecting to be relieved by the next MedEvac crew. Still strapped in and parked at the revetments, our operations duty officer contacted us with still another emergency MedEvac mission. With our weapons, ammo, medical equipment, and the same crew in place, we launched once more that 9 May 1969 at about 12:30 p.m. with instructions to check in with the direct air support center and get a zone brief en route to the landing zone near the village of My Hiep in Quang Nam Province, about 14 nautical miles southwest of Da Nang. The weather was clear but very hot and humid. The terrain was flat with rice paddies, dikes, the village of My Hiep, and some tree lines that provided cover and concealment for the enemy.

While orbiting over Liberty Bridge southeast of My Hiep, we listened to the developing zone brief received over a pe-

riod of approximately 30 minutes. It became apparent that many emergency MedEvacs were widely separated in multiple locations where Marines were still receiving sporadic incoming small arms and rocket propelled grenade fire. Tree lines and village buildings were occupied in close proximity by both friendly and enemy units at and around My Hiep.

My eyes and ears for the mission belonged to Sgt Kenneth A. ("Al") Altazan. In the next few paragraphs Al explains in detail how we executed the pickups in five separate locations.

A View From the Crew Chief

Thirty-four years later I can still hear the garbled chatter and almost subliminal flow of information over my headset. 9 May 1969 is a day I will never forget. It was a disaster looking for a place to happen.

It began with a zone brief, that kept constantly changing, and ended with a completed mission in spite of the continually changing, unfolding events of that day. The sheer determination of everyone involved in that mission, in spite of the adversities, is what haunts me to this day. As crew chief aboard the lead aircraft for this mission, I can only speak to the events as I lived them and comment on what I saw that day.

After a third or fourth "final" zone brief, we began the extraction of the MedEvacs by proceeding toward yellow-colored smoke marking the positions of the MedEvacs, at low level, and escorted by Huey gunships. My headset was jammed with incoming information that 1stLt Donovan turned into useful information for his crew. I remember both gunners locked and loaded searching out any trouble spots and holding fire because the friendly and enemy were in such close proximity to each other.

Our initial approach to the first pickup point was uneventful. This changed dramatically upon touchdown. I was looking out for obstructions and verbally "clear" offered my unobstructed view of our landing to 1stLt Donovan. As the ramp was lowered, I moved to the back of the aircraft to assist our onboard corpsman, HN-3 John Van

Damme, in embarking the incoming MedEvacs. This is a trip I would make many times that day. It was at this time that I realized all of the MedEvacs were not at this location. Standing on the ramp and yelling over engine and transmission noise, I was told of other MedEvacs scattered in other areas and pinned down by sniper fire. "Ramp up" cleared us to lift from this zone but to exactly where I did not know. With the MedEvacs positioned to the sides of a clear walkway through the aircraft, I returned to the front door portal and communicated what I had learned to 1stLt Donovan. I then realized that 1stLt Donovan was already in communication with air and ground spotters and on his way to the next pickup point.

Receiving a continuous and seemingly overwhelming flow of information from multiple sources, 1stLt Donovan maneuvered our CH-46D from one pickup point to another. The confusion in the zone and the separation of all of the MedEvacs forced us to spend entirely too much time on the ground. At some point we began taking fire, and our aircraft was hit numerous times. At one location we were taking on MedEvacs, and as they made their way to the ramp one of the Marines helping to carry the wounded was shot, and both men fell to the ground. Corpsman Van Damme, assisting other wounded into the aircraft, seemed oblivious to the gunfire we were taking and continued caring for his charges. At this time I unplugged my intercommunications system (ICS) cord and ran to help the two fallen men at some distance from the aircraft. Carrying one on my shoulders and helping the other as best I could, I heard or felt a sniper's bullet hit the man I was carrying. The impact caused me to fall with my wounded Marine, and I injured my right knee. I stood up and picked up the injured Marine and started toward the aircraft with both men and was met by the corpsman. He grabbed one man from me, and we entered the aircraft. Because he had seen me go down and saw me limping, he came to check on me, concerned that I had been hit. Alertly, the gunners seeing this and realizing I had no communications with the cockpit, advised 1stLt Donovan that we were clear to take off. I then returned to the front door as 1stLt Donovan maneuvered to the next pickup point.

As I reconnected my long-cord ICS I heard someone advising that they were taking fire and that we should wave off the last pickup. I informed 1stLt Donovan that the aircraft was taking hits, which he in turn reported to covering aircraft. Again, we were advised to pull out of the zone if we were taking fire. 1stLt Donovan quickly responded emphatically and in no uncertain terms that "We're not leaving this zone until we've got all your MedEvacs! Do you understand that?" As we approached the fifth and last pickup point, I again moved to the rear of the aircraft to move wounded and clear a path for the next MedEvacs. By this time the floor of the plane was literally covered with wounded Marines, spent brass, medical bandage wrappers, hanging intravenous bags, windblown grass and debris, and one of the busiest corpsman I have ever flown with. With no more than hand signals at times, I was able to communicate what was needed to Van Damme and our gunners, LCpl Don Chamberlin and Cpl Steve Lovelady.



Purple Fox CH-46D, 1969.

Photo courtesy of the author.

As I moved to the front of the aircraft we were in little more than an air taxi configuration approaching what would be our last pickup. From that elevation I saw movement near some bushes across the open paddy. As we set down to embark more MedEvacs, one of the Marines from the ground unit came up to my right gunner's window and attempted to direct our .50 caliber fire toward the tree line to our right side. Once again as we lifted to reposition closer to the approaching MedEvacs, I noticed the movement some distance away that I had seen before. I did not have time to tell 1stLt Donovan that I was leaving the aircraft, but I decided to go to this man who obviously was not able to come to us. As I bolted from the front door of the aircraft, I forgot to unplug my long-cord, and in full stride was jerked from my feet when I reached the end of that cord. As I got up I again felt a terrible pain in my knee and was not certain that I was going to be able to even get to the MedEvacs, much less help them. As I was making my way to the wounded man I had seen waving what turned out to be a green T-shirt, I had to remove my body armor (bullet bouncer) because it was pounding on my hips and slowing me down. When I got to the spot, I found two men. One was unconscious, and the other was exhausted and suffering heat stroke. I picked up the unconscious man and grabbed the other man by the belt, and as I was making my way back to the aircraft, I fell because of the instability in my knee. Once again I got up, picked up one MedEvac, grabbed the other one, and headed back for the aircraft. I can still reflect back on the surreal scene before me as I approached the plane—a pilot holding his aircraft fast in a fire swept zone, my right gunner firing his .50 caliber machinegun, the other gunner standing in full view on the steps of the front door firing over and past me with his rifle, Huey gunships and fixed-wing aircraft literally right over our heads and, as I got to the ramp, a familiar face in Van Damme waiting to assist with his MedEvacs.

The coordination of information from numerous sources, flying skills, determination to get this job done, and the absolute calm displayed by 1stLt Donovan was an inspiration to everyone and the driving force to the success of this mission. Corpsman Van Damme's courage under fire and his devotion to the task at hand, no matter how overwhelming it seemed at the time, helped to ensure the success of the mission. The two gunners, Chamberlin and Lovelady, at their stations were a calming influence



Photo courtesy of Dr. Joe Franger, M.D.

CH-46D MedEvac mission, 1969.

MedEvacs that day. Lt Fong would remain on the ground fighting with his unit and would remain so for some time to come. For all those Marines participating in these types of operations in Vietnam, this type of activity may seem somewhat routine. For those of us who were there, I assure everyone that it was anything but routine. But this bonding that we all felt for one another on that hot and humid Friday afternoon in May 1969 lives on. We were proud of our squadron then and even more proud now, as we continue to meet with the Purple Foxes at reunions. We salute our active duty Purple Fox squadron mates heavily engaged in the current combat action in the Gulf and wish our mentor, "Papa Fox," Col Eugene R. Brady, USMC(Ret), a Happy 75th Birthday on 27 May. Semper Fi!



over this mission. Just as necessary as it was for them to fire their weapons, it was hard but necessary at times, even under attack, for a gunner to hold fire to protect any friendlies who might be in the area. Because of the complications of this mission, friendly forces were oftentimes in the way.

I am told now that we were in that zone for 10 minutes. It seemed like an eternity to me. I was separated from my beloved Purple Fox brothers that day because of my injury, but I will forever be joined in memory to the men who shared the experience of 9 May 1969, and the leadership and men who kept the Foxes flying.

A Pilot's Gratitude

As noted, that was Sgt Altazan's last flight with the Purple Foxes as he, himself, became one of the last

>Editor's Note: The CH-46D helicopters employed by the Purple Foxes performed yeoman service in the Vietnam War and continue today in Iraq. The hard work of the aviation mechanics kept the birds flying. For Mission 5-Mike, 1stLt Donovan flew serial number 153365. It is flying today with the Dragons at HMM-265 located with the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, MAG-36 in Futenma, Japan.

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>>>>Purple Fox logo courtesy of Capt Eugene Holmberg, USMC(Ret).

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