

## **A Story of Billy Hibbs 184<sup>th</sup> RAC Nonstop 26 Second Flight Platoon Leader**

### Operation Junction City- The first day

The afternoon of 14 February 1967 I flew the second portion of our support for 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade on this dramatic day of the only parachute assault of the Vietnam war. I relieved Captain Roland Miller who had been on station for the huge preparation firing and the parachute jump. The preparatory fires were perhaps the largest in the history of the conflict and created a limiting battle haze. I was assisted by a young 1LT observer from the 173<sup>rd</sup>. I can't recall his name. Our taskings were very light and not memorable. The haze and approaching thunderstorms were the interesting subjects.

I kept checking with Capital Center on the weather and learned the storms had aligned north of Saigon and reached well out to sea and into Cambodia. It was near time to return to Phu Loi and I found myself trapped by the weather and haze. I checked to see how far out to sea the storms reached and recall 120 miles, way too far for my remaining fuel. I consulted with Capital Center for possible courses of action and learned Tay Nihn was already closed, but he was painting a light area in the line of storms just west of Nui Bah Dinh. The controller offered to vector me into the light area. Running low on options, I reluctantly accepted. About 10 seconds after penetration, I encountered horrendous turbulence and recall seeing fuel pouring from the vents in the wing. Right or wrong, I interpreted this as a sign of inverted flight and applied corrective pressures while noting both gyros had tumbled. I was too busy with an unruly airplane to answer the Center's call of "Radar contact lost; radar service terminated." I remember entering a large room in the black clouds with the walls bathed in lightning. Suddenly, we were clear of the clouds at a high rate of speed. The compass was unreadable and I declared an emergency. I turned off the observers access to radios and asked him to get his tactical maps and try to see where we were. I also, after realizing that we had not penetrated the line, told him my plan to go to the lighted strip just over in Cambodia or to crash land on the morning's drop zone. I then shut off communications with the flight observer. By now I realized the storm had spit us out near the point of entry.

I had become a very busy man. My calls on Guard were answered by the pilot in an OH-13 who was flying out of an A Team camp along the highway NW of Tay Nihn. He offered to lead me to their strip and would fly the axis of the strip and get a vehicle parked on the approach end with flashers on. Somehow in the haze I got a visual on the helicopter, but the weather was getting worse and I was running short of ideas. I followed the helicopter to a destination I had never seen. The weather continued to worsen and the winds were wild and quartering on the tail during approach. Darkness was also a factor. My first approach over

the flashing lights of the ¾ ton was not successful. The wild wind and making and approach to absolute blackness was too much. I went around and knew the next time was the last chance as the winds and now rain had become very critical. On the next approach as I crossed the flashing lights I pulled the power off and reached for the ground.

The quartering tail wind was zipping us along and somehow we touched down with some semblance of control. I stopped on the strip as nobody seemed to be using it. I was shaking like the proverbial leaf and taxied to mid strip and shut down. The rain was really increasing and we would have never had another chance. As it was, it was like landing inside a cat. In the glow of the navigation lights I saw many Chinese figures with a strange assortment of weapons. I suddenly noticed my observer was crying. Then I realized I had never informed him of my plan to try for the A Team strip and he was sure we had gone up to the strip I had mentioned in Cambodia. I calmed him and then realized I had not closed out with the great number of people that were trying to help us. I cranked and prayed we could reach some aircraft to relay our arrival to Capital Center. God continued to watch over us when I was able to talk directly to Capital Center from this strip. I got out and learned our welcoming group were friendly. The A Team helped us tie down, shared their K rations and gave us our own private shell crater. They fired track mounted 40mm throughout the night, but that was a welcome sound. I did not sleep well, but it was a gift to see another day. I can't recall the name of the camp, but they saved this wayward aviator from a much worse fate. We scrounged some canned fuel from the OH-13 crew and left for Phu Loi.

I don't recall telling this story to anyone and have probably lost some detail, but it was a memorable night. I have often wondered if the Secretary of State would have helped us get out of Cambodia.