

Third Regional Assistance Command (TRAC)

Mike Sloniker: The Battle of Loc Ninh was written by the late Ron Timberlake. I just have to believe where "the cobra pilot" is referred to, it is Ron. He and I had many discussion via the phone and email on the sequence of events, which he also bounced off Mike Brown, who lived near him in Houston. I will always admire the clear writing style of Ron Timberlake. Happy Trails.

Left to right: WO1 Bob Stein, CPT Ron Timberlake, and LT Parks, an aviator that was the Blue Platoon Leader, F Troop 9th Cav. 3d Bde (Sep) 1st Cav Div.

The Battle of Loc Ninh

Sloniker note: Ron started his work with the incidents on 5 April 1972. During the 1999 reunion at Nashville I learned the first 229th KIAs were JJ Jelich and his gunner Owens from the Smiling Tigers of D/229 whose OH-6 was shot down NW of Loc Ninh on the Cambodian border. Timberlake's work follows:

As the Hunter/Killer Teams prepared to laager at Tay Ninh East on the morning of 5 April, they monitored a dramatic radio transmission: "Attention all aircraft, this is Paris, on Guard. Loc Ninh is under tank and heavy infantry attack. I say again, Loc Ninh is under tank and heavy infantry attack. Any aircraft with armament, please respond."

F Troop, 9th Cavalry responded immediately with six Cobras and their three Scouts. A C&C Huey and three slicks full of Browns followed. Blue Max, always quickly aware of contact missions, would fly the longer distance from their base, and arrive on station by lunchtime.

The Hunter/Killer Team Leaders that morning, some veterans of Lam San 719, had more than 6,000 combat hours between the three of them and their wingmen. Even with that base of experience, the fighting they encountered at Loc Ninh was more intense than anything they had encountered. Uniformed soldiers were visible around the outside of the perimeter in the hundreds. To the north there were burned out Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs), and explosions were all around the compound of Loc Ninh.

The callsign of the American on the ground who seemed to be holding it all together was Zippo. He coordinated attacks, relayed information, and although we knew he was an advisor who could not order the Vietnamese soldiers, he seemed to be the cement holding together the defense. Most of us did not even learn his name until 1998, when several general officers started an effort to have Mark Smith awarded the Medal Of Honor.

The morning was extremely confusing. CW2 Tom Jones and CPT Don Gooch were asked to engage a huge formation of uniformed soldiers that seemed to be

ignoring all of us, and each Cobra ripple-fired its entire load of rockets into the group. Body count and kill claims were ignored by the Troop during the heavy fighting. Supporting the defense was all that mattered.

Most amazing to any of the pilots was the volume of anti-aircraft fire. Aside from what was later reported to be nine battalions of NVA anti-aircraft, the NVA soldiers had already captured large numbers of US-made Browning .50 caliber heavy s from the APCs of the South Vietnamese (ARVN) 1st Armored Cavalry Regiment. Literally hundreds of heavy s and AAA weapons reached for any Cobra that attacked.

Zippo asked for a tank to be destroyed on the road just north of the town and compound, where the road ran past the rubber plantation. The F/9th Hunter/Killer Team on station advised him that the tank was sitting across the road and appeared to be too obvious to be an NVA tank, and the profile did not seem right. It appeared that it was either an ARVN tank or an intentional trap. Could it be an ARVN tank?

When Zippo said that the tank had killed ARVN APCs and was blocking his people from joining up from the north, the Team Leader admitted to himself that he was poorly trained at armored vehicle identification, and dove for the tank. Even from much closer it appeared that it might be an M-41, but the commander joined hundreds of his friends in shooting at the approaching Cobra before the 17-pound HE warheads actually destroyed the vehicle. There was no joyful feeling at destroying the tank, because the Cobra was very low and the volume of heavy weapons fire was absolutely terrifying.

A FAC on station had wasted no time targeting freshly arrived fighters, and rolled a flight of Phantoms in what appeared to be a move to help the Cobra escape. As the Cobra flew north from the now burning tank, an F-4 pickled its entire load of bombs on an east-west line across its path, with the bombs going directly over the Cobra and impacting into the rubber west of the road. The silence after that tremendous blast of explosives allowed the Cobra pilot to start breathing again.

Not far from where the road turned back west, the Cobra pilot saw five APCs tail-to-tail in a star-shaped defensive formation down in the rubber trees. They were not only destroyed, but were completely burned out. Some even appeared to have had fires so hot that their aluminum armor melted. The desperation of their stand left a lasting impression. The ARVN cavalry faced and fought overwhelming odds and these, as many others, had died before the American Air Cavalry troopers were even told about the battle.

Major Thomas A. Davidson, an ARVN advisor who received a Distinguished Service Cross for his actions at Loc Ninh, later told of his relief at having that particular tank destroyed. Years later Mark Smith solved this mystery of armored vehicle identification, explaining why the tank looked like it was an M-41, and why the 17-pounders destroyed it so effectively.

The tank had been a PT-76, but unlike most of the published photos of this Soviet vehicle, the ones that morning at Loc Ninh were mounting 12.7mm heavy machine-gun on the turret for the commander, changing their appearance significantly for untrained armor observers.

Later that afternoon Blue Max lost the first Cobra and crew of the battle. On a rocket run at almost 4,000 feet just south of the town of Loc Ninh, CW2 Charles Windeler and CPT Henry Spengler were hit. Told by his wingman that he was on fire, Windeler tried to make it to the ground, despite the number of enemy soldiers in the area. It appeared that his controls burned through at about 1,500 feet, and the helicopter impacted on cleared ground on the side of a slight rise. A Cobra from F/9th confirmed that the two pilots did not survive the crash. The entire cockpit area was a crater.

The second morning, 6 April, was just as confusing, and perhaps even more frightening for the aircrews. Although it was uncertain whether the troop would laager from a camp at Song Be, or the former American 1st Infantry base at Lai Khe that was still active as an ARVN headquarters for the 5th ARVN Div, for the first sortie a team flew directly to Loc Ninh. Between Lai Khe and An Loc, the leader noticed that a rocket with 17-pound HE warhead was working its way forward out of an inboard rocket tube. Aside from the fact that he wanted all his rockets, it had worked itself into a position that would make it dangerous to shoot rockets from that pod, and in any intense maneuver the rocket might work itself free and cause rotor or tail rotor damage.

Demonstrating a perfect ignorance of the enemy's ultimate intentions, he decided to land in a safe area to re-seat the rocket. There was a provincial capitol along the line of flight, a place where on his first tour he and his crew had not been allowed to eat because they were too dirty from flying missions for the senior advisor all day. He landed at that sleepy and safe little town of An Loc, corrected the problem by re-seating the rocket, and continued northward.

Like most of his fellow team leaders, unaware of the magnitude of the battles in other portions of Vietnam, he did not interpret the battle at Loc Ninh to be a serious push to take the country. All the pilots were extremely impressed with the size and ferocity of the forces attacking, but assumed that when the NVA took the pounding and suffered large enough losses at Loc Ninh, they would pull back across the Cambodian border as they had done in the past. From even the first day of the battle, it was obvious that enemy losses would be in record numbers, and no information had been given to the teams about ARVN losses.

The anti-aircraft fire was even heavier and more organized than the day before. During that day COL John Casey, Deputy Commander of the 3rd Brigade (Separate), 1st Cavalry Division, called an F/9th Cobra to engage without collateral damage a 57mm anti-aircraft gun firing at jet fighters from the town square in Loc Ninh. With about 60% cloud cover, the Cobra engaged the cannon from a steep dive, but the pilot was so... "distracted"...by ground fire that he unintentionally selected the less accurate outboard wing stores instead of the

well bore-sighted inboard. (Normal F/9th load was HE inboard and flechettes outboard, so outboard pods did not get the attention of the ones "shot for record" every day.) Although the 57mm cannon was silenced, a nearby building was also damaged, so permission to engage was withdrawn. The pilot felt bad about the collateral damage and felt terrible about selecting the wrong stores, but was purely relieved not to have to dive back into that boiling cauldron again.

The cloud cover worked for and against the helicopters, and more against than for the tactical air support. About 50-60% cloud cover gave a feeling of occasional concealment to the helicopters flying above it, as most of these aircraft moved to ever higher altitudes. The helicopter pilots also learned that an F-4 climbing from a bomb run and popping up through the clouds must look just like a large Surface-to-Air Missile, and even when it is not coming directly at you, it certainly appears to be.

That afternoon an F/9th Cobra destroyed a heavy machine-gun set up as an anti-aircraft weapon in the drained swimming pool of the Frenchman's villa on the west side of the airfield at Quan Loi. F/9th also shot for the ARVN units under attack at Quan Loi, and were asked to engage a force of at least 80 personnel in the open on the runway near the Frenchman's villa. Because they smiled and waved and refused to shoot at the helicopters, all members of the team, Scout and Cobras, were convinced these Vietnamese, armed with both AK-47s and M-16s, were ARVN. Everyone was happy the team did not engage, especially the FAC who first spotted them, but when the team left to rearm, the same men started shooting at the ARVN. Later a Cobra from F/9th expended his remaining rockets into the ammo dump on the north side of the runway, to keep the ammunition from being captured. At the request of the ground personnel, the beckoning target of the POL point at the southwest side of the runway was left intact.

Plans were made to insert H Company, 75th Rangers into Loc Ninh, but those who had been on station knew that no single company of soldiers of any caliber or capability could stem the NVA attack at that point.

Air strikes that were not available for the Air Cavalry Troops to attack the NVA when concentrated inside their Cambodian sanctuaries were allocated to stop the multi-division Communist attack, but few of the strikes were allowed to be put in on actual targets developed by the Hunter/Killer Teams. Air strikes were most often allocated by staff personnel safely bunkered at Long Binh and Bien Hoa, almost a hundred miles from the battle. Fortunately, FACs on station would often divert their flights from the staff-selected targets to enemy positions actually being engaged by the men at the battle.

On the third day of the battle, Loc Ninh fell. CPT Mike Brown was near by in his Blue Max Cobra the afternoon of April 7th, and recalls the last radio transmissions from the defenders. Hauntingly, there was a baby crying in the background as the NVA captured the command bunker. It was assumed that Zippo was killed after his heroic stand. F/9th Scout Richard Dey had tried to pick

up Zippo earlier that day, but the man we would learn years later was CPT Mark Smith refused to leave his post.

It was years before most of us learned that Zippo had survived his 27 or more wounds and his captivity, and he recently gave an excellent insight into what that battle actually cost the Communists, and what American advisors and American airpower actually faced in that battle. In October of 1998, Mark Smith thanked some of the participants in the effort to have his heroism recognized, and explained events many of us had witnessed. Parts of his letter follow:

"Those of you in the air had a very good view of the battle. That is probably why your statements are much more in line with the things that George and I have always said about certain events.

"There were some hard feelings about my demand that pilots and aircraft not be brought in for a rescue, unless there was a reasonable chance they would survive. That was my call and I don't regret it for a moment. I still don't know how Dey survived on either occasion he came in on 7 April.

"For Ron Timberlake I would like to put your mind at ease on the vehicle. After reading your statement I realized that you were referring to the tank left on the road after the Cavalry had been ambushed. Originally there had been five, but the remainder, one PT 76 and three T-54s were marshaling surrendering 1st Cavalry (Note: 1st ARVN Cavalry) vehicles to the west. The reason you initially mistook that tank for an M 41 was that it was, in fact, a PT 76. What was unusual about the PT 76s at Loc Ninh is that they had been mounted with a 12.7 on the turret. This gave them a similar 'look down' profile to the M 41. I know you attacked Soviet armor that day and not ARVN.

"There was another mistake about armor made on 7 April. Gentlemen, those APCs that got inside Loc Ninh were not manned by ARVN. They were 1st Cavalry APCs, but were loaded with NVA. I didn't know that until they lowered the ramp and tried to run out and I saw them. They all died. Strangely, I believe the driver of at least one was an ARVN, because after he lowered the ramp, he swung the APC out of the gate and went full bore down the airfield and did a right over the hill and made for Highway 13, toward An Loc. I'm sure he had agreed to take the guys with guns into the compound, but as soon as they were gone, he headed for home and not back to get some more NVA.

"There has been some discussion about who the NVA were at Loc Ninh. I can assure you that you fought elements of three Divisions and not only the 5th NVA Division. I was captured by the 272nd Regiment, 9th Division at their blocking position south of Loc Ninh. They had POWs from the 3rd Battalion (all wounded) 9th ARVN Regiment, that had been captured on the first hill mass south of Loc Ninh. This told me they had been there since the 4th, in the evening. General Tra and the Division Commander were also there. This should tell all of you, that you fought a lot more folks and killed a lot more than you thought you did at Loc Ninh. We also had POWs from the 9th Division, early on the first day.

"Sometimes I wish the NVA were more like a lot of 'Vietnam Veterans' I run into who also claim to have been on the ground in that battle. 'Just down the road from you.' Yeah right. The VNA are more hesitant about revealing how much time and men they expended at Loc Ninh. But, I met General Tra in Vietnam a few years ago, before he died. When I said he had lost about seven thousand men at Loc Ninh, he said, "More than that."

"Larry (McKay) (commander of F/79 ARA, Blue Max), I was particularly happy to hear your description of the tanks rolling into An Loc. The first tanks that came at Loc Ninh and the last ones always opened their hatch covers and the commanders stood in the turret and glared at you as they came in. If you shot the commander they left. If you shot the driver they stopped. It became evident cross training was not a strong suit of the NVA Tank Corps. Why the tanks seemed to wish to operate alone and only came unescorted, I do not know. Why they only supported the Infantry from the woodline I can't figure out either.

"I was especially touched by your remembering the baby crying in our bunker Michael (Brown). As a matter of fact, Ken and Ed also had civilians, dependents of the soldiers, in the underground complex with them also. One thing I did notice about the NVA, they did not take vengeance that I could see, on the women and children. They did use the kids from the school as shields, but I believe those were political types with the Sapper Battalion. I brought this up with General Tra in no uncertain terms and he queried all the others present about who was responsible. I don't think that was a show.

For the reason Loc Ninh fell, Smith wrote, "We just ran out of soldiers and in many parts of the perimeter where soldiers remained, ammunition was depleted. As my little band left the perimeter we rearmed and reloaded off the dead NVA in the wire and on the bunker line. What the Air Force, Navy, Marines and VNAF did with the limited number of fixed wing aircraft available was a great feat of arms and should not be diminished with talk of 'gaps in air power.' What helicopter pilots did in a high threat environment was a miracle. There was every reason not to fly, but fly you good men did."

He concludes his comments about the fighting by noting, "Each of you, from the Generals on down participated in great battles in 1972. Few men, now living, ever saw such raw power and sheer numbers in such a small area."

A valiant attempt was made to pick up the surviving American advisors late the afternoon of 7 April. Although referred to in some accounts as "Bay Rum", the official duty log called it "Bay run". It was essentially a test of non-lethal chemical agent to attempt to lessen enemy fire.

After delays for tactical and logistical reasons, USAF fighters delivered an incapacitating riot gas on the NVA positions. 1LT Richard Dey, Scout for CW2 Tom Jones' F/9th Hunter/Killer Team, flew into the compound to pick up the advisors. The gas did not work as advertised, and to quote the Brigade's official duty log, "LOH F/9 checking Loc Ninh L.Z. Took heavy 51 cal fire from E, W, SW,

NE. LOH seriously shot up, going to Song Be."

The true number of NVA casualties will never be known, but more than 7,000 Communist soldiers were killed in a savage three-day battle. To the men observing and helping to create that carnage it seemed certain that the NVA forces would soon fold from the losses but on they came, to lay siege to the pretty, sleepy little Provincial Capital of An Loc.

In front of the main force of NVA in their drive toward An Loc were survivors from Loc Ninh, trying to evade or fight their way to An Loc. On a small hill by the highway, about midway between Loc Ninh and An Loc, was an ARVN Fire Support Base Smith mentioned in his letter.

Early in the morning of April 8th, a Pink Team Leader from F/9th noticed that all of the M-101 series 105mm howitzers on the firebase on the little hill were pointed south, instead of north. Characteristically, the teams had not even been informed that the base had been taken by the NVA, but he radioed An Loc, and they confirmed they were under artillery fire from the north. The Cobra expended on the firebase and the pilot, not anywhere near the top of his class at the Field Artillery Officers Basic Course the year before, actually recognized an equalibrator soar past him from one of his hits.

About halfway between that outpost and Loc Ninh, an evading group of ARVN soldiers and their American advisors trying to regroup at An Loc were pinned down near the intersection of a dirt road going west into the rubber plantations. NVA forces already sent to recon and isolate the defenses of An Loc, formed the anvil for the huge NVA hammer to the north.

The plan to extract the advisors was a complex multi-service exercise. Hunter/Killer teams had offered to pick up the advisors with their Scouts, or expend rockets on the way in and let the advisors ride the rocket pods out, but apparently Air Force logistics had caught up with the riot agent that might help to reduce possible casualties on the extraction.

An old term denoting conspicuous valor is to be "mentioned in the dispatches", and John Whitehead certainly was. The task force daily journal mentions few individuals by name, and then only for particular reasons. Brigadier General Hamlet's succinct orders designating who would rescue whom, followed by reports from the 3rd Brigade (Separate) Deputy Commander, COL John Casey, were logged on 8 April:

0830 hours – CG: S-3 will rescue personnel from Nui Ba Dinh. DCO-A, D/229, 75th Rangers will rescue Cornish 67 from Cat Lo Bridge. CO 1/21, F/9 Cav will move 2,000 ARVN from Bu Dop to Song Be.

This 0830 log entry is as poignant as it is significant. In the real world, unlike in the movies, soldiers and missions within like units are normally either somewhat or completely interchangeable, and there is not a case of "There's only one man who could pull this off."

The Commanding General assessed the major missions for his brigade that morning, and without any of the dramatics one learns to expect from the less informed, he designated which missions would be performed by which units and leaders. Once the missions were tasked to the particular units, it became the luck of the draw as to which particular pilots had already been assigned to be flying that day, and who would be assigned in what order. No planning the night before, no preparing the roster for a special mission. The missions were assigned to the units, and they were carried out with the personnel and equipment on hand.

So it was that John Whitehead's unit was tasked to rescue advisors, and his job became to get them out. Had that mission fallen to the other Cavalry Troop, it would probably have been their Scout Platoon Leader, Joe Harris, who would have attempted the rescue. Would he or anyone else have succeeded as well as John Whitehead, or would he have died near the Cat Lo bridge instead of in the rubber plantation near Bu Dop?

The die was cast as the assignments were divided, and the progress of the missions were logged:

1045 hours – DCO-A: Bay run on ground at Cat Lo Bridge, putting CBU around advisors position checking with LOH after CBU.

1055 hours – DCO-A: LOH received ground to air fire vicinity of XT 7297, unknown damage. AH-1G also hit from D/229.

1110 hours – DCO-A: 3 advisors at Cat Lo Bridge rescued by D/229 and 75th Rangers. Critically wounded update to follow.

1215 hours – DCO-A: LOH used for extraction at Cat Lo took 4 hits small arms and 51 cal. Carried 3 U.S., 4 ARVN, pilot and gunner total 9 people. Pilot CPT Whitehead, Gunner SGT Waite.

Nine people on an OH-6A that had been hit by automatic weapons fire. Nine men on a LOH, with the blood flowing in the airstream.

John Whitehead, Dave Ripley, and Ray Waite-D/229, 8 April 1972

9 people in one OH-6A

USAF A-37s made passes low over the rubber trees to the west, dispensing a chemical agent said to be similar to CS tear gas, but also causing a temporary burning sensation and nausea. John Whitehead, a Scout in Delta Troop, 229th, may have broken the world record for the number of passengers carried by an OH-6A, when he rescued the advisors under heavy fire. Desperate ARVNs seized the opportunity by mobbing his helicopter, and Whitehead and his gunner flew out with three advisors and four Vietnamese jamming the aircraft and hanging from the skids. Here are the details:

That morning at Lai Khe, Whitehead, Smiling Tiger 16, had been briefed to lead a

second empty D/229 OH-6, flown by the 1LT Dave Ripley on a rescue attempt. Ripley would be the sole person in his OH-6, Whitehead would have Waite

Responding to a call for help from three American advisors who evading south from Loc Ninh to An Loc, CPT Whitehead landed under withering enemy fire only to have his aircraft swamped by desperate ARVN soldiers seeking to escape the surrounded town of Loc Ninh. CPT Bill Leach, Blue Max 26 from F/79 AFA remembers thinking the little bird was lost in a cloud of dust and intense ground fire. However, with 9 people inside or clinging to the aircraft and enemy fire increasing, Whitehead skipped, bounced and forced the OH-6 into the air.

Whitehead had one panicked ARVN across his arms, the left front seat was empty. (If you ask John, today, who was in the left side, he will say God.) On the floor of the aircraft in the rear was an American E-8, who had 3 ARVN stacked on top of him. On the left side was an American Captain, barely in the rear compartment. On the right side, Ray Waite was held into the aircraft by a monkey strap and he was holding an American O-5 who was, sort of, on the skids.

The aircraft way was out of the center of gravity(CG) limits and would not fly level. Once clear of the fire, Whitehead landed the aircraft at Chon Thanh, and the 7 pax, 3 US Advisors and 4 ARVN were placed on larger aircraft and evacuated. The mission was flown with M-24 gas masks, because a preceding B-52 strike had mixed CS with HE, and the gas was floating over the PZ. Nobody's mask fit and it was the first time, any of the majority of the pilots and crews had ever put the protective gear on.

Whitehead was nominated, by the 3d Brigade Commander, then BG James F. Hamlet for the Medal of Honor, and received the Distinguished Service Cross. Ray Waite also received the Distinguished Service Cross.

Dave Ripley recalls: "The Battle of Loc Ninh was written by the late Ron Timberlake. I just have to believe where "the cobra pilot" is referred to, it is Ron. He and I had many discussion via the phone and email on the sequence of events, which he also bounced off Mike Brown, who lived near him in Houston. I will always admire the clear writing style of Ron Timberlake. Happy Trails.

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The anti-aircraft fire was even heavier and more organized than the day before. During that day COL John Casey, Deputy Commander of the 3rd Brigade (Separate), 1st Cavalry Division, called an F/9th Cobra to engage without collateral damage a 57mm anti-aircraft gun firing at jet fighters from the town square in Loc Ninh. With about 60% cloud cover, the Cobra engaged the cannon from a steep dive, but the pilot was so... "distracted"...by ground fire that he unintentionally selected the less accurate outboard wing stores instead of the well bore-sighted inboard. (Normal F/9th load was HE inboard and flechettes outboard, so outboard pods did not get the attention of the ones "shot for record" every day.) Although the 57mm cannon was silenced, a nearby building was also damaged, so permission to engage was withdrawn. The pilot felt bad about the collateral damage and felt terrible about selecting the wrong stores, but was purely relieved not to have to dive back into that boiling cauldron again.

The cloud cover worked for and against the helicopters, and more against than for the tactical air support. About 50-60% cloud cover gave a feeling of occasional concealment to the helicopters flying above it, as most of these aircraft moved to ever higher altitudes. The helicopter pilots also learned that an F-4 climbing from a bomb run and popping up through the clouds must look just like a large Surface-to-Air Missile, and even when it is not coming directly at you, it certainly appears to be.

That afternoon an F/9th Cobra destroyed a heavy machine-gun set up as an anti-aircraft weapon in the drained swimming pool of the Frenchman's villa on the west side of the airfield at Quan Loi. F/9th also shot for the ARVN units under attack at Quan Loi, and were asked to engage a force of at least 80 personnel in the open on the runway near the Frenchman's villa. Because they smiled and waved and refused to shoot at the helicopters, all members of the team, Scout and Cobras, were convinced these Vietnamese, armed with both AK-47s and M-16s, were ARVN. Everyone was happy the team did not engage, especially the FAC who first spotted them, but when the team left to rearm, the same men started shooting at the ARVN. Later a Cobra from F/9th expended his remaining rockets into the ammo dump on the north side of the runway, to keep the ammunition from being captured. At the request of the ground personnel, the beckoning target of the POL point at the southwest side of the runway was left intact.

Plans were made to insert H Company, 75th Rangers into Loc Ninh, but those who had been on station knew that no single company of soldiers of any caliber

or capability could stem the NVA attack at that point.

Air strikes that were not available for the Air Cavalry Troops to attack the NVA when concentrated inside their Cambodian sanctuaries were allocated to stop the multi-division Communist attack, but few of the strikes were allowed to be put in on actual targets developed by the Hunter/Killer Teams. Air strikes were most often allocated by staff personnel safely bunkered at Long Binh and Bien Hoa, almost a hundred miles from the battle. Fortunately, FACs on station would often divert their flights from the staff-selected targets to enemy positions actually being engaged by the men at the battle.

On the third day of the battle, Loc Ninh fell. CPT Mike Brown was near by in his Blue Max Cobra the afternoon of April 7th, and recalls the last radio transmissions from the defenders. Hauntingly, there was a baby crying in the background as the NVA captured the command bunker. It was assumed that Zippo was killed after his heroic stand. F/9th Scout Richard Dey had tried to pick up Zippo earlier that day, but the man we would learn years later was CPT Mark Smith refused to leave his post.

It was years before most of us learned that Zippo had survived his 27 or more wounds and his captivity, and he recently gave an excellent insight into what that battle actually cost the Communists, and what American advisors and American airpower actually faced in that battle. In October of 1998, Mark Smith thanked some of the participants in the effort to have his heroism recognized, and explained events many of us had witnessed. Parts of his letter follow:

"Those of you in the air had a very good view of the battle. That is probably why your statements are much more in line with the things that George and I have always said about certain events.

"There were some hard feelings about my demand that pilots and aircraft not be brought in for a rescue, unless there was a reasonable chance they would survive. That was my call and I don't regret it for a moment. I still don't know how Dey survived on either occasion he came in on 7 April.

"For Ron Timberlake I would like to put your mind at ease on the vehicle. After reading your statement I realized that you were referring to the tank left on the road after the Cavalry had been ambushed. Originally there had been five, but the remainder, one PT 76 and three T-54s were marshaling surrendering 1st Cavalry (Note: 1st ARVN Cavalry) vehicles to the west. The reason you initially mistook that tank for an M 41 was that it was, in fact, a PT 76. What was unusual about the PT 76s at Loc Ninh is that they had been mounted with a 12.7 on the turret. This gave them a similar 'look down' profile to the M 41. I know you attacked Soviet armor that day and not ARVN.

"There was another mistake about armor made on 7 April. Gentlemen, those APCs that got inside Loc Ninh were not manned by ARVN. They were 1st Cavalry APCs, but were loaded with NVA. I didn't know that until they lowered the ramp

and tried to run out and I saw them. They all died. Strangely, I believe the driver of at least one was an ARVN, because after he lowered the ramp, he swung the APC out of the gate and went full bore down the airfield and did a right over the hill and made for Highway 13, toward An Loc. I'm sure he had agreed to take the guys with guns into the compound, but as soon as they were gone, he headed for home and not back to get some more NVA.

"There has been some discussion about who the NVA were at Loc Ninh. I can assure you that you fought elements of three Divisions and not only the 5th NVA Division. I was captured by the 272nd Regiment, 9th Division at their blocking position south of Loc Ninh. They had POWs from the 3rd Battalion (all wounded) 9th ARVN Regiment, that had been captured on the first hill mass south of Loc Ninh. This told me they had been there since the 4th, in the evening. General Tra and the Division Commander were also there. This should tell all of you, that you fought a lot more folks and killed a lot more than you thought you did at Loc Ninh. We also had POWs from the 9th Division, early on the first day.

"Sometimes I wish the NVA were more like a lot of 'Vietnam Veterans' I run into who also claim to have been on the ground in that battle. 'Just down the road from you.' Yeah right. The VNA are more hesitant about revealing how much time and men they expended at Loc Ninh. But, I met General Tra in Vietnam a few years ago, before he died. When I said he had lost about seven thousand men at Loc Ninh, he said, "More than that."

"Larry (McKay) (commander of F/79 ARA, Blue Max), I was particularly happy to hear your description of the tanks rolling into An Loc. The first tanks that came at Loc Ninh and the last ones always opened their hatch covers and the commanders stood in the turret and glared at you as they came in. If you shot the commander they left. If you shot the driver they stopped. It became evident cross training was not a strong suit of the NVA Tank Corps. Why the tanks seemed to wish to operate alone and only came unescorted, I do not know. Why they only supported the Infantry from the woodline I can't figure out either.

"I was especially touched by your remembering the baby crying in our bunker Michael (Brown). As a matter of fact, Ken and Ed also had civilians, dependents of the soldiers, in the underground complex with them also. One thing I did notice about the NVA, they did not take vengeance that I could see, on the women and children. They did use the kids from the school as shields, but I believe those were political types with the Sapper Battalion. I brought this up with General Tra in no uncertain terms and he queried all the others present about who was responsible. I don't think that was a show.

For the reason Loc Ninh fell, Smith wrote, "We just ran out of soldiers and in many parts of the perimeter where soldiers remained, ammunition was depleted. As my little band left the perimeter we rearmed and reloaded off the dead NVA in the wire and on the bunker line. What the Air Force, Navy, Marines and VNAF did with the limited number of fixed wing aircraft available was a great feat of arms and should not be diminished with talk of 'gaps in air power.' What

helicopter pilots did in a high threat environment was a miracle. There was every reason not to fly, but fly you good men did."

He concludes his comments about the fighting by noting, "Each of you, from the Generals on down participated in great battles in 1972. Few men, now living, ever saw such raw power and sheer numbers in such a small area."

A valiant attempt was made to pick up the surviving American advisors late the afternoon of 7 April. Although referred to in some accounts as "Bay Rum", the official duty log called it "Bay run". It was essentially a test of non-lethal chemical agent to attempt to lessen enemy fire.

After delays for tactical and logistical reasons, USAF fighters delivered an incapacitating riot gas on the NVA positions. 1LT Richard Dey, Scout for CW2 Tom Jones' F/9th Hunter/Killer Team, flew into the compound to pick up the advisors. The gas did not work as advertised, and to quote the Brigade's official duty log, "LOH F/9 checking Loc Ninh L.Z. Took heavy 51 cal fire from E, W, SW, NE. LOH seriously shot up, going to Song Be."

The true number of NVA casualties will never be known, but more than 7,000 Communist soldiers were killed in a savage three-day battle. To the men observing and helping to create that carnage it seemed certain that the NVA forces would soon fold from the losses but on they came, to lay siege to the pretty, sleepy little Provincial Capital of An Loc.

In front of the main force of NVA in their drive toward An Loc were survivors from Loc Ninh, trying to evade or fight their way to An Loc. On a small hill by the highway, about midway between Loc Ninh and An Loc, was an ARVN Fire Support Base Smith mentioned in his letter.

Early in the morning of April 8th, a Pink Team Leader from F/9th noticed that all of the M-101 series 105mm howitzers on the firebase on the little hill were pointed south, instead of north. Characteristically, the teams had not even been informed that the base had been taken by the NVA, but he radioed An Loc, and they confirmed they were under artillery fire from the north. The Cobra expended on the firebase and the pilot, not anywhere near the top of his class at the Field Artillery Officers Basic Course the year before, actually recognized an equalibrator soar past him from one of his hits.

About halfway between that outpost and Loc Ninh, an evading group of ARVN soldiers and their American advisors trying to regroup at An Loc were pinned down near the intersection of a dirt road going west into the rubber plantations. NVA forces already sent to recon and isolate the defenses of An Loc, formed the anvil for the huge NVA hammer to the north.

The plan to extract the advisors was a complex multi-service exercise. Hunter/Killer teams had offered to pick up the advisors with their Scouts, or expend rockets on the way in and let the advisors ride the rocket pods out, but apparently Air Force logistics had caught up with the riot agent that might help to

reduce possible casualties on the extraction.

An old term denoting conspicuous valor is to be "mentioned in the dispatches", and John Whitehead certainly was. The task force daily journal mentions few individuals by name, and then only for particular reasons. Brigadier General Hamlet's succinct orders designating who would rescue whom, followed by reports from the 3rd Brigade (Separate) Deputy Commander, COL John Casey, were logged on 8 April:

0830 hours – CG: S-3 will rescue personnel from Nui Ba Dinh. DCO-A, D/229, 75th Rangers will rescue Cornish 67 from Cat Lo Bridge. CO 1/21, F/9 Cav will move 2,000 ARVN from Bu Dop to Song Be.

This 0830 log entry is as poignant as it is significant. In the real world, unlike in the movies, soldiers and missions within like units are normally either somewhat or completely interchangeable, and there is not a case of "There's only one man who could pull this off."

The Commanding General assessed the major missions for his brigade that morning, and without any of the dramatics one learns to expect from the less informed, he designated which missions would be performed by which units and leaders. Once the missions were tasked to the particular units, it became the luck of the draw as to which particular pilots had already been assigned to be flying that day, and who would be assigned in what order. No planning the night before, no preparing the roster for a special mission. The missions were assigned to the units, and they were carried out with the personnel and equipment on hand.

So it was that John Whitehead's unit was tasked to rescue advisors, and his job became to get them out. Had that mission fallen to the other Cavalry Troop, it would probably have been their Scout Platoon Leader, Joe Harris, who would have attempted the rescue. Would he or anyone else have succeeded as well as John Whitehead, or would he have died near the Cat Lo bridge instead of in the rubber plantation near Bu Dop?

The die was cast as the assignments were divided, and the progress of the missions were logged:

1045 hours – DCO-A: Bay run on ground at Cat Lo Bridge, putting CBU around advisors position checking with LOH after CBU.

1055 hours – DCO-A: LOH received ground to air fire vicinity of XT 7297, unknown damage. AH-1G also hit from D/229.

1110 hours – DCO-A: 3 advisors at Cat Lo Bridge rescued by D/229 and 75th Rangers. Critically wounded update to follow.

1215 hours – DCO-A: LOH used for extraction at Cat Lo took 4 hits small arms and 51 cal. Carried 3 U.S., 4 ARVN, pilot and gunner total 9 people. Pilot CPT Whitehead, Gunner SGT Waite.

Nine people on an OH-6A that had been hit by automatic weapons fire. Nine men on a LOH, with the blood flowing in the airstream.

In an August 1999 email, one of the Advisors at An Loc, Jim Willbanks, now a retired LTC at the Army Command and General College at Ft Leavenworth KS recalled: "For your information, the advisors that CPT Whitehead picked up were **LTC Walter Ginger, CPT Marvin Zumwalt, and SFC Floyd Winlan**. They were with TF 52, which was from the 18th ARVN and OPCON to the 5th ARVN. I have always considered CPT Whitehead's actions to be worthy of the Medal of Honor; what he was almost unbelievable."

CPT Bill Leach, Blue Max 26 from F/79 AFA remembers thinking the little bird was lost in a cloud of dust and intense ground fire. However, with 9 people inside or clinging to the aircraft and enemy fire increasing, Whitehead skipped, bounced and forced the OH-6 into the air.

The aircraft way was out of the center of gravity(CG) limits and would not fly level. Once clear of the fire, Whitehead landed the aircraft at Chon Thanh, and the 7 pax, 3 US Advisors and 4 ARVN were placed on larger aircraft and evacuated. The mission was flown with M-24 gas masks, because a preceding B-52 strike had mixed CS with HE, and the gas was floating over the PZ. Nobody's mask fit and it was the first time, any of the majority of the pilots and crews had ever put the protective gear on.

Whitehead was nominated, by the 3d Brigade Commander, then BG James F. Hamlet for the Medal of Honor, and received the Distinguished Service Cross. Ray Waite also received the Distinguished Service Cross.

Dave Ripley recalls: "*John was my platoon leader and was indeed the lead ship in this action. He was flying with SGT Waite, who was to assist with loading the three advisors on board. When he landed, his ship was swamped by people. I was in the second loach, and as when I put down the same thing happened to me, except I had the advantage of being second in, so I stopped at a hover. One guy in particular, I remember vividly, jumped in the front and tried to pull himself in by the cyclic. I started to go left (toward the tree line full of the entire NVA Army) and down, as if in a low level left hand turn. All of a sudden, he went stiff, blood splattered across the left seat and chin bubble, and he fell backwards out of the loach. John was just struggling to get in the air. I had three guys on board, and several standing/hanging on the skid base. There were guys hanging all over John's loach, and I didn't think he was coming up, but he did. Right as we took off, a pretty wicked burst got him, and most of the hangers-on got shot, falling back to the road. I think that **SFC Floyd Winlan** was wounded in this particular burst. I remember thinking that I was flying right into it, but for some reason, it missed the front of my ship, and hit the tail boom and the vertical stabilizer several times.*

In 1998, an unsuccessful effort was made to have John Whitehead's award upgraded to a well-deserved Medal of Honor. As the Deputy Brigade

Commander remarked on the day it happened, if John Whitehead had landed within sight of journalists, he would have been assured the Medal Of Honor.

Sloniker notes: Dave Ripley received the Silver Star for his action.

On April 8th, F/9th planned to laager at Lai Khe, but when the Commanding General tasked them to evacuate 2,000 ARVN from the imperiled Special Forces camp of Bu Dop, the teams flew to work out of the small firebase in the red clay of Song Be. The level of opposition would have been considered heavy at any previous time, but after the astounding ground fire of the past three days, it seemed almost restful there.

That afternoon a Hunter/Killer Team was bounced to respond to a request for assistance from the CH-47 unit engaged in the evacuation of the Special Forces camp across the river to the northwest of Song Be.

The Chinooks reported taking fire from east and slightly south of the camp, and the Pink Team quickly located the source of fire, then scouted and identified a clear path for the heavily loaded cargo helicopters. The annoying fire was originating from a rubber plantation on rolling terrain, and the relieving team was advised of its location and briefed on the route selected for the Chinooks. The enemy location, and indeed Bu Dop itself, was far out of range of supporting artillery, without Tactical Air or even ARA support readily available. With no way to prosecute the enemy force, and especially since it was already late in the afternoon, it was judged best to continue to screen as cavalry instead of try to develop an unproductive and unsupported contact with a force of unknown size.

By the time the original Hunter/Killer Team re-armed at Song Be, the relieving Scout was reported down in the rubber. The team scrambled back to the location, where the Cobra flown by CPT Don Gooch had experienced a complete failure of his armament systems, and CW2 Tom Jones had lost all radio communications. With no radios, Jones remained on station and fired whenever he identified a target.

COL John Casey, called The Silver Fox by his troops, arrived overhead, assessed the situation, and made assets available. Blue Max was now en route to the crash site, but had not yet arrived. The Cav pilots were unaware of what an eventful day COL Casey had already experienced.

CPT Larry Corn, a lift pilot with F/9th, hovered at the tops of the rubber trees as his load of eight Browns rappelled into the crash site. The original Hunter/Killer Team Leader put his Scout at altitude, and with Louis K. Breuer flying wingman, covered the insertion at treetop level. They kept the NVA from rushing the crash site, and drew the fire that would otherwise have been directed at the hovering Huey.

Once again, the Browns proved their value. Though under almost constant fire, they comforted the slightly wounded gunner, SP4 Neidel, and recovered the body of the pilot, CPT Joseph Harris. A short time later a Blue Max Fire Team from

F/79th and a Medevac helicopter arrived. The Pink Team escorted the Medevac in, and it used its jungle penetrator to extract the Scout crew. CPT Harris' body was to be transported to a morgue facility, but the aircraft needed fuel, so Neidel was taken to where the Troop was now located at Song Be.

Recovery of the Browns presented a dilemma for the crews on station. With the recovery of the aircrew, some considered the mission to be over. The eight soldiers on the ground faced an enemy force far too strong to be assaulted or repulsed without reinforcements, and they could not move to the closest available landing zone about a kilometer to their northeast. The sun was low on the horizon, and they would lose the light within the hour.

Eight soldiers would die if they could not be extracted quickly. The men flying in support of them did not know even their nationality for certain, and it was possible that at least some of the soldiers had fought against them at some point in the war. But on 8 April, those eight soldiers were US Cavalry, and were fighting for their lives in a rubber plantation many miles from any other support because they had rescued another Scout crew.

F Troop's Blues had been brought forward to Song Be, and were assembling rockets and supporting the fastest possible turnarounds of the Cobras. As the Pink Team Leader rearmed and refueled, the Medevac helicopter dropped off SP4 Neidel, and the two captains talked briefly at POL. The Medevac helicopter cut short its refueling and took off to the northwest. CPT Harris was left at POL for a while, watched over by the Blues. Minutes later, with darkness fast approaching, the two Cobras of the Heavy Pink Team arrived back at the crash site to monitor a radio discussion about leaving the Browns.

Resuming the Air Mission Commander role at the direction of The Silver Fox, the Pink Team Leader radioed that he needed medical evacuation of eight "wounded" from the crash site. Surprisingly for all but two of the crews, the Medevac pilot radioed that he was on short final to pick up eight wounded. With the Pink Team circling him at treetop level, under fire the entire time, the Medevac helicopter hovered over the rubber trees, raising and lowering his jungle penetrator repeatedly.

At one point he lost power for some unexplained reason, and began to settle into the treetops. He recovered, and continued the extraction of the "wounded" Browns. With the Browns extracted after their courageous rescue, the Loach was destroyed by the Pink Team's rockets, and the team went back to Song Be to inspect for damage.

The evacuation of Bu Dop had continued during the recovery. Sent to evacuate 2,000 ARVN, the effort resulted in the removal of 1,500 ARVN, 2,000 civilians, six 105mm howitzers, and two 155mm howitzers. Assets were available to lift out all the ARVN, but many chose to stay behind, either to be with their families and about 500 Montagnards, or to let their families move to a safer location instead of themselves.

The lead F/9th Cobra had taken hits during each sortie, with one round hitting the frame beneath the pilot's feet with such impact that his foot was knocked from the pedals and he thought for an instant that he had been hit himself. Another hit on the left side of the aircraft directly below the pilot made a huge hole. Inspection revealed that it was only a 7.62mm round that had been fired from directly below and almost missed, but tore along the aircraft skin upward to form a fist-sized elongated hole. Although hits in the rotor blades would require their replacement, it was deemed safe for a one-time flight home. The troop flew from Song Be to Bien Hoa in the darkness.

This interesting action would be covered in the official duty logs by two entries:

1605 hours – ARTY LNO: F/9 LOH down at XV 971290 cause unk GAF (Ground-to-Air Fire) in area; Pilot trapped in A/C, gunner wounded and trying to get pilot out DCO-A enroute with gunships.

1645 hours – DCO-A: Pilot of F/9 LOH KIA, going in W/Medevac now complete at 1700.

The DCO-A was Colonel John Casey, and the 1605 entry is an excellent demonstration of the artillery chain of communications, which was reporting as F/79th was responding.

Only years later did the Hunter/Killer Team Leader realize that in three days of flying, his flight times were 10.8, 10.7, and 12.1, for 33.6 hours of the most hotly contested fighting he had seen in 2,000 hours of combat flying. And the main battle had not yet started.

An Loc

On 9 April, F/9th fielded five Cobras, which were launched from Lai Khe without Scouts for the first and only mass attack by the Air Cavalry Troop. These Aircraft Commanders were accustomed to operating on their own, usually without any support at all, and being extremely judicious in placing their rockets. A strike as a flight of five was a unique and exciting opportunity. When the coordinates were decoded and the map was checked, the leader asked the other aircraft to check to make certain. Hand signals indicated surprise at the target, and the leader asked the Liaison Officer to re-shack the grid. The second set of alpha-numeric decoded to indicate the same target, so the flight flew on.

As they approached the target over 70% cloud cover, the leader called Operations Forward, and asked for the grid in the clear, and to confirm that the target was the village just southwest of An Loc, inside the rubber plantation. None of these men had ever fired into a village except for the engagement of the 57mm at Loc Ninh, and they could not believe the order.

Liaison confirmed that the village was the target. The civilians had been run out, and had reported that the village now housed an NVA Regimental Headquarters. Lead intended to check the village from low level before firing, but began

receiving fire as he broke through the cloud base. He and the other four Cobras engaged as a heavy team, with all but Lead staying above the clouds.

Because of the volume of fire, the lead Cobra stayed low level on his engagement, as the others shot through openings in the clouds to allow themselves more protection from the AAA. Fireballs rose from secondary explosions from many of the village buildings, as anti-aircraft positions fired ineffectively into the clouds.

The cloud cover made the AAA much less effective than at other heavily defended areas. From high above the clouds, the Cobras selected targets between small gaps in the clouds. They used steep diving attacks and made their breaks while still above the cloud cover whenever possible. This allowed them to engage without any weapons other than those directly around the intended target being able to see them.

CW2 Stew Scannel had a Cobra with an inoperative turret, which was the only aircraft in the Troop with Heavy Hog configuration. On this golden opportunity his rockets would not fire, but he stayed on station to make dry covering runs, and to function as the self-appointed unit cheerleader.

Completely expended against such a rare and lucrative target, the flight headed back to Lai Khe with the lead Cobra still at treetop level. Before he was far enough away from their target to safely begin a zoom climb to altitude, he came across a UH-1H on the ground, and turned back to see if the crew needed rescue. It was a VNAF helicopter that had been abandoned intact, and NVA were shooting at him from all around the area. Without armament remaining, he reported the situation so that other assets could check it. A Blue Max Fire Team from F/79th soon checked the ship, with the same reception.

The next day F/9th was sent once more to verify the position of the VNAF helicopter, and were engaged by AAA that had been dug in around the point of interest.

The rate and speed of redeployment of the USAF to the theater of operations was nothing less than remarkable. The distinctive whine of F-4s lowering their landing gear in the pattern at Bien Hoa was soon heard again, as air power expanded sharply. The eerie whine was a comforting sound to men grown accustomed to support by the lightly armed counter-insurgency aircraft, instead of the immensely capable Phantoms.

From the levels of only two months before, compare the Order of Battle of USAF strike aircraft on 30 May 72:

Bien Hoa – 20 A-37 (3 were lost.), 2 A-1, 5 AC-119; Da Nang – 60 F-4, 5 AC-119, 2 A-1; Korat – 34 F-4, 31 F-105; NKP – 4 AC-119, 16 A-1, 4 F-4; Ubon – 92 F-4, 14 AC-130; Udorn – 86 F-4; U-Tapao – 54 B-52; Guam – 117 B-52; Takhli – 72 F-4.

On 11 April, the Brigade S-3 Journal of the 1st Cavalry recorded some rather remarkable reports. Think about what this entry says:

0900 hours – TRAC: D/229 tasked to go to Tay Ninh west and work for 25th ARVN w/mission to find 271 NVA Regiment and 24th NVA Regiment. Mission complete at 0930.

Modestly and succinctly reported, this entry says that only a half hour after the provisional Air Cavalry Troop was assigned the task of locating two Regiments of NVA, they had completed their mission. The second documented tank engagement of the battle occurred on 11 April, and was reported by BG Hamlet himself:

1100 hours – CG: F/9 Cav LOH at XT 6867 spotted footprints estimated 100 individuals in possible staging area using trails. LOH F/9 spotted fresh cuttings at XT 615745 est 10 individuals in the last 24 hours at XT 7388 F/9 Cobras engaging tank.

Hit with 17-pounders, the tank was reported damaged, but after remaining in the same position for days, it was obvious that it had been a kill.

That afternoon COL John Casey was hit in the hand and wrist by a 12.7mm, and BG Hamlet and the Brigade lost an outstanding Deputy. Still later:

1700 hours – At XT 691955 F/ found 1 tank in brush, type unknown. At XT 690952 observed 1 APC moving into brush area. AH-1G took fire, unknown number of 51 cal at 100 kts. FAC and Spectre on start to engage targets, negative hits, negative damage.

HEAT

The first tanks killed by helicopter during the Spring Offensive were destroyed by multiple hits from 17-pound High Explosive warheads fired from extremely close range, although HE warheads were not expected to destroy tanks. Within only a day or two, the rearm pads at Lai Khe and Song Be had small stocks of 2.75 inch rockets with warheads few of the pilots had seen or used, High Explosive Anti-Tank, or HEAT.

Manufacture date on these Korean War-era warheads was 1953, when they were used by fixed wing attack aircraft. The only upgrade was to mate them to current rocket motors with canted nozzles, instead of motors designed to be fired at high speeds, so these little six-pound warheads were propelled by the same rocket motor as the heavier warheads.

That resulted in impressive velocity and trajectory for pilots accustomed to shooting 17-pound warheads, but terminal effects did not satisfy those who needed the bursting radius of the 17-pounders. Against armor, HEAT usually made deadly little holes, but they were all but useless for other types of targets, so were not favored by the Cobra pilots in the Cavalry Troops.

In contrast, the Cobras of F/79th accomplished what should be considered some of the Army's best work of the war with those HEAT rounds. On 13 April, as Soviet-made T-54 tanks rumbled and clanked arrogantly and without infantry support into An Loc, the situation seemed as bleak for the American advisors as it did for the ARVN defenders they were helping.

The story cannot be told better than it has been told by COL Bill Miller, the Senior Advisor at An Loc. As the tanks penetrated into the city and approached his command bunker, a Blue Max Fire Team from Battery F, 79th AFA reported on station, and called that they were prepared to engage. COL Miller did not think helicopters would have any effect on the tanks, and told them the anti-aircraft fire was so bad that if they rolled in they would not roll out.

CW2 Barry McIntyre had the F/79th commander, MAJ Larry McKay, in his front seat. A comment about McKay that says a lot for his character is that although he regularly flew the extremely hazardous missions to An Loc, he usually did so in the copilot's position with his Aircraft Commanders. That was not because of a lack of experience on his part, since he already wore the star of a Senior Aviator on his wings. McKay responded to the senior advisor that his team was armed with HEAT rounds.

Expecting heavy ground-to-air fire but receiving almost none, Blue Max rolled, with 17-pound HE warheads in their inboard pods and old HEAT warheads outboard.

That day at An Loc, almost at the feet of the senior officer who was at the very center of the most violent battle of the war; that ultimate Infantryman to whom every senior Army officer would listen with respect; McKay and his pilots dramatically demonstrated that Army helicopters could indeed kill tanks in a hostile anti-aircraft environment.

COL Miller's observations and accounting of the incident were riveting, and his debriefings of the battle were instrumental in contributing to the future of the attack helicopter and Army Aviation. His summation, delivered in his distinctive voice, is marvelous to hear: "The Cobras were the instruments of our salvation."

That remarkable endorsement from an Infantryman's Infantryman, already selected to command a brigade of the 101st Airborne Division and noted for his heroism and leadership in one of the most visible and significant battles of the war, could well justify the declaration that, "Colonel Miller was an instrument of the attack helicopter's salvation."

Within days of the tactically and politically significant tank engagement, a newly developed and far more effective anti-tank warhead was delivered to the attack helicopters fighting in the An Loc area.

Arriving in-country on 15 April with a manufacture date of that very month, the High Explosive Dual Purpose (HEDP) warhead was introduced and combat tested. The rear portion of a 17-pound warhead was fitted with a shaped charge

cone like the Light Anti-tank Weapon (LAW), a streamlined nose cone, and a piezo-electric fuse. The warhead casing allowed for far more explosive than the LAW, to produce the same lethal bursting radius as a normal 10-pound HE warhead.

By actual experience that month, the warhead was found to be able to penetrate a T-54 series tank from all directions as promised. On soft targets it gave the same anti-personnel effects as a normal 10-pound HE warhead, and was the perfect compromise to engage armor, vehicles, equipment and personnel.

The new rounds were accompanied by a field grade officer on temporary duty from CONUS, to ensure that the rockets were made available to the correct units, brief the pilots on the warhead's capabilities, and learn of the results.

Jerry mentions that the HEAT round was past its shelf life and displayed a high dud rate, so his team at Picatinney Arsenal were developing a new warhead with the armor penetration of the LAW, and the antipersonnel and soft target capability of the 10-pound HE warhead.

When it was apparent that armor was a threat in the new offensive, the team produced 1,000 of these new warheads in a four-day period, and Daly accompanied them to combat. Arriving in-country on 15 April, he determined that An Loc was where they were needed most, and accompanied their delivery to Lai Khe.

Daly flew combat missions with F/79th, and his article describes in detail their engagement of tanks on 13 April, prior to his arrival. His assessment of the anti-aircraft threat, even before confirmation of the SA-7, was interesting:

"The anti-aircraft fire around An Loc was continual and impressive. Having been at Lam Song (sic) 719 last year, I can say that the fire was as high, and a bit higher around An Loc, as it was around some of the fire bases established by ARVN in Laos."

While mentioning the problem of gathering data on engagements and kills, Daly reported that Cobras equipped only with the 2.75-inch rocket system destroyed ten T54s, three PT76s, and damaged six T54s for the period 30 March through 11 May.

Though covering only a portion of the battle, his report is unlikely to have brought joy to most Armor officers, or to the men wearing blue suits and planning their version of close air support for the future.

These entries below, from the Task Force Garry Owen S-3 journal, reflect the level and intensity of the fighting around An Loc in mid-April. TRAC is Third Regional Assistance Command, Major General Hollingsworth's unit of advisors.

15 April 1972:

0255 hours – TRAC: F/9 to stage from Lai Khe. Be prepared to depart Bien Hoa at 0700H and to engage enemy armor vehicles, conduct Visual Recon in designated boxes. F/79 to be on standby (30 min) starting at 0630H. Be prepared to engage enemy armor vehicles.

0520 hours – TRAC: Since approx 0440H An Loc had been under heavy ground attack from S-SE and taking incoming. Bounce Heavy Fire Team of F/79 AFA ASAP w/nails. Weather at An Loc is bad. All families of fighters cannot operate. Marginal weather for helicopters. Put F/9 on alert to depart 1st light. Fire skids up at 0520. 2nd team at 0550H. Notified TRAC to make sure Lai Khe fuel and ammo points are open. F/79 ships are Serpents 25, 33, 12, 24.

0625 hours – F/79 has five ships at An Loc. Serpent 26 was #5 our assets 5 MAX birds for our AO. (Note: It was unusual that callsigns of the attack helicopters would be included, especially down to identification of wingmen. Though always reported to Brigade, elsewhere in the journal even Heavy Hunter/Killer Team leaders, who were the Air Mission Commanders, are not identified by callsign. This appears to be a personal touch by whoever kept the journal that day.)

0730 hours – TRAC: Reports 23mm AA E of An Loc. FAC's report 37mm but no location.

0815 hours – TRAC: Requested F/9 to be bounced to work Visual Recon boxes. Skids up at 0825H. Our representative at An Loc will control our assets. Approx 1000H the rest of the 8th ARVN Airborne Battalion may airlift into An Loc. May need MAX to engage Ground-To-Air Fire.

0940 hours – TRAC: LTC Fuloyer (Note: This would be LTC Niles Fulwyler, TRAC G-3 who retired as a Major General) wanted message passed to DCO-A (Note: 1st Cavalry Deputy Brigade Commander) that An Loc requested gunships support to protect Tactical Operations Center. Tanks 500 meters from the TOC. TRAC Commanding General says Cav Troop to be used to find Anti-Aircraft positions for Forward Air Controller.

1035 hours – TRAC: Troop concentrations and 10 tanks in box at XT 735894, 731885, 721905, and 716897 requesting arclights.

The Hunter/Killer Teams found, attacked, and silenced the active major caliber AAA positions, resulting in the next log entry:

1050 hours – DCO-A: Reports no 23mm or 37mm AA fire East of An Loc at this time, but great deal of 51 cal Ground-To-Air Fire.

1135 hours – Msg fr Gen Hamlet: Get 400 heat rockets to Lai Khe ASAP. (Note: This was the day the newly developed High Explosive Dual Purpose actually arrived in-country. The journal never differentiates between the old and marginally effective HEAT, and the refined HEDP, referring to all armor-piercing rockets as "heat". This is similar to the unit's generic method of referring to any

Cobra being used in the attack role as MAX.)

1500 hours – TRAC CG: At 1450 ten tanks were attacking An Loc. 9 were destroyed. CG TRAC wants more air to destroy tanks before they get into the city. They are in the city and the ARVNS are destroying them there by cluttering the street.

CW2 Ron Tusi, F-79 ARA, made real good use of those HEAT rockets. The NVA tanks were within a few meters of the 5th ARVN Div headquarters in downtown An Loc. They were close enough to fire into the windows of the buildings that had command bunkers in them. When the conditions further deteriorated the US Advisors specifically requested Cobras and not TACAY because of the proximity of troops of friendly troops and civilians. Confidant of his ability to deliver accurate fire on moving tanks, he responded immediately despite intense air to ground fire. He singlehandedly attacked the D

The last entry for the day promised that the excitement would continue:

2310 hours – TRAC G-3: Mission tomorrow is to prepare to execute an order to 1) Send 1 Heavy Fire Team to arrive An Loc by first light. 2) Send 1 Cavalry Troop to arrive An Loc area at first light. Additional guidance from 1st Cav S-3: All gunships should have at least 50% HEAT rockets.

Some sources report that the enemy tank threat was active at An Loc for only a short time. Although incomplete, the G-3 journal lists other tank activity for the next month:

24 April 1972:

1830 hours – F/9 Cav found a bridge at XT 609424 at 1710H had been used by track and wheeled vehicles last 24 hours. Will be engaged by TAC Air.

26 April 1972:

0630 hours – TRAC: An Loc SITREP: 5th Airborne received heavy incoming at this time. 8th Airborne receiving a ground attack. Spectre is engaging tanks at XT 668850.

1430 hours - ...Tanks and troops massing at Loc Ninh to attack from the West of An Loc....

1655 hours – Bien Hoa Sector: VNAF reports that 80 VC are at YT 144143 with 5 X 122mm rockets and 8 X 107mm rockets, 3 rating. Request clearance for airstrike. Denied so that we could send a Pink Team.

2057 hours – S-2: Approx 120 enemy are at XT 828456, and 20 tanks at XT 878488 with intent to attack Lai Khe....

27 April 1972:

0045 hours – TRAC: At the present time numerous tanks have been sighted at An Loc. Request that F/79 AFA Heavy Fire Team have heat rockets when they arrive in the morning.

29 April 1972:

1030 hours – TRAC: APC spotted 2 km west of Lai Khe. F/9th Cav checking now.

Portions of one of the most intense days of the later part of the battle were recorded as follows:

11 May 1972:

0420 hours – TRAC: Tanks have been sighted at An Loc. Request Heavy Fire Team be on station at 0600 hours. Will have Lai Khe opened early.

0530 hours – TRAC: At 0440 hours, Intercepted enemy radio message stating that this was the last big attack to take An Loc.

0625 hours – TRAC: At the present time tanks are inside the An Loc perimeter. Launch second Heavy Fire Team. Skids up at present time.

0640 hours – TRAC: There are 200 heat rockets at Lai Khe.

0805 hours – RASH FAC: A-37 shot down 2 km north of An Loc. F/9 Cav heavy team covering downed at this time. (Note: The Hunter/Killer Team Leader had his hydraulics shot out while he was low level at the crash, but was able to slide onto the runway at Lai Khe. This A-37 was the aircraft of 1LT Michael Blassie, who would later be interred in The Tomb of The Unknown Soldier until a CBS News investigation confirmed his identity in 1998.)

0920 hours – F/79 ARTY. Three tanks at XT 715892, 5 tanks inside An Loc. A-37 shot down in item 16 was shot down by 23mm.

1025 hours – F/79 ARTY. Report total of 11 tanks destroyed by ground troops, TAC Air, and F/79th ARTY. F/79 claims 4 tanks destroyed.

BG Hamlet was particularly active that day, personally making the following reports:

1040 hours – CG: Anti-aircraft positions at XT 810902 – 37mm, XT 754865 – 37mm. XT 7585 right 1 up 1 numerous 51 cal positions. XT 7390 right 2 up 2 numerous anti-aircraft sites.

1040 hours – CG: At XT 746894 A-37s attacking 2 tanks and troops in open.

1215 hours – CG: AH-1G shot down north of An Loc, at 1215 hours at XT 755872. F/79 bird. (Note: This Cobra was destroyed by an SA-7 missile, killing CPT Rodney L. Strobridge and CPT Robert J. Williams. Their bodies were not recovered, and because of legal considerations, Rodney Strobridge was briefly listed as a possibility of being in the Tomb of The Unknown Soldier.)

1425 hours – RASH: At 0937 one FAC in O2 birddog reported down. At 1120 another FAC reported missing.

1740 hours – TRAC: An Loc update total 13 tanks destroyed today. Only one penetration by two tanks and VNA platoon. Heavy buildup to the north and west of city. No ground probes in 30 to 60 minutes.

2300 hours – DCO-A: Send TOW missile section with MAX to An Loc. (This refers to the SS-11 Team, and not actually the TOW Team, who were not in that AO.)

The SS-11 Team, escorted by F/79 Cobras, actually flew to An Loc the next day but found no targets to engage, and on 14 May, they re-deployed to I Corps.

The entry from the TRAC log of 6 June (TRAC, not 3rd Brigade journal) makes reference to this time period:

Passed following info to T30 Aircraft downed in the An Loc area – VNAF UH-1Km

South of An Loc:

XT 778888 US C-130 3 May

XT 732912 US A-37 11 May

XT 764875 2 US FAC (Chico 11 & Sundog 34) 11 May

XT 775875 AH-1G 11 May

XT 748868 VNAF A1-E 13 May

XT 81 75 VNAF UH-1 13 May

XT 760864 US FAC (Sundog 07) 14 May

A TRAC log entry that begs for more information was logged the night of 6 June. Remember that "slow mover" refers to aircraft:

2105 DASC reports Spectre has a slow mover at XT 655992. Is it clear to shoot. Cleared with III Corps Fire Support Element, CPT Long.

A C-130 gunship, in the dark of the night, with a slow moving aircraft far west of An Loc. Air-to-air? How could any C-130 driver not publicize an air-to-air kill? A helicopter on the ground?

The armor battles around An Loc were essentially finished for the campaign, but the missile war had already begun. Not a single Cobra had actually lost a tank engagement. Certainly, some missed their targets, but not one was destroyed by a tank or even while engaging a tank. The missiles would prove to be more costly to the Cobras and their crews, but even they would not prevail over the attack

helicopter.

Missile! Missile! Missile!

As April became May, and An Loc held, the men who saw the carnage as they flew at treetop level wondered when the mauled NVA would retreat back to their "neutral" sanctuaries.

The first SA-7 fired in the vicinity of An Loc was most likely the one fired in mid-April at a Hunter/Killer Team Leader low level southwest of the town. He reported that as he turned sharply to engage what he thought was an APC, a missile streaked past him, leaving a slightly spiraling thick white smoke trail. He continued his turn and engaged the individuals at the still-smoking launch point with 17-pound proximity-fused rockets. His report was ignored, and Military Intelligence continued to insist that Surface to Air Missiles were not deployed in the area.

After 11 May, it was more difficult to ignore that particular threat. To quote the USAF report, *Airpower And The 1972 Spring Invasion*, "At one location (An Loc), one pilot reported 'four of five 37mm, and the same number of 23mm weapons, all surrounded by .51-caliber weapons.' By late afternoon on 11 May, a VNAF A-1, an A-37, a Cobra, and two O-2 FAC aircraft had been shot down."

The Air Force report resorts to wishful fiction in reporting, "All slow movers were thereby forced to stay at higher altitudes, and helicopters were banned from the area." Although Air Force helicopters with their inflexible tactics may have been banned from the An Loc battle area, Army helicopters never were.

Another item of interest that may be a bit confusing, is that the A-37 shot down on 11 May was not VNAF. It was a USAF aircraft, flown by the man whose remains would later be interred in The Tomb Of The Unknown Soldier. When 1LT Michael Blassie's A-37 was shot down, a FAC who would himself be shot down and killed later that day, saw and reported a parachute near the crash. An F/9th Hunter/Killer Team was bounced to locate the parachute, and hopefully the recently attached pilot.

Ground fire in the area was intense, so the Scout was not committed, but the lead Cobra went to treetop level to check the parachute. It turned out to be a flare parachute from an expended flare, hanging in the top of a rubber tree. In the process of gathering that information, the Cobra had its hydraulics shot out, but made a successful running landing at Lai Khe.

The Brigade S-3 Journal was compiled from third hand information. The Hunter/Killer Teams and Blue Max Fire Team Leaders made their reports by radio, and their reports were forwarded. In the case of the Cavalry teams, that chain of forwarding included an Operations jeep sitting under the rubber trees at Lai Khe. Entries at all levels relied on the understanding, fast copying, and legible writing of the radio operators involved. Consequently, it is little wonder that the journal entries were usually even more cryptic than the unit log entries, and much

information was unintentionally left out, or slightly changed like the whispered verbal party game.

First Surface to Air Missile's (SAM) in III Corps

The US Air Force reports that the initial SAM firings at An Loc coincided with the heavy attacks of 11 and 12 May, after which time "helicopters were banned from the area." A review of even the reports that made it into the journal shows that missiles had been reported earlier by Army and Air Force pilots. On 8 May a missile fired at an F/9 Cobra at 2,000' was reported as a missile, but logged in the journal as a possible B-40. An RPG engagement at 2,000 feet?

A 9 May report from a FAC was very specific and recorded far more accurately:

0345 hours – TRAC: FAC in An Loc area reported the firing of possible SA-7 missile at 0140 hours vic XT 743865, fired from ground, left white smoke trail and went between 2 FAC's and exploded in white flame. Negative damage.

The first really bad day for missiles was indeed 11 May, as reflected in the journal:

0720 – RASH FAC: At XT 740882 sometime this morning an unidentified rocket was fired at FAC's.

1215 hours – CG: AH-1G shot down north of An Loc, at 1215 hours at XT 755872. F/9 bird. (Note that the journal does not show this to be a loss to a SAM. Through this date, reports of missile firings by Army aviators were completely ignored, or reported as B-40 RPG firings. Imagine the trajectory that would allow an RPG anti-tank rocket, even with airburst fuse, to burst as high as 2,000' above ground level.)

1425 hours – RASH: At 0937 one FAC in O2 bird dog reported down. At 1120 another FAC reported missing.

On 13 May the losses continued to mount. Note how consistently missiles fired at USAF assets are referred to as missiles, but missiles fired at Army aircraft, even at altitude, are called B-40 rockets, even though the reported locations and incidents are only 600 meters and 25 minutes apart:

1440 hours – RASH FAC: VNAF A-1 shot down SW of An Loc. Pilot bailed out, F/9 Cav will try to support. Possible ground to air missile. Pilot is at XT 750870.

1705 hours – F/9 Cav: At XT 750876 at 1505 hours AH-1G F/9 Cav received unknown amount of 51 cal Ground to Air Fire and one B-40 round negative hits or damage, negative response due to weather.

The toll continued on 14 May:

1650 hours – RASH FAC: Approx 1500 hours 2 kilometers S of An Loc, Sundog 7, and O-2 FAC was shot down by a SA-7. Pilot was recovered by ARVN and

taken to An Loc (ARVN AIRBORNE).

It was not until 15 May that the missile threat was taken seriously enough that Army pilots were no longer told they were seeing B-40s, as Blue Max reported sightings:

0820 hours – F/79 AFA: At XT 746885 spotted a surface to air missile being fired, at F-4. TAC AIR employed.

0955 hours – F/79 AFA: Report SAM at XT 769881 being fired at C130 left tremendous white cloud and heavy smoke trail. (Note that their description of the smoke trail is very similar to the Cavalry pilot's report the month before.)

(Mike Brown, Blue Max pilot later shot down by an SA-7, relates that pilots from his unit stated that some of the missiles observed during this time appeared to be the large SA-2 missiles, and not the shoulder-fired SA-7, and the larger missiles were fired only at cargo and high performance aircraft.)

1005 hours – ACC: Report following SAM launching sites:

TIME PLACE

0800 XT 750855

0845 XT 746885

0945 XT 769881

0845 XT 746695

Report from F/79 AFA and AF. TAC AIR is presently being employed, on firing sites. F/79 is being pulled away by DCOA. F/79 away from An Loc due to SAM situation.

(Note: This momentary agreement to move Army helicopters from the area while TAC AIR attacked missile "sites" may be the basis for the Air Force claim that helicopters were "banned from the area". This method of engagement also supports Brown's impressions that the missiles involved were indeed SA-2s, because SA-7 "missile sites" happen to be wherever the soldier carries it.)

1700 hours – DCO-A: XT 773700 A1E while putting in air was shot down. American pilot bailed out, landed between enemy and friendly lines. Low bird from D/229th tried to pick him up, received heavy Ground to Air Fire at XT 772701 went from another direction and picked up the pilot. Pilot is OK. Request combat response from TRAC for grid of Ground to Air Fire.

By 17 May the fighting at An Loc had been so reduced that for the first time since 5 March, TRAC relieved the 3rd Brigade of the requirement to have an Air Cavalry Troop in the area. The teams still went back when needed, which was regularly, and the Aerial Field Artillery of F/79 continued to augment tube artillery.

On 24 May, Blue Max lost another helicopter and crew:

1045 hours – F/9 CAV: AH-1G from F/79Arty shot down by a SAM at XT 765785 missile firing site at XT 766788. 1-33 ARVN moving to site at this time. TRAC reports Rash saw the aircraft crash. It burned for six minutes and then exploded. 2 U.S. MIA.

1120 hours – TRAC has bounced Jolly Green Giant and one set of A-37s to respond to missile firing.

1205 hours – TRAC: 1/33 ARVN in contact near the crash site of F/79 Arty AH-1G. They have not reached crash site.

1930 hours – LATE ENTRY: 1/33 ARVN recovered the bodies of the two F/79 Arty pilots and returned them to Tam Kai Firebase vicinity XT 768773. Results 2 U.S. KIA.

A small mystery appeared in a 30 May journal entry:

1315 hours - TRAC: 33rd Regiment claim to have found a body with a scrap of paper with the name ISAAC HOSAKA on it. This body was found near the crash site of the F/79 Arty ship vicinity of Tam Khai Fire Support Base.

CW2 Isaac Yoshiro Hosaka was indeed one of the Blue Max crewmembers shot down on 24 May with CW2 John Robert Henn, Jr. The mystery continues, for while the 1/33rd ARVN reported recovering both Blue Max pilots on 24 May, the day they were shot down, a 4 June journal entry confuses the issue even more:

4 June 1972:

1430 hours – 229th AVN BN: A body has been recovered by the ARVNS and is enroute to 24th Evac. Believed to be the body of Mr. Henn F/79 AFA pilot shot down near Tam Khai.

Both bodies were reported to be recovered by ARVNs the afternoon they were shot down, and six days later a body that is not identified is found with a scrap of paper with one of the pilots' name. Then the second body is not transported to 24th Evac hospital at Long Binh until 11 days after the loss.

The data base developed and maintained by Gary Roush shows that while Hosaka is listed as KIA, Henn is still shown as Body Not Recovered. This is the kind of disorder that existed in the turbulent and confusing times during June of 1972. The fighting was more intense than earlier in the war, with far fewer American units available to do the tasks that were previously routine. The remaining units had to rely more and more on their ARVN counterparts to carry out functions that in the past had routinely been done by other Americans.

The following journal entry documenting recovery of remains from another day and a different type of aircraft, is edited somewhat to preclude possible pain for the family, but will show why recovery efforts were sometimes so difficult to

document during that period.

1730

D3 – AN LOC reports a patrol has reached the crash site of a possible (Aircraft type) (possibly [Aircraft callsign]) vicinity XT _____. Wreckage was burned. Engine was made by continental motors, some item of unknown type equipment made by teledyne # 629-XXXX, a number on the wing "TAN KCA/44-XX, a piece of equipment #RT 859/APX-72. Also some burned dog tags which were unreadable, bones. No skull returned to An Loc.

Another entry was made the next day:

1450

5XX – An Loc units found a few pieces of skull & some teeth, a silk survival net (Survival vest?) & some engine parts at crash site noted yesterday.

In the more intense combat environment, with less and less support available, recovery and identification of remains, with the technology available in 1972, was becoming increasingly difficult. Fortunately, the number of American soldiers and aircrewmembers involved or actually fighting, was at the lowest point since before the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

On 8 June a Medevac helicopter from the 215th Medical Company was shot down, and after the crew and passengers were picked up, the aircraft was burned. The luxury of recovering helicopters from even disputed locations in the field with CH-47s was almost at an end.

A Company 229th had a UH-1H shot down on the morning of 13 June, with other of the participating aircraft also hit by ground fire.

As the reader has gained an appreciation for the pace of the battles, for the desperate stands and situations of the men on the ground, repelling seemingly endless probes and assaults without even the hope of American ground troops to relieve them, consider the log entry below. Read it as though you were an American advisor to the defenders at An Loc, not knowing when the next wave of tanks will again break through your perimeter. Read it with the hunger of not having a full meal in two months, with the pain of watching Vietnamese civilians who are hungrier than you, crouched in the rubble of their NVA artillery-pounded homes.

Read this entry knowing that what your boss would later say was true: "The Cobras were the instruments of our salvation." Read it with the full awareness that the Vietnamese Air Force helicopters had repeatedly declined to bring supplies or reinforcements to you, and would not do so without full support from the American Cobras.

Consider how you would have felt in the rubble of An Loc, when you read:

19 June 1972:

2140 hours – TRAC G-3: MACV has to ask TRAC for an impact statement on what would happen if TRAC lost the following assets: 5 X AH-1G; 4 X CH-47A, and F/79 AFA. Danger 79 (Note: MG Hollingsworth) and Defiant 5 have objected but it still may happen. Also message has been forwarded to MAJ Bentson. He said he would inform Danger 79. TRAC Forward has notified and will relay message to MAJ Nadal. Maj Bentson said he would concur with all aspects of the message (JDW). (Note: Because of the seriousness of this log entry, in compliance with previous instructions the officer who personally informed Danger 79 was required to enter his initials.)

By mid-June, the Spring Offensive had been won, and the NVA attack had been broken, so the U.S. was continuing its withdrawal from the war. When the North Vietnamese walked away from the Peace Table, President Nixon stepped up the bombing with a more effective target list and ordered the mining of Haiphong Harbor, acts that brought immediate and positive reaction. Even as some of its soldiers were fighting battles of greater intensity than experienced previously in the war in Vietnam, America was continuing with its policy of standing down entire units and bringing them home.

But around the ever-smaller town of An Loc, 20 June was another bad day, and the log shows the different styles of those making the entries:

0820 hours – AH-1G, F/9 shot down at XT 769770, 0812, SA-7, no survivors. (CPT Edwin G. Northrup and 1LT Stephen E. Shields.)

0820 hours – AAE reported that an AH-1G of F/9 exploded in the air and crashed at XT 769770 at approximately 0815 hours. Suspected SA-7 missile shot it down. No survivors.

1LT Louis K. Breuer, IV was dead, with his copilot, second-tour CW2 Burdette D. Townsend, Jr. He and his wingman Andy Kisela, had been scouting a Landing Zone for a troop lift that was about five minutes out, when the missile turned his Cobra into a flaming projectile.

Lou Breuer had been immediately and immensely popular when he came into the Troop when the 101st stood down, and was affectionately and respectfully called Animal. He was a great companion and comrade, risking his life when he could have been playing football for Dallas. Animal spent his last birthday in my front seat, as we scouted Cambodia in March. He was, indeed, an immensely popular man.

Nor did Ghostriders seem to do well on survivability in the Troop, as 1LT James Calvin "Reb" Williamson had died with 1LT Donel Dobbs and nine others when their Huey went down from an internal explosion in March.

Townsend had been CW2 Andy Kisela's copilot the day I was shot, when Andy landed beside me so that Townsend could fly my Cobra back to Lai Khe, as I

transferred to the C&C ship and took the rest of the day off. Although at least three F/9th Cobras were engaged by SA-7s, Breuer's was the only F/9th crew actually lost to a missile.

And the day had only started. Almost immediately, other entries document the action:

0825 hours – AH-1G, F/79, received unknown number hits 51 cal, returning to Lai Khe with escort Cobra, escort Cobra reported missing.

0825 hours – 1 AFA received unknown number of hits from unknown type Ground to Air Fire and was returning to Lai Khe when another AH-1G trailing the bird disappeared and is missing at this time.

0915 hours – TRAC, U.S. FAC sighted wreckage of AH-1G, downed 0820 hours, vic 752797.

1020 hours – TRAC: 2 bodies have been recovered and are located in the ville at XT 7677. Request TRAC to determine status of maps, SOI, & condition of aircraft.

1055 hours – TRAC: Reports that VNAF observed two Cobras being shot down this morning. 1 aircraft still missing

1330 hours – AAE reports that F/79 AH-1G has been located at XT 783762. Aircraft intact, however crewmen killed by small arms fire outside bird.

1625 hours – Notified Signal Brigade of possible SOI compromise because of downed aircraft.

1700 hours – TRAC: Reports that 02 bodies of F/9 Cav AH-1G shot down have been extracted from Than Kai and will be transported to 3rd Field Hospital.

The last Lou Breuer had been at the 3rd Field Hospital was when the pilots came down to say goodbye to me with an impromptu party the month before. Setting aside (Literally.) the nurse's protests, they wheeled me out of the ward to locate a club. That night Lou offered \$125 for my \$26 Stetson that I brought out of my Cobra and had with me. The money would have been long gone, but that Stetson still sits on the Cav boots on the mantle.

Blue Max went back in the barrel, but a very lucky barrel, the next day.

21 June 1972:

1523 hours – GC notified that a F/79 Cobra down near road at 1510 hours. Crew O.K. Securing force on way. A SA-7 missile shot down the Cobra at XT 758773. Crew extracted, condition unknown.

1645 hours – 2 F/79 pilots O.K. 16 lifts completed. Estimate 10 lifts to go.

22 June 1972:

1030 hours – 31st ARVN Regiment recovered bodies of 2 F/79 crewmen shot down 20 June.

CPT Mike Brown was the Aircraft Commander of the Blue Max Cobra hit by an SA-7 above 4,000 feet. With his tailboom blown completely off, he and his copilot, CPT Mark Cordon, survived. His story was reported in Stars & Stripes, and he taped an excellent debrief of his actions that very day. Cordon was injured by the impact, but very much alive. Brown flew again that day, but not in a Cobra.

Brown's audio-taped debriefing goes through an impressive list of actions he took on the way to the ground. Jettison the pods. Didn't work. Shoot off the turret ammunition to lighten the front of the helicopter. Didn't work. He had applied aft cyclic just as the missile hit, and that served him well all the way down to a hard landing that was slightly cushioned by impact in a clump of bamboo.

The same hit and loss of tailboom that killed other pilots in the same unit had proven, in one case, to be survivable.