

## MY WORST MISSION

John L. Tarn Capt RW (Ret) AAM Sept 65 to Aug 68

Captain USNR (Ret)

I, like most of our readers have been enjoying reading the memorable mission write ups submitted by some of our pilot captains. Before all the good lies were taken, I thought I'd give a little different take and write on a mission that would have such a positive outcome in my life years after the actual event.

The time frame for this mission was in June/July of 1968, and takes place in the wide, low lying, valley NE of L-54 (Lang Prabang). This valley was bisected by a slow flowing river that provided an almost straight invasion route from North Vietnam to the Royal Capital of Laos. Our counter to this was a series of low fortified positions, lying almost in a straight line astride the invasion route, over a distance of perhaps 150 clicks.

The enemy had opened their offensive buildup with a sapper attack on the airfield at Lang Prabang in which a number of T-28s flown by Hmong pilots were destroyed with satchel charges. Our response to this was a buildup of defense forces and resupply of the base camps. Air America choppers were heavily involved in this effort. Initially things did not go well as we found ourselves bringing more soldiers(officers) out than we were taking in. We were ordered to not take anyone out of the camps. This did not sit well with the base camp occupants and we found ourselves in an increasingly dangerous situation as we landed and tried to off load troops in the face of a mob trying to get aboard. With many of the officers gone, military discipline was fast breaking down. Pilots routinely used high power when offloading to help keep the mob at bay with high rotor wash and frequently actually getting slightly airborne to prevent them from boarding. This was the situation in general, but was particularly bad in the most forward of these base camps which was not far from the North Vietnam border. Tensions were high, with nightly probing attacks. We assumed the base was surrounded, and took precautions by routinely spiraling down vertically from altitude..

The expected finally happened. One of our pilots landed, and things quickly got out of hand with the "friendlies" mobbing his helicopter to get on. He responded by pulling into the air with troops hanging on to the landing gear struts, and some half in the door. The FM was frantically trying to keep the door half closed. Troops began jumping off from some altitude. As the pilot climbed out in a reverse spiral to gain altitude the "friendlies" started taking shots at him. At perhaps 750' above pad level the engine suddenly quit! The pilot made a textbook auto rotation to a safe landing in the only rice paddy in the area. After 50 years, I do not remember the pilot's name, but he did a great job of flying. He and his FM were rescued by another helicopter.

The dry rice paddy was maybe a couple of acres with some small stumps sticking up. It was just about due east and perhaps 500 meters from the base of the pad. The ground rose in a semicircle to provide good enemy observation of everything and covered with a dense grass providing good cover. The disabled H-34 was in the paddy near the side of the base camp. This was the situation for about a week as management in Udorn decided what to do.

The first plan that we heard of was that plans were being made to have the AF come in and strike the aircraft to keep it from falling into enemy hands. I point this out as management's recognition of the extreme danger associated with the fact that a large enemy buildup was occurring in the immediate area.

This was the situation when Capt. Mike Jarina and I were called into the operations office at L-54

and told of the mission we were to fly the next day—briefing over HF radio with Udorn. Destroying the aircraft plan was scrapped. Mike was to fly three Udorn mechanics in who were going to go over the aircraft and determine engine problem which could be something simple?? I was to also fly in and the two of us were to remain on the ground turned up while mechanics went over the aircraft looking for the problem!! We were to be covered with several fast movers, two Sandy's, a FAC (L-19), and a C-130 CAC.

As I tried to convey earlier, the one disabled aircraft in no man's land (more enemy land than no man's land) was the classic trap the enemy used to ambush American rescue efforts in a string of rescue disasters from one end of Vietnam to the other on both sides of the border. And now we have a “plan” to increase the bait by two more helicopters and seven employees of AAM! This plan was so stupid it could only have been developed at the AAM bar. It was obvious that the plan was designed to give the mechanics encouragement that we were looking out for them. The planning was a departure from the normal as we pilots always planned the operations with management doing the outside coordinating. On hazardous missions we doubled up, were issued flack jackets to wear or sit on depending on your likes.

I told Mike I was NOT going on this mission as planned. Unfortunately, he was willing to fly it, leaving me hanging out on a limb alone. I don't know if he was afraid of being fired? Not a concern of mine, as I had submitted my resignation a month or so back as I was returning to the states in September to finish college at Penn State.

Let it be known that my objection to the mission was NOT the flying of the mission as those hazards of flying in combat were an accepted part of our job assignment, but the sitting turned up in an untenable position did not pass the “calculated risk “ test. It served NO tactical military purpose except provide the enemy with a bigger target. I am going to digress for a moment and tell you of my experience as a stationary target.

On 22 February 1968, our Hmong forces were mounting an offensive just south of the Plaine De Jars to recapture a runway/village. I was the first AAM helicopter to land at the recaptured runway. I picked up two 100 kilo sacks of enemy rice and an interpreter. I was to take this to a mt. top position over looking the PDJ. I landed and my FM James Hope started tossing out the rice sacks while the interpreter talked with the position occupants. I am silhouetted against the sky as the tallest point within 50 klicks, and remained in this position for perhaps 10 minutes waiting for the interpreter to finish talking. I was turned up with flying rpm, but relaxed. All of a sudden there was an heavy explosion on the right side of the helicopter. My first thought was “damn that was close, let's get the hell out of here!”. I brought the collective up to TO lift when I was surrounded by fire and immediately abandoned that idea. The helicopter toppled over to the right as the entire right landing gear was blown off. The helicopter came to rest on it's right side supported by the stubs of rotor blades perhaps two feet off the ground. I unbuckled and fell to the ground and scooted out between the blades and took a position behind a log located about 50 meters down the hill. For about 30 minutes, I watched my aircraft burn. I had sold FM James Hope an AK-47 and 1000 rounds of ammunition and I listened to every one of them cook off. (He still hasn't paid me for this purchase!) The strange thing was that the PW1820 engine ran intermittently throughout? I could see at least two bodies. When the fire died out I walked up to the site. I looked down the side of the pad and saw my FM laying on his back about 50 meters down the hill. Soldiers and I carried him up the hill and sat in a 1000# bomb crater till rescued by JJ McCauley. The toll was a dead soldier, the interpreter, and a badly wounded FM. I received a 2” shrapnel wound on left shoulder blade that I did not notice until back at LS-20. Analysis of this incident made me believe that the better option to sitting exposed would've been to

leave interpreter and TO remaining airborne till he signaled he was ready to leave?

After talking with Mike Jarina I called Udorn on HF and told them I would not fly this mission as they planned. They replied that they would relieve me and send another pilot to fly my helicopter. I rogered that. They called back shortly and said that a C-123 would bring the new pilot and the mechanics and supplies in the next morning. When they gave the name of my relief it brought a smile to our crew as we knew there was no way that pilot would fly the mission! This belief was confirmed when the flight landed the next day and the pilot came off the aircraft complaining he was too sick to fly. When we reported this information to Udorn they asked if I would fly in the A-Frame to remove the engine if necessary. I agreed to do that as the risk could now be calculated: (a) There was a 50 – 50 chance that I would not need to land, (b) I could control the exposure time if I did need to land, (c) And the possibility I would have to fly a rescue existed.

We loaded up and took off. I had a very experienced Filipino FM who I carefully briefed en route. On arrival Mike landed as planned while I orbited above 10000 feet as 12.7 AA was not out of the question. After orbiting for about 75 min. I called for status report as fuel would be a problem soon. Mike replied that they were almost complete and would let me know what to do. About ten min. later he called and told me to land. I made an auto rotation descent and went over my FM briefing again. As I was on short final Mike sent his FM over to direct my landing. He sat me down on a stump and re lifted me about 5 meters to my right and sat me down again. As my wheels touched the first mortar hit to my right close enough for me to feel the heat and blast on my right arm through the open cockpit window. With the collective in my left armpit I took off. The FM headed at a run to his chopper, the mechanics were headed for the same helicopter. When I hit translational lift I made a sharp right climbing turn to avoid rising terrain. As I rolled out I observed a second mortar round hit ½ way between Mike and where I had been sitting, and then observed a third round hit right where I had been sitting. As luck would have it I was headed right toward where the mortar rounds were fired from. I called this to our Raven FAC who excitedly replied that he saw the smoke and would mark with a smoke rocket. He fired while still in a right turn causing the rocket to take a looping mortar like flight missing the target by a couple of hundred meters. The retaliatory attack was on, but I was unable to observe as I continued to turn and climb en route to L-54 with Mike out ahead of me. I finally had time to ask the FM if he had gotten rid of the A-frame and he replied in the affirmative—well done. After landing we confirmed we had several minor shrapnel holes in the tail pylon. You had to appreciate the enemy patience to await firing till all the targets had landed. Their range was exactly on, and they were only off on azimuth by a degree or so. After refueling we flew to Udorn.

It would be a week or so before I was scheduled to fly again, so my family took the amoeba test even though we had not been sick a day in our three years in SE Asia. To our surprise we all tested positive. Calculating the cure time of 30 days, vacation time, and travel time we left for CONUS the last week or so of July.

On my return, one of the first things I did was rejoin the Naval Reserves at NAS Willow Grove, PA. Before joining AAM I had been an attack pilot flying the A-4C Sky hawk at NAS Memphis, so I tried to get into the A-7 reserve unit. But competing with returning Vietnam vets made this impossible. Next I tried to get into the PV2 unit, but was unable as the Helicopter squadron flying SH-3s wanted me. So I found myself back flying helicopters again. I had hardly begun qualifying in the SH-3 when the Navy moved the squadron to NAS Lakehurst, NJ about 100 miles east. Only PC's were transferred and I lost my billet. Fortunately I was able to pick up a billet in the PV2 squadron which was about to transition into the P-3. I became the CO's copilot.

In January 1970 I graduated from college with a BS in Animal Industry, and the course work done for a MS Agr. I thought about returning to AAM, so I called Mr Dawson who had originally hired me. He seemed glad to hear from me, but said he had to check with Udorn first. A few days later he called back and said Udorn did not want me back for reasons unknown. I can't say for sure whether I would've gone back, but it sure made my decision making easier and was the best thing that happened to me as it turned out. I took a job with the PA Farmers Association (A Farm Bureau Affiliate) and assigned to Lancaster County, PA as a Farm Management business Analysis Specialist. Lancaster County is one of the top ten agricultural counties in the country. And I was much closer to NAS Willow Grove.

At my next weekend reserve drill I was assigned as Maintenance Department Head. As it turned out this was to be the world's shortest assignment! At morning colors it was announced that I had been promoted to Commander. That was good news, but the bad news was I lost my billet as only two CDRs were authorized for the squadron. But, my luck was to get even better. Our crew was scheduled to fly to Bermuda that afternoon. While the CO preflighted the aircraft and turned up I went to flight operations to file our IFR flight plan. As I came around the hangar door I ran into a CDR knocking both of us down. As we dusted ourselves off we recognized each other and exchanged a few words. The CDR's name was Punzult who Mike Jarina and I had served with at NAS Ellyson field as instructors. CDR Punzult was now heading up the Navy's Reserve Helicopter forces. He asked me if I would be interested in assignment as XO of the squadron I had formerly been in—now in NAS Lakehurst? With a yes reply he said the CO would call me Sunday night and interview me. I dashed off to make my flight to Bermuda. The CO called as arranged and we hit it off so that next drill I was XO and at the end of the CO's tour I was made CO. At the end of my tour I was made CO of our sister training squadron. At this point I was out of flying and took a billet at Reserve Ctr Youngstown, OH. Then to Reserve Ctr Buffalo, back to Youngstown, then to Reserve Ctr Pittsburgh where I was promoted to Captain, causing another loss of billet. Back to Youngstown where I retired with 20+ years earning a pension and lifetime military health care at age 60.

#### AFTER WORD:

Nobody enjoyed their AAM tour more than I did. Three years of the best flying one could possibly enjoy. 3000 hours accident free. A sense of adventure enough to make Terry and the Pirates and Indiana Jones envious. The friendships I made will last a lifetime: Mike Jarina, Ted Cash and his family, Bob Davis, Charlie Davis, Mick and Kathy Prulhiere, Vern Clarkson (former Capt RW and AAM Udorn school supt. Reserve Lt Gen. Marines who crossed paths in the reserves and even gave me a ride from Willow Grove to Norfolk on his C-47), Steve Stevens, and my best friend James Hope and family. A true "Band of Brothers".

In closing, I would like to commend the AAM maintenance personnel who kept our aircraft in such excellent flying condition. Our FM's who flew so many hours and serviced our aircraft on a daily basis were crucial to this program. In my opinion, the FM's were the unsung heroes responsible for the reliability that our lives depended on.