

“Happy Valley” Phan Rang AB, RVN

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.

Phan Rang AB News No. 191 “...keeping the memories alive”

The Rescue That Became a Recovery

Comments on “The Mystery Surrounding the Disappearance of Taco 81 and 82

Doug’s Comments

THE RESCUE THAT BECAME A RECOVERY UNITED STATES AIR FORCE (USAF) FORWARD AIR CONTROL (FAC) AIRCRAFT CRASH – 19 JUNE 1969

**The loss of Cessna Skymaster O-2 USAF Serial Number 68-6869 on 19 June 1969
and the recovery of the crew.**

Article By:

Roger Lambert – Platoon Commander, 9 Platoon, Charlie Company, 5th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (5 RAR), 1969/70.

Preface

At the time, as is the nature of combat, I had not given thought about the deceased crew of the Forward Air Control (FAC) Cessna O-2 or their Next of Kin (NOK). They were simply two more casualties of the Vietnam War. However, as the years passed and the war faded into the pages of history, I began to think more and more about these men and their sacrifice.

Some 50 years after the event, besides being somewhat satisfied that we were at least able to recover their remains for repatriation to the United States, I decided that I would make it my personal quest to identify them.

Background

Operation Esso 1, 2 and 3 was conducted in the period June to July 1969. For members of the Battalion, particularly C Company, Operation Esso is indelibly etched in the minds because of the enemy’s use of mines throughout the Area of Operations (AO).

The Viet Cong used M16 anti-personnel mines taken from the barrier mine field laid between

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the Horseshoe Hill and Lang Phouc Hai on the coast. These mines were implanted on tracks, potential allied ambush positions and tactical harbour positions as well as around villages in the area. That is, they were placed anywhere our troops were likely to operate in the AO. Unbeknown to the Platoon Commander, David Mead, he selected an ambush site that had been previously used by members of A Company, the site having been observed by the Viet Cong. 7 Platoon was virtually decimated in the resultant mine detonations.

The Commanding Officer (CO). Lieutenant Colonel Colin Khan, had ensured that special training was undertaken in conjunction with the Engineers prior to the Rifle Companies deployments into the AO. Flak jackets and helmets were issued and were to be worn whenever possible and practical. Notwithstanding these precautions, by the end of Operation Esso, 7 soldiers were killed and 43 were wounded by mines.

To support the land clearing, patrolling and ambushing activities, Fire Support Base “Thrust” was established some six hundred yards south of Hoi My. Under operational control of 5 RAR during this operation was a Troop of Engineers and elements of the Plant Troop of 1 Field Squadron also Engineers. Two infantry Rifle Companies were involved throughout the operation protecting this Land Clearing Team.

Operation Esso is also well remembered by members of 9 Platoon, Charlie Company, 5 RAR having been given the task of recovering the bodies of two United States servicemen killed when their Cessna O-2 FAC aircraft crashed in the Long Phouc Hai mountains on 19 June 1969.

To retell the story of the recovery, the timelines and activities are taken directly from the 5 RAR Operations Log radio transmissions. These have been supplemented by the personal recollections of 9 Platoon and Charlie Company soldiers who were directly or indirectly involved.

Time: 1044 hours

“TO CALLSIGN (C/S) 0A FROM C/S 3 - AN AC HAS BEEN HIT AND HAS CRASHED – WELFARE OF PILOT UNKNOWN AT THIS STAGE”

This is Major Ducker, Military Cross, the Officer Commanding C Company, advising the Battalion Command Post that an aircraft had crashed. 9 Platoon, C Company (C/S 33) were undertaking protection duties of the Engineer Land Clearing Team and their bulldozers in reasonably open

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ground at the base of the Long Hai mountains. A lone aircraft had been seen undertaking observer activities for what we had been advised was naval gunfire into the mountains.

The aircraft, later identified as a Cessna Skymaster O-2, was carrying out observation duties for a Charles F. Adams Class United States Navy destroyer which was firing into the Long Hai mountains.



Charles F. Adams Class Destroyer (USN Image)

Private Colin Summerfield had noted the aircraft “buzzing around”. While most were watching the shells exploding in the hills, Colin noted a change in pitch in the engine sound of the aircraft and recalled, “**Looking up, I saw a burst of flame and a few seconds later I heard the ‘boom’**”. A large piece fell to the left and a smaller section fell to the right.”



Long Hai mountains; note the explosion on top of the mountain

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“I watched the bigger piece hit the ground in the hills. Using a knoll on the ridge line of the hills, I measured three fingers to the right to get a fix on the big bit.”

As the Platoon Commander, I was immediately summoned and, besides, Private (PTE) Summerfield, I asked my troops whether anyone else had seen what happened. PTE Terry “Giuseppe” Fitzgerald stated that he had seen a parachute, a fact at the time Colin didn’t dispute. Using the knoll Colin had used as a reference point, I took a bearing on the crash site and reported my finding to the Company Commander, Major Ducker.

Time: 1047 hours

“TO C/S 3 FROM C/S 9 – GET TA MOVING TO LOC OF CRASHED AIRCRAFT NOW”

This was the Commanding Officer (C/S 9), Lieutenant Colonel Khan (Callsign Niner), directing Major Ducker (Callsign 3) to get the Centurion tanks and M113 Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs) in support to move to the crash site as soon as possible. The tanks and APCs were supporting the land clearing operation and were already in situ at Fire Support Base “Thrust”.



Centurion Main Battle Tank

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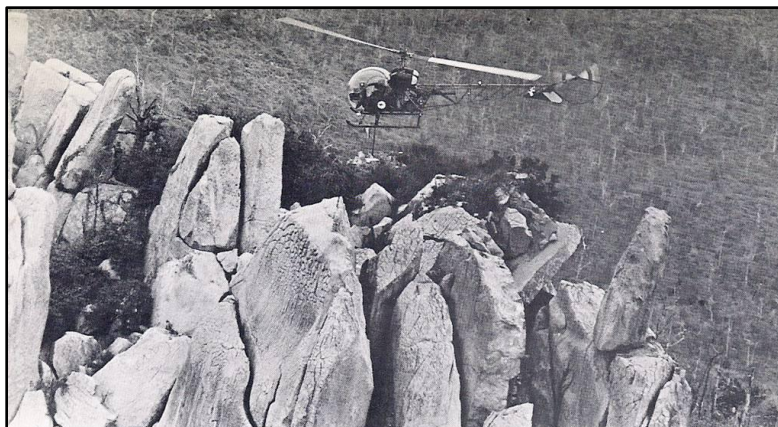
Armoured Personnel Carrier (APC) with Australian soldiers

Time: 1048 hours

**“TO C/S OA FROM C/S POSS – IN AREA NOW AND WILL ORGANIZE DUSTOFF AND RESCUE OPS
– INCIDENT IN GEN AREA 455540 ”**

This was the pilot of a 161 Reconnaissance Flight Bell 47 helicopter, known as Possum (abbreviated to ‘poss’ in the log), reporting to the Battalion Headquarters Command Post (Callsign Zero Alpha) advising that he would arrange a Dustoff helicopter (a medical evacuation helicopter usually a Bell UH-1D Iroquois normally referred to as a Huey) as well as coordinate the rescue operation as it was at that time. The grid reference (455540) was the pilot’s original estimation of where the wreckage lay in the hills.

Time: 1100 hours



Bell 47G Sioux (Call Sign ‘Possum’), over the Long Hais (Image via David Wilkins)

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“TO C/S OA from C/S POSS – RETURNING TO THRUST – NOW GRID OF WRECKAGE 459544’

The Sioux pilot (Possum) advises that he is returning to Fire Support Base “Thrust”, presumably to provide a briefing on his aerial reconnaissance. He also advised a revised grid reference (459544) for the wreckage.

Time: 1102 hours

“TO C/S POSS FROM C/S 9 – I WILL BE OUT TO CON THIS OP SOON”

This is Lieutenant Colonel Khan advising that he has taken the decision to take charge of the operation himself and advises the Possum pilot accordingly.

Time: 1104 hours

“TO C/S OA FROM C/S 68 – IT’S BEEN CONFIRMED THAT THERE WERE 2 PERSONS IN THE AIRCRAFT – IT SEEMS ONLY 1 BAILED & BLACK PARACHUTE WAS SIGHTED BY US (AC WAS A L19)

This is the second reference to a black parachute being sighted. Regrettably, we were to find out later that neither the pilot nor his observer had parachutes. What had been mistaken for a parachute was in fact one of the tail fins of the aircraft, a Cessna O-2, wafting to earth after the aircraft had been hit.

Note also the reference to the aircraft being an L19. The L19 was the former designation of the O-1 Bird Dog, the very aircraft that the O-2 replaced in the FAC role. Whereas the O-1 was a single engine light observation aircraft, the O-2 was a twin-engine aircraft with the engines arranged in a push/pull configuration fore and aft. The only things in common between the two aircraft were that were both built by Cessna and both were used in the FAC role.

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Cessna O-2 foreground and Cessna O-1 (L19) background

Time: 1115 hours

“TO C/S 3 FROM C/S 9 – ONE BODY HAS BEEN FOUND IN THE WRECKAGE”

Lieutenant Colonel Khan (Callsign Niner) advises Major Ducker (Callsign 3) that one body has been found. Presumably, this is an aerial observation by Possum as no ground party has yet been dispatched into the Long Hais to the crash site. Concurrent preparations for that activity had been initiated earlier and 9 Platoon, with other elements of C Company, was on stand-by to move into the Long Hais supported by a Centurion tanks and M113 APCs. At this stage it was assumed that the rescue operation had now become a recovery operation.

Time: 1155 hours

“TO C/S OA FROM C/S T21 – NO OF AIRCRAFT 86869 USAF”

Tango 21 is the callsign of a Centurion Main Battle Tank troop commander advising the Battalion Command Post that the downed O-2 is positively identified by the ‘buzz’ number stenciled on the separated tail fin located on the way to the crash site.

Time: 1200 hours

“TO C/S OA FROM C/S T21 – NO CONFIRMATION ON AIRCRAFT”

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The Centurion tank commander advises the Battalion Command Post that there is not yet any confirmation on the remainder of the aircraft.

Time: 1216 hours

**“TO C/S 9 FROM C/S T21 – ONE OF THE TANGO ELM CAUGHT IN ROCKS – SUSPECTING
BROKEN GEARBOX – BLUE BELL OPS TO BE SUPPLIED”**

This transmission from the tank Troop Commander advised the Commanding Officer that a Centurion tank had sustained a suspected broken gearbox and that Royal Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (RAEME) would be required to effect repairs. “Blue Bell” was the radio codeword for RAEME. During the Vietnam conflict, the Long Hai Mountains were a Viet Cong (VC) base area, known as Minh Dam secret zone. The VC D445 Battalion and VC C25 Company used the hills as a supply and staging area. The land clearing operations were designed to deny the VC covered routes into and from the Long Hais.

The hills, one of the few remaining Viet Cong strongholds in Phuoc Tuy Province, were subjected to constant bombardment by American B-52 bombers, strike aircraft, including our own 2 Squadron Canberra bombers, and naval gunfire from United States warships. Between the Nui Dat base and the mountains 12 miles to the south were the heavy populated villages of Baria, Long Dien and Dat Do as well as several small hamlets. The terrain between Nui Dat and the Long Hais was flat and one of the richest rice bowls in Vietnam.



Typical Long Hai terrain

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The Long Hais were considered ‘tiger’ country by our troops. The terrain was rugged in the extreme. Besides a thick jungle canopy, the hills were a labyrinth of limestone caves and VC base camps and hospital facilities. As previous battalions had experienced, the hills were littered with mines and booby traps, and the terrain lent itself to ideal sniper positions, all of which combined led to a high incidence of friendly casualties for Australian soldiers venturing into the hills.

Time: 1305 hours

TO C/S OA FROM C/S POSS 27 – 1 ATF REQUIRE PIECES OF CRASHED AIRCRAFT”

Possum relays a message from 1st Australian Task Force (1 ATF) that they require pieces of the crashed O-2. That may sound simple on paper but given the nature of the terrain of the Long Hais and the fact that the crash site could only be, as may be seen, reached on foot by Infantry, recovery of any aircraft parts would prove near impossible. Other than the port fin and portion of the horizontal stabilizer, tail boom and starboard fin which had fallen in reasonably open ground, activities at the main crash site would focus on the recovery of the bodies.



Port tail fin and rudder, portion of the port tail boom, and portion of the horizontal stabilizer

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Starboard tail fin and rudder

Time: 1307 hours

“TO C/S OA FROM C/S T21 – HAVE GONE ABOUT AS FAR AS WE CAN GO – TERRAIN IMPASSABLE”

This brief radio transmission between the tank Troop Commander and the Battalion Command Post eloquently described the harsh terrain presented to armoured fighting vehicles such as the Centurion tank or Armoured Personnel Carrier (APC) attempting to access the foothills. The thick jungle interspersed with huge clumps of bamboo and jagged rocks proved to be a formidable barrier to tanks and APCs. From here on in, the recovery operation would come down to the Infantry.

Time: 1310 hours

“TO C/S OA FROM C/S T21 – SECURING POSITION NOW HAVE SENT FWD CAMERAMAN AND IF HE IS FIRED ON HE IS TO WITHDRAW SO THAT MY C/S CAN FIRE – WE ARE ABOUT 100 METRES SHORT”

This is the tank Troop Commander advising Battalion Headquarters that he is short of his objective. It is at this stage that we had dismounted from the APCs in order to ascend the mountain on foot to the crash site.

Time: 1321 hours

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“TO C/S TF FROM C/S 5RAR – REQ SECOND POSSUM (APPROVED)”

With the tank unable to proceed, HQ 1 ATF (Callsign Tango Foxtrot (TF)) is requested to allocate a second Possum to assist with reconnaissance work.

Time: 1330 hours

The Battalion Adjutant, Captain David Wilkins, who flew as an observer in the Bell 47G Sioux helicopter. He was able to assist the C Company recovery party by guiding us to the crash site. The following is an extract from David’s diary of 19 June 1969:

“A “Jade” (FAC) aircraft was shot down by ground fire today and I was involved in the recovery operation, being the observer in “Possum”. This became a most nerve-racking experience as we whirled in tight circles at treetop level at the foot of the Long Hai Mountains, above the plane wreckage, guiding the ground troops and reporting any enemy movement.

The pilot detected two enemy camp areas very near to the downed aircraft and we engaged one of these with a light fire team (Bushranger 70) firing rockets. We had one good hit but the rest were inaccurate. In addition to the possibility of coming under enemy fire as we hovered and reconnoitered, sometimes only 15-20 feet (4.6m-6m) from the ground, I was unnerved somewhat by the driving rain through the open side door, and the turbulence which tossed us about like a cork in the ocean. Updrafts would suddenly lift us from 20 feet (6m) to 200 feet (61m) above the ground. Thank heaven the down drafts weren’t as violent!! After 2. hours I was thankful that “Possum” was due to refuel, as by now I was quite soaked through from the rain, cold from the wind and giddy from the tight circling of the chopper.

The downed aircraft was completely burnt out and the two unfortunate crew reduced to charcoal. The ground troops, C Coy, had the unpleasant task of recovering their remains, which they wrapped in ponchos, and carted to a helipad for evacuation.

The local VC who occupy camps in the areas of the Long Hai Mountains and the “Long Green” are having definite difficulties in obtaining rice and conducting their normal activities in Dat Do and surrounding villages. Documents captured from the VC in contacts in Dat Do and in the Long Green talk about the Australian operation here as “the siege of the Long Hai”. Their rice supplies have run very low and they have been forced to take risks by entering Dat Do by night and therefore exposing themselves to the Australian ambushes.

One document described how, on the night of 15 June, they unfortunately lost six of their VC hardcore members who, despite efforts to warn them, entered Dat Do and ran into a fatal Australian ambush. Two VC members inside Dat Do at the time were mentioned in the letter, as

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having failed to warn the six, and I would hazard a guess that they will be reprimanded accordingly, whatever their methods are.

The Australians have proved to be a definite thorn in the VC's side and retaliation is now planned (according to the documents) with the aim of attacking Dat Do and killing at least 30 Australians. Let them try.”

**“TO 62 FROM C/S 5RAR – YOUR RV WITH FOXHOUND ELMS IS AT 477548 OUR INTERNAL
FREQ 77E – YOUR EXTRA ELMS ARE APPRECIATED”**

Callsign 62 was that of the Battalion's Assault Pioneer Platoon. This transmission advised that these additional troops had been dispatched to assist with the recovery operation.

Time: 1335 hours

**“TO C/S OA FROM C/S 3 – HAVE REACHED AIRCRAFT FOUND TWO VERY CHARRED BODIES
AND 2 WEAPONS – BODIES ARE TO BE RECOVERED IF POSSIBLE – RADIOS AND OTHER EQUIP
TO BE DESTROYED”**

The Officer Commanding C Company advises Battalion Headquarters that 9 Platoon and the other C Company elements have reached the crash site of the O-2 and that the pilot and his observer were both deceased. On instructions from Major Ducker, I deployed my platoon in a defensive cordon around the crash site in anticipation of any enemy activity and to aid the recovery of the bodies.

I have never forgotten that scene of the two American servicemen still in their seats, very badly burned and with their arms up in front of their faces as if trying to protect themselves from the impending crash. With the tail blown off the aircraft, they stood little or no chance of survival as the O-2 would have been uncontrollable.

In conversation with our Company medic, Corporal Kevin “Doc” Mulligan, years after the event, he was able to confirm that both men had died instantly. Their spines had been driven up into their skulls by the impact. If it is any consolation to their next-of-kin, “Doc” advised that they were dead before the ensuing fuel fire took hold.

Time: 1344 hours

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**“TO C/S OA FROM C/S 3 – ATTEMPT IS BEING MADE TO REMOVE BODIES FROM AIRCRAFT
WRECKAGE – REQ LT FIRE TEAM – THERE ARE SIGNS OF ENEMY IN GEN AREA”**

At this stage, “Doc” and my platoon medic, the late Lance Corporal Stone began the unenviable task of extracting the bodies from the wreckage. Water bottles were passed to the two medics in order to cool the bodies for extraction from the tangled wreckage that once was an O-2 Cessna. Concurrently, because of obvious enemy activity around us, the Officer Commanding asked Battalion Headquarters for a Light Fire Team (rocket and mini-gun armed Bell UH-1D Iroquois “Bushranger” helicopter) in case of any impending fire-fight.



Bell UH-1D Iroquois “Bushranger” Light Fire Team helicopter

Time: 1400 hours

**“TO C/S 9 FROM C/S 3 – REPORT BY T21 HEARD 1 SHOT IN AREA OF WRECKAGE AND WANTS
33A TO WITHDRAW IN ORDER TO SECURE AREA”**

This transmission was from Major Ducker to the Battalion Commander advising that the tank Troop Commander had heard a shot which appeared to come from the vicinity of the crash site. Whether this shot was a signal shot by the enemy to warn their comrades of our presence in the area or something else will probably never be known. Call sign 33A was a detachment of Call sign 33 (9 Platoon). At this stage, we began to make preparations for our way down from the crash site to link up with the Centurion tanks and APCs.

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Time: 1405 hours

“TO C/S 3 FROM C/S OA – ETA 1430 OF TA FROM NUI DAT. TWO TRACKS ARRIVING 5-10 MIN”

This message from Battalion Command Post (Callsign Zero Alpha) advised the Officer Commanding C Company (Callsign 3) that two APCs from Nui Dat were arriving in the area of the foothills. These were to take the bodies out of the area as well as any aircraft parts recovered.

Time: 1431 hours

“TO C/S OA FROM C/S 3 – TA22 APPROACHING 3 LOC NOW”

This transmission from the Battalion Command Post advised the Officer Commanding C Company that the additional APCs were approaching the Long Hai foothills.

Time: 1603 hours

**“TO C/S OA FROM C/S 3 – TA IS BOGGED ALSO RECOVERY VEH. IN GREEN NOW ALL EXCEPT
C/S T21, 32, 33A”**

Time: 1712 hours

“TO C/S OA FROM C/S 3 – CHECKING WRECKAGE NOW. EN SIGNS IN AREA”

This transmission from the Officer Commanding C Company advised the Battalion Command Post that there were obvious signs of enemy activity in the area.

In conversation with Warrant Officer Class 2 Jack Lake, the Company Sergeant Major of C Company, in 2011, he advised that he believed that it was Corporal Bill Ross from the Intelligence Section, Battalion Headquarters, who told him some time after the incident that there were a group of enemy in a squad sized camp cooking rice when the aircraft plunged from the sky near them. Apparently, from captured documents and intelligence reports, the enemy rapidly decamped as they knew that there would be some sort of follow-up by ground forces as a result of the crash.

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Time: 1735 hours

“TO C/S OA FROM C/S 3 – REQ LFT WITH DUSTOFF: GRANTED”

At this stage, it was intended that the bodies were to be extracted by air using a Dustoff helicopter. The request for a Light Fire Team was based on the tangible signs of enemy activity in the area.

Time: 1745 hours

“CANCEL DUSTOFF. THERE ARE BOOBY TRAPS IN AREA. BODIES WILL BE TAKEN OUT BY FOOT. LFT STANDBY”

With bodies extracted, they were wrapped in a Tent’s Half Shelter and secured with toggle ropes. With the enemy activity in the area, the decision was taken to extract the bodies on foot rather than risk a Dustoff helicopter coming under enemy fire. The Light Fire Team Iroquois helicopter remained on standby in case of enemy contact.

Private Summerfield recalled *“We got the remains out (of the wreckage). A length of sapling some 15 to 18 feet (4.5m to 5.5m) long and some 3 to 4 inches (7.6cm to 10.2cm) at the base was cut down. The bodies were wrapped in a tents half shelter and slung under the pole”*.

The bodies were then carried down the mountain by two platoon members. While this method may seem somewhat irreverent, due to the rugged terrain, it was the only practical way of getting the bodies off the mountain.

Time: 1908 hours

“HAVE BODIES – NEARING OLD LOC NOW. SEND DUSTOFF//DUSTOFF HEAR (sic) IN MORNING”

The Company Headquarters and 9 Platoon elements linked up with the tanks and APCs at the foot of the mountains. With bodies placed on the lowered wading board of one of the APCs, the group returned to the Fire Support Base. **In all, the recovery operation had taken some 9 hours but at least we had the satisfaction of knowing that these two**

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United States servicemen would be repatriated to their homeland.

Time: 1945 hours

“LOCSTATS FINAL C/S 3, 33, E7, TA23 TFNBYZEC (477548), C/S 31 PWBZLFIA (461543) C/S 32, T21,T20B UXBLNGYLT (462545)

These were the final night time positions of C Company Headquarters group, 9 Platoon, the APCs, 7 Platoon, 8 Platoon and the Centurion tanks.

Who Were These United States Servicemen?

I wrote to the then Secretary of the FAC Association, Rick Aitcheson, in the United States seeking his assistance in identifying the pilot of the O-2 and his observer. I provided the ‘buzz’ number of the Cessna O-2, ‘86869’ (the full Serial Number (S/N) was 68-6869, the 68 designating the year of manufacture of the aircraft) together with the date of the crash as well as my reason for my enquiry.

Rick’s response included an extract from the FAC Association website as follows:

[“James Dean Hoag Killed In Action 19 June 1969](#)

Captain James Dean Hoag was from East Point, Georgia and born on 18 October 1941. He was 27 and married when he died. Captain Hoag was a Kenny Forward Air Controller assigned to the 19th Tactical Air Support Squadron at Bien Hoa. He and First Lieutenant George Richard Dover, a Marine Observer, were flying O-2A S/N 68-6869 on a mission to destroy Viet Cong rocket and mortar firing positions near Lang Phouc Hai 15 miles (24km) north of Vung Tau in Choung Thien Province, South Vietnam. They were using air strikes and Naval gunfire when their aircraft was hit by ground fire, which blew off the tail of the aircraft. Both crewmen died in the crash and their bodies were recovered. Captain Hoag had four years of service and had served 67 days in combat. His name is located at 22W 089 on the Vietnam Memorial.”

Some 49 and a half years after we recovered them from the Long Hai Mountains, I had finally identified the crew of the ill-fated Cessna O-2. But was it possible to put faces to the pilot and his observer? The following are extracts from the United States Vietnam Memorial Virtual Wall:

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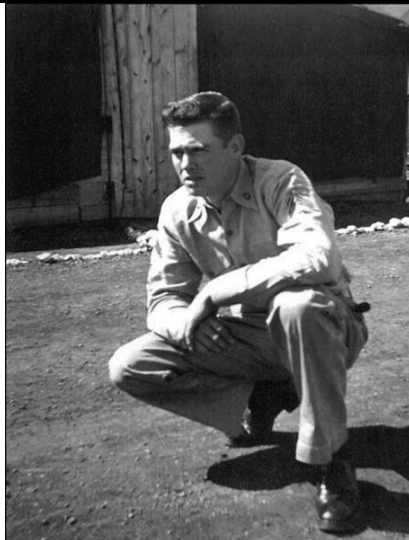
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James Dean Hoag



Air Force Captain
Age: 27
Race: Caucasian
Date of Birth: Oct 18, 1941
From: East Point, Ga.
Length of service 4 years
His tour began on Apr 14, 1969
Casualty was on Jun 19, 1969
In Phuoc Tuy, South Vietnam
Hostile, died while missing, FIXED WING - PILOT
Air loss, crash on land
Body was recovered
Panel 22W - Line 89

George Richard Dover



Marine corps. 1Lt.
Age: 36
Race: Caucasian
Date of Birth: Feb. 8, 1933
From: Indianapolis, IN
Length of service 18 Years
His tour began on Oct. 26, 1968
Casualty was on Jun 19, 1969
in Phuoc Tuy, South Vietnam
Hostile, Fixed Wing - Non Crew
Air Loss, crash on land
Panel 22W - Line 88

Rest in peace Captain Hoag and First Lieutenant Dover Your sacrifice is not forgotten.

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Acronyms:

1 ATF = 1st Australian Task Force

AC = aircraft

BHQ = Battalion Headquarters

CAPT = Captain

C/S = radio callsign

C/S OA = Battalion Headquarters command post

C/S 3 = C (Charlie) Company

C/S 33 = 9 Platoon, C Company

C/S 33A = detachment of 9 Platoon

C/S 62 = Assault Pioneer Platoon

C/S 9 = 5RAR Commanding Officer (Lieutenant Colonel C.N. Khan)

C/S T21 = Centurion Main Battle Tank

CFM = confirmation

CPL = Corporal

CSM = Company Sergeant Major

Dustoff = Bell UH-1D Iroquois aeromedical evacuation helicopter

En = enemy

EQUIP = equipment

FAC = Forward Air Controller

Foxhound = Infantry

FWD = forward

GP = Group

HQ = headquarters

LFT = light fire team (armed UH-1D of the RAAF named “Bushranger”)

LOC = location

LTCOL = Lieutenant Colonel

MAJ = Major

NoK = Next of Kin

OC = Officer Commanding

Possum = Cessna 180 or Bell 47 helicopter of 161 Reconnaissance Flight

PTE = Private

RAAF = Royal Australian Air Force

RV = rendezvous point

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SQN = Squadron

TA (Tango Alpha) = prefix for radio callsign of M113 Armoured Personnel Carrier

TAC AIR SPT = Tactical Air Support

TF = Task Force

T (Tango) = prefix for radio callsign of Centurion Main Battle Tank

VEH = vehicle

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- Captain David Wilkins, Adjutant, 5 RAR, 1969/70
- Warrant Officer Class 2 Jack Lake, Company Sergeant Major, C Company, 5 RAR, 1969-70
- Corporal Kevin ‘Doc’ Mulligan, Company Medical Orderly, C Company, 5 RAR, 1969/70
- Corporal Bill Ross, Intelligence Section, Battalion Headquarters, 5 RAR, 1969/70
- Lance Corporal Dave “Stoney” Stone, Platoon Medical Orderly, 9 Platoon, C Company, 5 RAR, 1969/70
- Private Colin Summerfield, Rifleman, 9 Platoon, C Company, 5 RAR, 1969/70
- Private Terry Fitzgerald, Rifleman, 9 Platoon, C Company, 5 RAR, 1969/70
- Private Dennis ‘Digger’ Nivens, Machine Gunner, Tracker Platoon, 5 RAR, 1969/70

FOLLOW UP ON THE MYSTERY SURROUNDING THE DISAPPEARANCE OF TACO 81 AND 82

Bruce Gordon, former F-100 pilot and author of “The Spirit of Attack” and a contributor to this newsletter and Jerry White provided these comments to the mystery of the disappearance of Taco 81 and 82 as it appeared in Phan Rang Newsletter 190:

Bruce Commented: *I have flown that route often in F-100s and have some comments you might share:*

There are two small mountains just north of Phan Rang, with forested hills on the north and

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Phan Rang on the south. A low ridge runs between the mountains. The ridge was high enough that an F-100 loaded with bombs could clear the ridge, but we sure knew the ridge was there and we were always worried that VC might set up anti-aircraft guns there because we were flying so low and not maneuvering.

Taco 81 and 82 had requested descent to VFR conditions, which was disallowed. They did not contact another control, and were apparently not passed from Tuy Hoa to Phan Rang control. They had been to Phan Rang, but were not familiar with the mountains around Phan Rang. They were coming down from the northwest, leaving a mountainous area and thinking they were entering the plains around Phan Rang.

A pilot who can see the ground, and has a good bearing on his TACAN, figures he can get to the base without radar help. Lead would tell his wingman to hang in tight and they'd go down to see better. The weather often included heavy downpours of rain, which could have blocked the view of those mountains. Maybe they were trying to come through the low ridge to the north of Phan Rang but were on one side or the other and hit the mountains. I expect that they were in rain and didn't see the hills — and went in together.

The article says that “50,000 pounds of metal crashing in an area where you KNOW they are is hard to hide”. Not so. We lost one F-100 in 1971 who took off from Phan Rang, went over that low ridge, and disappeared. It was daylight. We never found his plane. We think the VC may have got an AA gun up on the ridge and got him as he flew over. There were thick forests on the other side, and planes crash into forests leaving almost no trace. The VC controlled those areas — we never went there. I don't think the pilot ejected because we didn't hear a beeper. He was just gone.

Jerry Commented: *Interesting article on Taco flight. I gave those guys the intel briefing before their departure from Phan Rang (PRG). The main reason I remember it is because a couple of weeks later a couple of officers were at PRG doing an investigation.. They had a tape recorder and asked me some questions about the briefing and the condition of the two pilots, which was strange to me. As I recall, there was nothing out of the ordinary and I don't remember any significant threats that were in the area where they were to meet up with their FAC. Pretty ordinary but the briefing was early in the AM and I think it was in the 120th building. We did think it was unusual that two aircraft did not return and that area of II Corps was not known to*

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be a high threat area.

Doug’s Comments: Roger Lambert with the 5th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment was originally introduced to us in Phan Rang Newsletter 186, ‘Blondes, Bombs and Bunkers’ and Magpie 31. He has written about many of his war time experiences and from time to time I would like to share them with you. Probably none of them have any connection to Phan Rang except that they are interesting stories of our allies fighting a war to help defeat the Viet Cong in a world so different than any of us at Phan Rang could ever imagine. Just as No. 2 Squadron members were our bothers in arms the ground pounders from The Royal Australian Regiment were also brothers in arms who suffered incredible losses. For those traveling to Australia for ANZAC Day 2020, Roger plans to travel up from Sydney to Canberra to meet our group at the Australian War Monument. This newsletter was composed and all graphics by Douglas Severt unless otherwise stated. To see a list of all previous newsletters click [here](#). To unsubscribe to Phan Rang News, mailto:dougsevert@cox.net and put ‘unsubscribe’ in subject line.



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Phan Rang Vietnam Reunion

Start Date: Thursday, October 15, 2020

End Date: Sunday, October 18, 2020

Last Day to Book: Thursday, October 1, 2020

The reunion rate is \$124 per night and is good for three days before and three days after the dates listed above. See the link on the sending message to make your reservations.

More reunion information coming soon, but be prepared...it’s going to be exciting!



Click on the banner to view the slideshow that was prepared for the 2020 Australian ANZAC Day Trip