

Boxer Down!

The 559th Tac Fighter Squadron, 12th Tac Fighter Wing, Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam was assigned the radio call sign “Boxer.”

The “Boxers” were one of the first fighter squadrons to get the F-4C in December 1963. The Squadron first arrived at Cam Ranh Bay, when the base first opened in November 1965.

The night of 1 December 1969, one of their F4C’s, 63-7438, was lost supporting the Special Forces Camp at Bu Prang, Quang Duc, Vietnam. The pilot, and the GIB were lost. They had been “Cleared in HOT” by the FAC. Around 1,500 feet above the ground the aircraft rolled left, then right and continued down, impacting into a slight valley. The FAC had reported ground fire from the area of the target.

Two days later, on 3 December 1969, the Special Forces were able to leave their camp to locate the crash site. I was the Air Liaison Officer, or ALO, for Quang Duc Province operating out of the dirt runway at Gia Nghia, the ‘capital’. That morning, I flew to Bu Prang in an Air Force O-1 aircraft to be of any assistance on the recovery effort. As soon as I started approaching the area I called on the FM radio.

“Limpid Regime 6, Walt 20, FM.”

“Walt Twenty, Other Tracker.” Was the response.”

He then continued, “Go up your sidearm and contact Tracker Alpha, FM.”

(“Up your sidearm” is referring to the 38-caliber sidearm carried by Air Force pilots. This meant for me to **increase** the FM frequency by 38. The ‘bad guys’ had, and were using our FM sets. This was an attempt to conceal the ground unit’s operating frequency.)

Also a little screw-up here on my part, I was calling the wrong SF Camp. ‘Limpid Regime’ was A-239 at Duc Lop. Should have used Bu Prang, A-236’s call ‘Other Tracker’.

“Tracker Alpha, Walt 20 Fox Mike.” I called.

“Twenty, Alpha here.” Was the reply.

“Morning Alpha, anything to report and your status.” I asked.

“Morning Walt. We reached the site about an hour ago, no survivors. We should be leaving with the remains in about three zero. We have had negative contact so far.” He answered.

“OK Alpha, I have your location. I flew over a couple of minutes ago, am continuing on to the Whiskey (West). I will be orbiting well away from you. What’s your time to “home plate”?” I asked.

“Would rather for you to get the info from Other Tracker, Walt. We will contact them if we should need any help.” He answered.

He was well aware that the FM radio was a direct link to the NVA/VC or anyone else. He didn’t want to give anyone his intentions much less his ‘flight plan’. If needed, he had secure means to get messages back to Bu Prang.

I remained in the area for about an hour. I then landed at Bu Prang. I needed to make arrangements to get the pilot and GIB (Guy in Backseat) home to Boxer Country (Cam Rhan Bay). My experience had been that if remains of Air Force personnel ended up in the Army Mortuary Affairs system in II Corp it would delay the change of status from MIA (Missing in Action) to KIA (Killed in Action) as much as a week. I had a strong feeling that ANY delay with this information always held out some kind of false hope for the families. Not fair and I would not allow it to happen.

After landing, I went into the camp command bunker. I was told that the patrol was about three hours out. I contacted the Gia Nghia TACP on the HF radio.

“Carbon Outlaw 69, Walt 20, over.”

“Two Zero, Six Niner, go ahead, five by.” The response was crystal clear; much better than the normal telephone service that we had.

“ OK 69, contact the DASC and request an IMMEDIATE for an AIR FORCE transport into Bu Prang for a mission to CRB, I repeat AIR FORCE. The aircraft is to arrive ASAP (as soon as possible) and NLT (not later than) 1500 hours. Acknowledge, over.”

“Roger Walt 20, 69.” They acknowledged.

I left the bunker and went back to the airplane and turned the FM radio on. I could hear a helicopter in the distance and then I could see a CH-21 Chinook approaching from the north. He approached the east end of the runway, hovered over a large CONIX container hooking it to the underside of the large chopper. Over the noise I heard a call from the radio in my airplane. All I heard was “Walt” something.

I climbed into the little airplane, and called into the microphone. “Station calling Walt 20, say again.”

“Walt 20, Pterodactyl 10, over.” It was John Strange, an Army Captain who was in charge of the small detachment of Army L-19’s at Gia Nghia.

“Go ahead John, Walt Twenty.” I answered.

“George, you need to contact six nine, they are trying to locate you.” John said.

“Any idea what’s up John?”

“All I know is that there is a problem with your request for an ‘immediate’ of some sort. I’ll be landing at BP shortly.” He responded.

“OK, I’ll see you on the ground.” I answered. I then turned off the radio and headed for the command bunker.

I went down the steps of the bunker, turned right and headed towards the HF radio. It was still set on our frequency.

“Outlaw 69, Walt 20, over.”

“Two Zero, Six Nine, we’ve been trying to contact you. The DASC advises that your request for an immediate airlift will not be required; they have the requirement covered.” He advised.

“What type aircraft and what is the ETA.” I asked.

“We have already asked, they did not have that information. They said that they were working with Saigon. That’s all we know.” Was the response.

“OK Sixty Nine I’m going to QSY to another freq, I’ll check back with you later.”

I changed the frequency of the radio, to the frequency for the II DASC at Na Trang. I pulled a lead pencil from my pocket and made a feeble attempt to tune the transmitter. I couldn’t get the blue arc from the antenna to the pencil that I wanted; but what I did get would have to do.

“Carbon Outlaw, Walt 20.” I called, not knowing how well I had the transmitter tuned.

“Walt 20, Carbon Outlaw, go ahead, over.”

“Outlaw, Two Zero, put the duty officer on.”

“Standby one.” Was the response, then silence.

After a couple of minutes the radio came to life again.

“Walt 20, Carbon Outlaw Charlie. Duty Officer here, how can I help you?”

“Is Outlaw Alfa (General Roberts) there?” I asked.

“Negative, he’s flying today. How can I help you?” He answered.

“I made a request for an IMMEDIATE airlift from Bu Prang to Cam Rahn Bay some while ago. What is the status of that request. Over.”

“We are aware of the situation and Saigon has taken over. A UH1H Huey Dustoff has been launched to your location for that mission; that’s their job you know. Over.” He responded.

“OK, after pick-up here what is their destination?” I asked.

“I have the frag order here, standby one.”

“Walt 20, Charlie here, they are fragged to go to Pleiku, over.”

“Outlaw my request clearly stated CRB, Cam Rahn Bay. What’s this Pleiku crap? Over.”

“Walt this is all being handled by MACV in Saigon, we do not have divert authority. Go Ahead.”

“ROGER Carbon Outlaw Alfa, this is Walt 20, OUT!” With that, I ended the radio conversation.

No help from there, I have to get these two guys into the Air Force system. I can’t get the thought out of my mind that if they go the Army route, their families will be kept in the dark for a couple of weeks. Slim, a very slim chance an Air Force C-7 or C-123 will be landing here within the next hour or so; I seriously doubt that though.

I left the bunker and went back out to the dirt runway. John Strange had just shutdown the engine of his olive drab L-19. He walked over to me and said, “George, sorry to hear about losing those two the other night.”

“Yep John, and it’s my job to get those guys back to Cam Rhan Bay. The problem is that there is a Huey Dustoff that should be here soon and Saigon wants them to take them to Pleiku. I HAVE to get them to Cam Rhan, NOT Pleiku. Look, you’re an Army Captain, can you divert them to CRB?” As I spoke to the tall army pilot, I could hear the distinct sound of two O-1’s approaching. We looked to the east and could see the two aircraft in a tight formation headed towards Bu Prang. The two little Cessna’s made a 360-degree overhead approach and landed on the dirt runway.

John Strange said, “George, you had better back-off and not buck the system; they have their orders, they do this every day.”

“Look John, I’m thinking of the families, they need and deserve to know as soon as possible. You know, as well as I do, that they are going to be carried MIA until after the identification process. At Cam Rhan that can be done in an hour, not a couple of weeks.” “No, I’m not going to allow that to happen.” I continued. With that I turned towards the parking O-1’s and John followed.

We walked over to the two new arrivals as the pilots were getting out of the airplanes. The lead pilot was Air Force Captain Mike Leonard, my assistant at Gia Nghia and he had another pilot in the back seat. The other aircraft was piloted by one of the FAC’s we had on loan, flying out of Gia Nghia.

After everyone exchanged greetings John Strange said, “OK troops, I’m going to check on the progress of the patrol, they should be rather close by now.” With that, he climbed into his olive drab L-19, started the engine and took off down the dirt runway, blowing a cloud of red dust behind.

Mike Leonard then turned to me and said, “We’ve been working up at Duc Lop and I thought that I would stop by Home Plate and pick up another pilot. Just in case you decide to take a little chopper ride to the coast. Wouldn’t be a good to leave your aircraft here overnight.” “OK Mike, make sure your Fox Mike radio is on frequency.” I said as we all sat down, in the shade, under the wing of his airplane.

“How far out are they?” one of the others asked. “Last that I heard, they were making very good time and no contact at all with the ‘bad guys’. My best guess is about an hour, maybe more.” I answered and continued, “They’ve got both of the crew with them, wrapped in a couple of ponchos.”

The FM radio in Mike’s O-1 barked, way too loud, “Walt 20, Pterodactyl 10.” It was John Strange calling from his Army L-19. Mike Leonard jumped up, turned the volume down on the radio. “Go ahead One Zero, Walt Twenty here.” Mike responded, using my call sign.

“Other Tracker Alpha, is about two zero minutes out from your location, Operations Normal.”

I moved into action, “OK troops, let’s get ready to roll. We have no chopper so we will use our aircraft. Let’s pull the back seats from my aircraft and Mike’s as well. I’ll take one and Mike the other. We’re going to CRB. We’ve got thirty minutes.”

The FM radio then said, “George, I’m also in contact with Dustoff 47 Golf. They are off the ground at Gia Nghia and about one five out from Bu Prang.”

“Everybody hear that?” I yelled. “Forget pulling the seats, Dustoff is inbound, they stopped at Gia Nghia for fuel.”

“Any aircraft Bu Prang area; Pterodactyl 10, Lima One Nine, short final, landing east.” The radio said, John Strange was landing.

As John shut down the engine in his aircraft, I could hear the “Wop Wop Wop” of the approaching helicopter.

“How are you going to handle this, George?” the army captain asked as he walked towards me from his aircraft.

“ I don’t really know John. It’s up to the crew of that chopper. They can make it easy, or they can make it hard. It’s their call. But, our guys are going to the Air Force at Cam Rhan Bay, NOT Pleiku. This, I can assure you.” I answered.

“Let me talk to them first.” He said, as he walked in the red dirt toward the East. He had both arms extended over his head, signaling the helicopter where to land.

The helicopter came towards our group from the East, as it approached the tall army captain with arms extended, the tail moved to the left and the ‘Huey’ settled down facing North; along side the four Cessna’s.

Even as the large rotors continued to rotate, the pilots stepped to the ground, one from the left side and the other from the right. They joined the army captain and they had a conversation. They then began walking toward the parked O-1 aircraft. As they walked they continued their animated conversation.

As they approached our group they saluted, I returned their salute and said, “Welcome to Bu Prang, my name is Major Lattin.”

“We were here a couple of weeks ago, Major.” The shorter of the two Warrant Officers said. He then continued, “Captain Strange here has explained that you would like for us to take the casualties over to the coast. That will be impossible, there are very strict Army procedures for return of remains; we must go to Pleiku. Sorry.”

“ I fully understand your position. I personally have over 10,000 flying hours, mostly in transport aircraft. I have also been in the position that you are in now.” I said, then continued, “Do you remember that first four weeks at Wolters and all those lectures?”

“Yes Sir.” was the reply from both.

“Very well, one of those rather boring lectures was something called UCMJ, an acronym for Uniform Code of Military Justice. They explained all sorts of things that could get you into trouble. Big trouble and you would end up in Fort Leavenworth; really big trouble and not only would you go to Leavenworth but you would also be shot. The ‘really big trouble’ included murder, spying and something called failure to obey an order from a senior officer in COMBAT. Remember? I think that we all agree that we are all in combat here and now. Otherwise those two pilots would not be coming this way wrapped

in ponchos. Also, I feel that we all agree that I am the senior military officer within a hundred miles of this place. Do we all agree, so far?"

"Yes Sir." Was the response from the two Warrant Officers AND Captain Strange.

I continued, "Very Good, I am only making a very slight change in your mission. We will leave here and go to Cam Rhan Bay to return these two pilots to their unit. After refueling there you are to return to Pleiku. Very simple. Should you refuse, I will place you under arrest and confine you to the command bunker here at Bu Prang until you can be transferred to an Air Force facility for a hearing. You may also recall from Fort Wolters that you have a right to an attorney. Very well, since there no attorneys available that I am aware of, I am appointing Captain Strange as your temporary attorney. Any questions?"

"No Sir." All three responded. "Very well, Captain Strange I think that it would be a good idea for you to have a private meeting with these gentlemen."

"Yes Sir." They responded, they then saluted and returned to their chopper where they were joined by two enlisted crewmembers.

I turned to the other pilots and Mike Leonard asked, "George, can you say that, err, do such a thing?" "I just did." I answered.

"LOOK, out West," someone shouted. I looked beyond the runway to the west and could see a double line of figures walking towards the west end of the runway. "MY GOD, THEY HAVE FOUR PONCHO'S" I said out loud. I lowered my head, as did all the other FAC's, There were silent prayers, one made 'the sign of the cross'.

I could hear the 'Huey' winding up, it then lifted slightly above the ground and headed towards us. As it neared, I could see John Strange standing on the left skid. As I ran over to the chopper the pilot in the left seat gave a salute with a gloved hand. Captain Strange jumped off of the skid as the crew in the back helped me into the rear. As I climbed aboard, the chopper tilted the nose down and headed towards the double line of troops to the west.

The troops had stopped as they saw the chopper approaching them; they covered their heads with their hands as we landed. I looked back at the Bu Prang runway and could see a line of four Cessna's taxiing to the end of the runway. They then took off to the east, first a gray one then an olive drab followed by two more gray O-1's.

The Montagnards loaded the ponchos onto the floor of the Huey one at a time until I had four ponchos at my feet. Some of the 'Yards' assembled on each side of open rear of the chopper. They then slapped their hands together several times, then paused, slapped their hands again. They then turned and walked away.

The pilot then lifted the helicopter a few feet off the ground, lowered the nose and we moved towards the end of the Bu Prang runway. At the end of the runway they hovered, the pilot turned to me and said, "Welcome aboard Dustoff 47 Golf, Major." He had a big smile on his face; he couldn't have been much more than twenty years old. He then pointed towards the runway.

Then I saw why he was pointing, a flight of Cessna's flying down the runway in a Vee formation. Number two was painted olive drab, the other three were gray, at the end of the runway the army aircraft, number two, made a steep climbing right turn, away from the formation. At the same time, the pilot dropped a white smoke grenade out the window.

Boxer Flight had received their "Missing Man Formation"!

It took a little over an hour to get to Cam Rhan Bay. One of the crew chief's told me that the pilot wanted to know where he was to land. I told him to land at the Base Hospital helipad. By this time I am exhausted.

The hospital had two gurneys waiting at the pad when we set down. A white uniform ask me which one is which. I answered, "I have no earthly idea."

After I got out of the chopper I went to the pilot and said, "Thank you, you did a good job today." He answered, "We both did, major." I saluted and turned towards the hospital emergency room door. Aligned along each side of the door were some hospital personnel in different types of dress, even a young girl in sports clothing, with a bandage around her ankle. They were all standing at attention and at present arms as we passed into the hospital.

Boxer flight was home!

The hospital gave me a ride to the 559th in an ambulance, as I walked in, someone stuck a beer in my hand and said, "The CO and Wing Commander would like for you to join them at the club." I answered, "Thank them for me but, I don't belong in a club now; I want to be here with my fellow pilots."

"This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

Winston Churchill, Mansion House, London, November 10, 1942.