

# COUNTERINSURGENCY IN LAOS

## THE SECRET WAR

18 September 1969

By: Jim Burns, USAF (Retired)



**O**n this date I was flying on a USAF, CH-3E, tail number 66-13292, belonging to the 21<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Squadron out of Nahkon Phanom, Thailand. I was performing duty as a Flight Engineer/Gunner on my bird, which was part of a six helicopter flight. My crew consisted

of a pilot and co-pilot (I can't remember either of their names), TSgt. Adron Ratliff (the other flight engineer/gunner) and me. My crew position for this mission was at the right cabin door, where I was responsible for keeping the right side of the bird clear of any trees or obstructions and to man the, 7.62mm, M-60 machine gun mounted in the door.

**O**ur mission this day was to move a large force of friendly Laotian troops into a landing zone (LZ) near the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos. Our flight had loaded up with the first load of troops (about fifteen in each bird) and took off for the area of operation. The LZ was a short abandoned airstrip that was large enough for all our birds to land at once and let the troops get off. A Forward Air Controller (FAC) had been flying over the LZ, scouting it out to see if there was any enemy activity that we might encounter during our landing. The FAC reported the area as appearing safe and cleared us into land and discharge the troops.



**T**he flight to the landing zone was uneventful, however that was about to change as we approached the LZ. As I remember, my helicopter was the first one in the formation and just as we were beginning our approach at about 1,000 feet altitude, the enemy



North Vietnamese Army troops who had been hidden along the airstrip opened up on us with automatic weapons fire. My helicopter was raked from the nose to the tail and took several hits from their automatic weapons. One of the Lao troops was hit in the buttocks and another in the leg. We completed our landing and discharged all the troops except for the two wounded. One of the enemy automatic weapons

rounds had entered the cabin ceiling about 2 inches above my head and just below the engine....that was real close!

As we were taking off and clearing the LZ the pilots were reporting that all instruments and controls seemed normal. TSgt. Ratliff and I checked the cabin over, and other than a lot of new holes in the skin of the helicopter, every thing seemed to be functioning normally. Once we were sure the helicopter was still safe to fly, we returned the wounded troops back to the original pick up location and took on another load of troops. The friendly Lao troops on the ground in the LZ had seemed to get things quieted down some what. So we all dropped another load of troops into the LZ to help the ones already on the ground. Again, if I'm remembering correctly, we all brought in a third load of troops to the LZ.

Shortly after departing the LZ after dropping off the third load the FAC called for us to go back in and pick up all the troops we had dropped off. He told us that the friendly Lao troops were under heavy attack by large enemy NVA force and that he had also spotted an additional large force of NVA troops moving toward the LZ. He wanted us to try and get the friendly Lao troops out before this much larger force could join the battle.

We returned repeatedly to pick up the Lao troops and bring them to safety. There



were several wounded, but they were all able to scramble onto the helicopter on their own as TSgt. Ratliff and I manned our M-60 machine guns and returned the enemy fire. My helicopter picked up over seventy troops in the three trips we made back into the LZ. We had spent over three hours hauling the troops in and then out of the LZ, receiving enemy automatic weapons fire as we approached and departed the LZ.

At the end of this day, all of our flight crews safely returned to our base at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, tired, drained of our adrenaline but thankfully unwounded. However, my helicopter, CH-3E tail number 66-13292 did not fair so well. Once we shut down and the crew chief (I believe this was Lew Taylor) finished counting, he determined she had over fourteen new holes in her. But now she was back into the tender loving hands of her crew chief and the rest of the maintenance crews who patched her back together and got her ready to fly another day.

As a result of our actions on this mission TSgt. Ratliff and I were awarded The Distinguished Flying Cross (I'm pretty sure the pilot and co-pilot also received a decoration for this action, but I'm not sure what it was, but most likely it was also The Distinguished Flying Cross).

**T**his is the citation that came with my award for this mission.

CITATION TO ACCOMPANY THE AWARD OF  
THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS  
(FORTH OAK LEAF CLUSTER)

TO

JAMES W. BURNS



Staff Sergeant James W. Burns distinguished himself by extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight as a CH-3E Helicopter Flight Engineer in Southeast Asia on 18 September 1969. On that date while engaged in a highly sensitive counterinsurgency mission deep in hostile territory, Sergeant Burns, even though his helicopter was seriously damaged by over fourteen hits from hostile ground fire during the first sortie, repeatedly exposed himself to hostile fire for over three hours and airlifted seventy troops to a place of safety. The professional competence, aerial skill, and devotion to duty displayed by Sergeant Burns reflected great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

**T**his mission and thousands like it could not, and would not, have been accomplished had it not been for the hundreds and hundreds of men and women that it takes to make it possible for Air Force crews to have a safe helicopter to fly. Just to name a few on this team, I always start with the Crew Chief and mechanics who spent countless hours on the hot humid parking ramps, working day and night, often in the pouring rain, to make sure 'their' bird was ready for the next days missions. Then there are the refueling crews, the armament crews, the guys in the chow hall, the guys in the supply chain and in the mailroom and on and on..... Most of these team members never received any recognition for their part in the successful completion of missions like this one, but without them being there, doing their jobs, my crew and I would not have been where we were on this day. To all the 'team' members, especially the crew chiefs', who made this successful mission possible, I offer my most sincere and heartfelt thanks....

**I SALUTE EACH AN EVERY ONE OF THEM.**

**T**hat's my story (as best I can remember it) of a few moments in my life, one day, 18 September 1969, while doing my job on one of my tours to sunny Southeast Asia.

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