

The VCSJC Editor has made only slight grammatical corrections to ensure understanding, but has not changed the meaning of his text.

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A TERRIFIED EVACUATION FLIGHT

HUY BANG & PAT HANVANA

Dedication: This article is written in memory of a fallen crew member. 1st Lieutenant Doan The Hao. He was a young, good aircraft commander with whom I enjoyed to fly and work. He was a model airman who encouraged me to study hard and become a good flight mechanic. His outstanding actions as an aircraft commander helped us survive a horrible takeoff. Thanks to Lt. Hao's struggle against the deadly situation, we brought our aircraft back to the base safely. On another mission, he had bad luck, his wings broken. He lives alone today in the Mac Dinh Chi graveyard in Saigon. Sadly, the enemy flattened his last tomb-home after their victory. Dear brother Hao, please, accept my prayers for your peaceful rest in heaven. I will carry your dear images everywhere in the USA, until I leave this world for my final resting.

Thanks for our very first memorable flights in the Caribou. Our young C-7A Caribou crew was made up of an aircraft commander and flight mechanic with about 500 flying hours each and other crew members with less than 250 flight hours. We called ourselves "young birds" in the war storm's sky. I learned a costly lesson of war to become a man in the great offensive "Red Fire Summer 1972."

Huy Bang walked into his new squadron operations room of 427th C-7A Caribou squadron. His unit was based at Phu Cat AB, Binh Dinh Province. They received the Caribous from the USAF several months ago. Bang looked up at a large mission planning board in the center of the squadron operations room. His eyes stopped at the line for a routine flight to Bong Son. He mused about the Bong Son district, a small, remote town where a hot battle to be called "Red Fire of Summer 72" was taking place. Bong Son was one of three "hot" districts in Binh Dinh Province. The Vietcong took over or fought many bloody battles in

the Tam Quan, De Duc, and Bong Son districts. The Vietnamese newspapers, radio, and TV were daily reported these battles. Armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam were trying to reoccupy the land in enemy hands with strong spirited titles such as Tri Thien Dart-up, Binh

Dinh Valiant, Kontum Proud, An Loc Decisive Victory Battle.

Bang slowly sat down on a chair in the operations room, reviewing his next day's flight schedule: aircraft commander 2nd Lt. Hao, copilot 2nd Lt. Binh, Sgt Bang, and Cpl Phung. Flight route: Phu Cat to Qui Nhon to Bong Son, flying two times. He silently reviewed his young crew's capacity for the hottest mission tomorrow. For some, it is their first C-7A Caribou flight landing at the dangerous outpost airstrips. Lt. Hao and Bang served in the Thanh Long ("blue dragon") 415th Squadron.

For the last eight months they flew the C-47 of WW II. However, this old aircraft must land in the large, convenient, and safer airfields. Now, they fly the C-7A, a newer aircraft that can land and take off at short fields of the dangerous outposts along the borders of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Huy Bang was concerned as he perceived his young crew's capabilities for tomorrow's mission. They were still young, with little war experience at small airfields in dangerous battle conditions. His young aircraft commander was not over 24 years of age.

Four months ago, Lieut. Hao became an aircraft commander, so Bang was not sure how his commander would handle the aircraft in a battle situation. Nobody in the new 427th squadron denied that Lt. Hao was a young, smart, high-energy pilot with great skill. His stature was not large, but he was quick, active, and a great memory. He remembered all his aircraft flying and maintenance systems manuals. In short, he was a young, bright, and valued aircraft commander. Huy Bang was fond of Lieut. Hao like a big brother, a young pilot who loved to study hard. Bang was comfortable around Hao and happy to work with him during "ask and answer questions" while studying together as the crew members. Hao would teach others everything that he learned himself. After one year of studying hard, Bang became a hard working flight mechanic with more knowledge and confidence about the aircraft.

All afternoon and evening, Bang could not sleep. The hot Phu Cat summer included the noise of the South Korean Tiger Division's cannon fire all night long, mixed with helicopter sounds of the 243rd Lion squadron of the VNAF. No one slept well in this war situation.

After four months working with the Caribou aircraft, Bang was only 22, so young without much thought and worry about life. He was thinking more about tomorrow and how to survive in this long war with its deadly crisis, as most Vietnamese thought "Leave life in God's hands." The cannon fire and helicopter and music sounds brought Bang only a little sound sleep.

In the flight line van carrying the crews to their aircraft, Lt. Hao looked back to check his crew members. Smiling, he saw them all. They made a quick check of

their aircraft and took off for Qui Nhon, where they loaded 4,000 lbs of 105 mm cannon shells for Bong Son.

They would make two 45 minute round trips to Bong Son. With the tiny Bong Son airfield in front of them, Lt. Hao started to descend. After a long night thinking without too much sleep, Huy Bang carefully made a request of his aircraft commander: "Lt. Hao, before we land, please fly around a little so we can check them out and see the situation before we land." Hao happily agreed to make a low level pass at 500 feet. The crew members carefully observed the small un-safe town. It was only a few thatched houses and a single road through the town. Looking down, the motorcycles and three wheel Lambrettas seemed like normal activities of life in the town.

Everything seemed OK. Lt. Hao decided to land. Their Caribou turned into the outpost terminal, but it was strange that nobody was there to receive their cargo. Lt. Hao decided to drop the pallets of cannon shells on the ground. Huy Bang left the aircraft to help the pilot clear the way to move up to drop the second cargo pallet.

The pilot turned off the engines and waited for the terminal personnel to come and sign the cargo manifest.

Huy Bang walked around the aircraft to check both engines. The pilots left the cockpit and were walking to the ramp, when, suddenly, they heard the screaming of two hundred Vietnamese passengers who were hidden behind the sand bag walls, elderly people, children, and soldiers. They were running quickly to the aircraft. They jumped into the airplane and they jammed and completely covered the cargo ramp. Both pilots quickly returned to the cockpit. Huy Bang hurried to find a way to get into the aircraft. A soldier trying to throw his large military bag over the heads of the evacuees was struggling at the ramp. Huy Bang pulled his bag down and it fell on the ground. The soldier got mad with a bad words, as

he looked at Bang, pistol hanging at his side. Bang shouted, "Airplane has no room for your property, sir! Please, run for lives."

Bang quickly opened the left passenger door and hooked up the ladder. Only one side was hooked and the evacuees moved over to try and get into the airplane. Bang could get aboard the plane. He took off the ladder and dashed it down on the ground.

He was confused as he thought about how to get into his airplane. The crew may leave him behind if he cannot get into the airplane. The first engine is now running noisily. Bang's face is happier as he remembers the bottom hatch — a last chance

to get into airplane. He quick looked around, ducked down under the fuselage and raced to the bottom hatch as fast as possible to get in the aircraft before the pilots moved the aircraft. He got in the cockpit just as the pilot was moving for takeoff.

As Lt. Hao moved the aircraft, several evacuees gave up, leaving the aircraft, but many were still hanging onto the ramp. Turning into runway, Hao made a running takeoff without rechecking the engines. People were in the aircraft and on the ramp. Bang and the loadmaster could not close the ramp and cargo door.

The takeoff run was slow, without normal airspeed to lift off the ground. Bang felt. it was slow as he waited for the airplane to lift up into the air. After a long time, the landing gear still did not lift up from the runway surface. Hao screamed into the interphone: "Flight engineer and loadmaster! Hurry up and move passengers forward. Airplane is tail heavy and we cannot lift off."

One man was hanging on the end of ramp, his foot slipped out, both his hands trying to hold the cargo door actuator. He could no longer endure the wind and the airplane shaking. His hands lost grip and he fell onto the runway, unmoving as our airplane reached takeoff speed.

A 12 year old boy screamed for help as he saw his father fall off the plane without people helping. The plane's engine noise covered his voice.

Almost at the end of runway, the landing gear just lifted up into the air. In horrible, slow motion Bang saw that the landing gear is lower than the barbed wire fence around the field, as the aircraft moves closer to it.

Landing gear is up, but Lt. Hao cannot throttle back to meto power. He keeps maximum power to climb over the tree tops. His deadly voice screams again: "Help! Quick, move the passengers forward, we cannot fly, move them up!"

In a trembling voice, the loadmaster answered, "We try hard, Lt.! But, the crowd of people is on the ramp. We can't close the door, sir!"

Bang's face turns green, his mind frozen as the wing tips are lower than the tree tops. His soul is full of a fear of death. His mouth trembles as he pray for both engines to be good. If one fails, certainly they will die with this overload. Lt. Hao has a hard time to bringing his aircraft over the trees.

Bang mumbles to himself, "What can I do to help? What can I do now? Looking at the empty space behind the two pilot seats, Bang feels an Army soldier standing behind the cargo compartment wall, pushing him into the cockpit as he screams noisily. "Move up! Quick! Move it, you, and you, please, quick move up." Everyone starts moving up.

Moments later, the loadmaster closed the ramp as the plane reached a few hundred feet into the air.

Still shaking, Lt. Hao reduced engine power slightly and turned his aircraft toward the sea, where it is safer than over land. As he was turning, the crew heard a noise. It seemed like enemy bullets struck the plane. Lt. Hao shouted, "Anyone hear that noise?" The load-master replied, "It seemed like enemy bullets hit our aircraft, Lt." Hao quickly climbed to 2,000 feet and leveled off, flying along the sea shore, heading to Qui Nhon.

First Lieutenant Nghiep flew the same route, starting one hour later. Hao stopped Lt. Nghiep from landing at Bong Son to avoid the bad evacuation situation. Lt. Nghiep returned his plane to Qui Nhon and reported the bad situation at Bong Son airfield.

Hao asked his crew, "FE and load-master, how many passengers did we load?" Both crew men counted and answered, "69 passengers, Lt.!" Lt. Hao turned the crying boy who

lost his father over to the Qui Nhon terminal personnel for them to take care of him and find his relatives.

The Tong Le Chan outpost was a very important Vietcong checkpoint. The South Vietnamese government was determined to keep Tong Le Chan at any price to keep the Vietcong out of War Zone III and Saigon.

The roads to bring supplies to support Tong Le Chan were cut off and dangerous. Only the air support of our two 429th and 431st C-7A Caribou squadrons stationed at Tan Son Nhut AB supplied Tong Le Chan. For many months, support of Tong Le Chan was very difficult with Vietcong forces nearby.

No C-7A Caribous could safely land for resupply.

In April 1973, the crew of Captain Ut, our 431st Squadron Safety Officer, flew in and tested the Vietcong skill by his method of "quickly touch and go" to check how the Vietcong "Steel Bird Hunters" reacted. They hit the Tong Le Chan airfield with a dozen mortars. Captain Ut's crew took off safely and escaped from the extremely dangerous airfield.

The ARVN 92nd Ranger Battalion was terribly short of supplies, without food, medicines, or evacuation of the wounded. The 429th and 431st squadrons few daily airdrop missions to Tong Le Chan, but no one could land safely to provide support.