

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

## **MY UNFORGETTABLE TONG LE CHAN FLIGHT**

When I checked my next day's flight schedule, I felt bad when I saw my name on Second Lieutenant Thu's crew (name changed). We would fly two times to supply food from Bien Hoa AB to Tong Le Chan.

I complained to my Flight Mechanic leader, MSgt. Nhu Nha, that he had scheduled me to fly with this pilot with whom I did not get along. I flew with many excellent Vietnamese pilots, but I did not like flying with Lt. Thu. I thought he did not make good decisions and took too many chances. Twice I was unhappy because I had been on flights with him I thought unsafe. I did not trust him as Aircraft Commander.

MSgt. Nha thought I was concerned about flying into the hot Tong Le Chan outpost. I told him that I did not like to work with this pilot. I thought he took unnecessary risks and we couldn't get along well. He told me that he was sorry, but "We are the leaders and you, as the oldest FM, must fly to the hot airfield first for the younger FMs to follow." MSgt. Nha insisted that, "We can't change the schedule now, it is already set." I said, "I am not complaining about the hot battlefield. I don't mind! But, I can't work well with this Aircraft Commander." He replied, "I understand. Take your mission tomorrow. I will try not to schedule you to work with him again.

Okay!"

As I started my hot mission, I was standing at my locker for a moment thinking about the flight. It may be the last flight of my life. I quickly decided to take my anti-bullet jacket, which had hung in my locker for a year without being used. I knew I needed it today. I knew Thu would land at the hot Tong Le Chan airfield even though it had been a long time since any airplane had landed there.

Our C-7A Caribou (PC 722) took off from Tan Son Nhut for Bien Hoa. Lieutenant Thu told our crew, "We will fly to Tong Le Chan and see what situation is there,

then we will decide what to do.”

While we were flying to Bien Hoa, he requested the VNAF Saigon operators to provide two fighters for our safe landing at Tong Le Chan. The VNAF operation officers took his request and set up the fighters to help. I strongly believed that we were landing at Tong Le Chan that day. I was already prepared for this horrible, unforgettable mission.

We loaded 2,000 pounds of fresh food on a large pallet. We took off from Bien Hoa with that food and a Ranger who left Tong Le Chan on leave and then waited for many weeks for a flight back to his unit.

Lt. Thu contacted the VNAF Saigon Operators and reported leaving for Tong Le Chan and asked for the information about the fighters. They gave Lt. Thu the radio channel to contact the fighters. Two VNAF A-1 *Skyraiders* would fly along with us for protection.

Lt. Thu contacted one of the A-1's and they answered on the VHF radio. They informed Lt. Thu that they were flying on the left side, behind our aircraft. Thu ordered our crew to check them out and find out where the A-1's were.

For ten minutes, both I and our Loadmaster looked without any A-1 *Skyraiders* appearing in our sight. I thought to myself, “Maybe they are cheating us. Within 30 minutes they can maneuver the fighters to protect us. I don't believe this! They're not ready yet. It may be that the A-1's are calling us from their parking lot.” We didn't see them in the sky behind us.

I didn't know why Lt. Thu was flying at a low altitude along side Highway 13, the road leading to Tong Le Chan. I guessed that he flew at much less than 3,000 feet. I looked down at the highway activity. I clearly saw huge buses and smaller, three wheel Lambretta scooters running down there. I even saw tiny motorcycles. Of course the Vietcong saw us in the sky. I wondered why Thu didn't fly higher than 6,000 feet to avoid the Vietcong tracking us and guessing where we were going.

I was concerned for two reasons. The VC saw our heading going to the Tong Le Chan outpost. They may have contacted their Vietcong Steel Bird Hunters to be ready to kill their target. Another concern was that Vietcong guerrillas might be shooting at us with their rifles. I opened up my anti-bullet jacket, put it on my seat, and sat on it, very concerned. I didn't feel able to talk to this Aircraft Commander. I believed that the Vietcong were ready and waiting for us with their Steel Bird Hunters in this Tong Le Chan trap.

We made a final check for the air support aircraft, but no aircraft appeared around us. Our aircraft, *PC 722*, got into the Tong Le Chan airspace. Lt. Thu contacted the Tong Le Chan outpost on their ground radio and asked for landing information.

The man answering the ground radio seemed like the voice of a base commander who waited there so long for our support until their food and supplies ran out. His happy voice greeted our crew with confidence. He encouraged us to land at a safe Tong Le Chan airfield where he was deployed, setting up his armed forces around the outpost. We were concerned about Vietcong rockets, but we were not worried about the Vietcong attacking the airfield.

It was 20 minutes to the airfield. The FM ground radio encouraged us again. *PC 722*, our airfield is safe for your landing. All our soldiers are at the airfield for your safety." The ground commander gave us his instructions. That sounded so nice and encouraging. Lt. Thu decided to land without any VNAF attack aircraft to support us. I felt we could get hit real hard on this landing.

Our aircraft was over the Tong Le Chan outpost. Lt. Thu briefed us for landing. He reduced the engines to idle speed for a STOL landing. We heard the stall warning sound in the cockpit and the Caribou was quickly falling from the air like a falling leaf. I saw the hands of the attitude indicator falling down. My ears hurt, so I covered my nose and blew air out to make my ears comfortable. The Before Landing procedure was completed and, four minutes later, our aircraft touched down on the runway.

Our Loadmaster took off all the cargo straps, keeping a single one to hold the cargo for the last release. We had opened the cargo and ramp doors 30 seconds before our C-7A touched down on the runway. I quickly put my anti-bullet jacket on and got up to help our Loadmaster to quickly release the cargo. The Ranger

also released his seat belt and moved to the ramp door, waiting for our aircraft to stop.

Lt. Thu made a very smooth landing and quickly used reverse thrust and brakes to stop our aircraft less than half way down the runway, preparing for an emergency taking off without taking time to make a u-turn to head into the wind for takeoff. The Loadmaster quickly released the last cargo strap and I helped him push the cargo out. Right at the moment that our aircraft stopped, the ground radioman yelled on the radio, scaring our crew to death "Vietcong is starting to mortar, fly away! Hurry up! Go! Go quick! Fly away!"

I was trembling, unnerved by the ground radioman's words. He kept yelling on the radio. "Leave! The Tong Le Chan airfield is under mortar attack." I looked through the large cargo and ramp door opening to see the smoke rising up everywhere. Both pilots readied for an emergency takeoff out of Tong Le Chan. The loadmaster and I were still pushing the food pallet out. The aircraft moved forward and the heavy cargo rolled backwards. Luckily, it ran straight on the rollers to the ramp. I was concerned that it might get crooked and hang up on the tail of the aircraft. Certainly, we might be killed. The cargo pushed the Ranger standing on the ramp down onto the runway surface with the cargo. We didn't know how hurt he was. We took off with the cargo and ramp doors open and things were scattered over the cabin floor.

The mortar, cannon smoke rose up everywhere, back on the runway, on the side of our aircraft, and in the front as well. Although scared, the pilot bravely lifted the aircraft into the air through the smoke. Lt. Thu made a tactical departure, turning our aircraft close over the outpost to avoid the enemy shooting. He quickly got to a high attitude over the outpost before we left the area of Tong Le Chan. Lt. Thu looked back to see us cheerfully yelling.

On the ground radio, the 92nd Ranger Battalion commander congratulated our lucky crew. He said that 23 mortar and cannon rounds exploded on the Tong Le Chan airfield while we were on the runway there. We were really lucky! We would live for more days in the Vietnam War.

On the way back to Bien Hoa AB for the second flight to Tong Le Chan, Lt. Thu reported an emergency and dangerous situation because of the 23 mortar rounds in the attack on Tong Le Chan airfield and requested that the second mission be canceled. The VNAF operator instructed our crew to land Bien Hoa AB and wait for their orders.

After noon, the VNAF Saigon Operations Officer informed us that our second flight to Tong Le Chan had been canceled and we flew back to Tan Son Nhut AB. That was our last landing at Tong Le Chan, a C-7A Caribou farewell to the Tong Le Chan outpost! After our last flight, the VNAF decided that no more C-7A Caribou would land there to supply the outpost.

Two VNAF C-130, 435<sup>th</sup> and 437<sup>th</sup> squadrons now responded with low-level parachute drops to support Tong Le Chan. There was a lot of Vietcong anti-aircraft gun and mortar fire there. The C-130's had a hard time getting low-level parachutes. Some of them made high altitude parachute drops. Fifty percent of the outpost supplies fell inside the Tong Le Chan base, helping our servicemen survive, but the other half of the supplies landed outside and were gifts for the Vietcong. They loved getting 'free booties.'