

On December 21, 1966, USS *Bennington* relieved USS *Kearsarge* on station in the Gulf of Tonkin, beginning the combat SAR deployment of HS-8. *Bennington* would only be on duty until April 15, departing after a line stint of just over three and a half months, the shortest of the CVS deployments.<sup>i</sup>

Naval air activity during this time resulted in the combat loss of 23 aircraft and the non-combat operational loss of 22 more. The non-combat mishaps claimed 18 airmen, while the combat losses endangered 27 men; with seven killed in action, nine taken as POWs, and eleven rescued. By comparison, over the same period, the Air Force lost 64 planes in combat and 31 due to non-combat operational losses. Their operational losses were only 13 men. But the combat losses endangered 111. Sixty-two of those were killed in action. Of the forty-one others who went down in combat, twenty became POWs and twenty-two were rescued. Of those rescued, the Air Force took care of nineteen of their own, and the Navy rescued three, and the Navy rescued ten of their own, and the Air Force one.<sup>ii</sup> Of twelve Navy rescue actions, three were by ship, two by HC-1 helicopters, seven by HS-8.<sup>iii</sup>

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There was only one Navy rescue penetration over land during this time frame. It was on January 6, 1967. USS *Gridley* had arrived from the States and was on station at South SAR, via a port call in Da Nang. Aboard her, also fresh from the States, and new to the business of combat rescue, was HC-1 Detachment 3, led by Lieutenant Commander Joe Brecka. As the new *Clementine* on the block, they were scheduled to take their UH-2B for an area familiarization the next morning bright and early.<sup>iv</sup> Instead, they were thrust into the game late the afternoon of their arrival when an F-8 was shot down just three miles inland from Cape Bang (19° 26'N, 105° 48'E) and due west of the ship's position a dozen miles. The F-8s from VF-191 aboard USS *Ticonderoga* had been trying to stick rockets in the caves of a hill known to house ammunition storage, according to the intel.<sup>v</sup>

Brecka, copilot Ensign John McMinn, crewmen AMS2 "Robbie" Robertson and ATN3 William J. Duggan were scrambled at 1751 for the first rescue mission of their deployment, and were highly strung to say the least.<sup>vi</sup> McMinn was so excited he neglected to align the magnetic compass after leaving the *Gridley* (a necessary detail for proper compass operation, performed once clear of the magnetic distortion caused by the steel mass of the ship). They raced off in the wrong direction following the faulty compass and had to get a "gentle" correction from their ship's air controller. Approaching the coast, the crew saw the Crusaders orbiting a black column of smoke, being followed by black puffs of AAA fire sprouting behind them, not quite catching up. From previous peacetime gunfire spotting experience, Brecka estimated the puffs to be at least the equivalent of the 5-inch guns of *Gridley*, perhaps 130mm; big stuff. He decided to go in low to complicate the firing solution of those heavy guns, thereby presenting only a fleeting and elusive target, too quick for the ponderous gun batteries to track. Brecka headed straight for the pillar of smoke that marked the location of the downed pilot according to the jets on the scene. Not yet briefed on the disposition of AAA in the area, it seemed as good a plan as any. Diving from the initial higher altitude used to approach the shore, *Clementine* crossed the surf just high enough to clear the band of trees backing the beach. Bursting past the trees to flat open country, Brecka dropped right down to the deck and found himself barreling at 150 knots along an east-west road

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which ran past a large hill on his left. Ahead a couple of miles was the source of the black pillar of smoke, flames stark against the sunset's remaining glow, tropical dusk falling quickly as it is wont to do.<sup>vii</sup>

Suddenly, a wall of fire appeared in front of them. Streams of red tracers arced at them from many positions on both sides and ahead. Ugly black puffs of AAA burst so close that the concussion beat against the helicopter, rocking and buffeting it. Shrapnel came through the windscreen and scoured the cockpit, wounding Brecka in the upper left arm, scything the visor control knob from atop his helmet. As the dark day visor started to slide down, another shard pinned it halfway down. Brecka, his hands on collective and cyclic, racing down the road at 20 feet, was unable to let go the controls to adjust the visor: he tilted his head back and peered under it to see. At the same time, McMinn's collective flight control lever was shot away at the pivot housing by shrapnel from another explosion, rendering it unusable by him. Wire bundles in the cabin overhead were severed, causing electrical failures, including the radio and the automatic flight control stabilization equipment.<sup>viii</sup> Bullets riddled the avionics console between the pilots and ricocheted off both pilots' armored seats. Yellow caution panel lights were illuminated in bunches, and the helicopter was vibrating so badly neither pilot could read them. Round after round was impacting the helicopter with a syncopated staccato whack of bullets and shrapnel on aluminum. In the cabin, Robbie Robertson immediately opened fire from the port door with the M-60, only to have it jam. As he turned to grab the other M-60, he saw Bill Duggan, firing an M-16 from the starboard door, go down. He was shot three times in the lower back, the rounds slanting up through his chest.

"Clementine, you're taking fire! Get the hell outta there!"

Even as the radio call came, Brecka was rolling right as hard as the helicopter would go, and reefing around in a high-speed turn, rotors dipping perilously near the ground. His turn took him away from the east-west road, out of the vortex of tracers, and he now found himself racing up a north-south road, where they ran into a second barrage of small arms and light AAA, and the bird took more hits. Once again Brecka rolled out of the crossfire, again to the right, back towards the east. The entire helicopter was vibrating, the collective twitching, and the cyclic shaking so violently it was all he could do to keep his hand upon it.

"We're hit! We're hit!"

"Get out of there Clementine. Head for the water. We'll pick you up on the way out."

The sources of the ground fire had dropped off behind them, the tracers now passing over the helicopter, and the noise of the shooting was no longer audible. The bigger AAA seemed to have lost interest, perhaps his low altitude was concealing them from the sight of the AAA gunners at this greater distance and low level, or perhaps they shifted fire to the Crusaders overhead. Brecka and McMinn could see a two- to three-foot spread in the rotor tip path plane. Where all the rotor blades should be following the leader in a smooth two-dimensional plane, one blade was grossly out of its track. The helicopter shook like a car driving over the ties of a railroad bed. More and more caution lights were coming on until the caution panel looked as if was in test. Joe Brecka knew he had to set the helicopter down. They were now over open fields and paddies and he slowed the helicopter; fighting the bucking machine, the flight instruments unreadable on the dancing instrument panel. Approaching a hover over the open field, Brecka's

memory of a recent nightmare filled his head. In it, he was being marched down a road, hands bound behind his back, prodded by bayonets, while the Vietnamese were laughing and leering and planning to remove a four-tooth gold bridge from his mouth at the next stop.<sup>ix</sup> Back aft, Robertson was lying next to Duggan, trying to stop his bleeding with a battle dressing.<sup>x</sup>

As he was almost stopped in a hover, the vibrations diminished, tantalizing him, (with the lingering image of his frightening vision), for the sake of his wounded crewman, to try to keep it flying, so he waved off his landing approach and accelerated toward the thick band of trees which separated them from the sea. The vibrations returned, as bad as before, but his resolve to tough out the vibrations was now strong and the initial terror of the vibrations was subsiding to mere fear. Small arms muzzle flashes twinkled at the base of the dark tree line ahead, across their path from left to right. Clementine dashed on, just clearing the treetops, and gaining the sea. Ahead about ten miles, he could see *Gridley*, bone in her teeth, coming towards him at high speed. He kept up his speed when he realized the horrible vibrations were the same at all forward speeds, and all he could think of was to get on deck as quickly as possible. *Gridley* was steaming into the wind so there would be minimum delay in landing. Glancing back before he slowed and turned into the wind, Brecka could see Robertson administering mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on Duggan.

Brecka, assisted mightily by McMinn, got the bucking, vibrating helicopter down on *Gridley's* flight deck. Once on deck, Brecka could see the rotor system still had one blade one foot out of the path of the other three, even with the engine at minimum power and controls at flat pitch. He had John McMinn slam the rotor brake full on as soon as he had snatched off the engine control lever. The rotors spun to a wrenching stop rather than the normal gradual deceleration. They got unstrapped to see one rotor blade hanging down below the others, almost down to the deck, its leading edge right up within inches of the fuselage tail cone. Its droop stop mechanism had been shot away.<sup>xi</sup> Had the rotors been slowed normally, that blade would have dropped as the gradual deceleration ceased too overcome gravity and cut right through the tail cone. The helicopter would have torn itself apart and, with no tail rotor, might have spun right off the flight deck into the Gulf of Tonkin to join the sea snakes.

Eager and tender hands carried William Duggan to sickbay where the ship's doctor<sup>xii</sup> fought a losing battle to save his life. He was dead within two hours, despite the best efforts of all hands. When the doctor had time to examine Brecka's wounded arm, he explained how the shrapnel was lodged pushing into his artery, but had not cut it. Any movement of the arm had had the potential to puncture the artery and kill him.<sup>xiii</sup> The helicopter had 41 holes in it. Fifteen in the rotor blades.<sup>xiv</sup> The blades were not just holed but torn, with skin surface peeled back and jagged rips, and with rounds through a main spar, the strength member of that blade. It should not have held together. A round had passed between the two tail rotor control cables, shining the inner sides of each. A quarter inch in either direction and their flight would have ended back in the paddies of Cape Bang with a loss of tail rotor control when the cable parted.<sup>xv</sup> Un-repairable aboard ship, *Clem Two* had to be craned off in Da Nang.<sup>xvi</sup> Crusader pilot Richard Dean "Moon" Mullen, was sighted trussed in the back of a truck going up the north-south road by RESCAP shortly before *Clem Two* had made its bid to rescue him. He would be six years imprisoned.<sup>xvii</sup> Some lessons from this tragedy? One, a proper turnover between

off-going and oncoming detachments, including up-to-date intelligence summaries, are more than mere courtesy. And two, following roads is never a good idea in hostile territory for any aircraft - especially helicopters.

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- i Hobson, p. 260.
- ii During this time, the Marine Corps lost eight fixed wing planes in combat and an additional seven to non-combat operational losses. Of five men rescued during combat losses, one was rescued by a Navy ship, one by an Air Force helicopter 15 miles at sea and the other three were rescued by Marine helicopters operating at the scene of the close-air support the jets were providing. Author's analysis from Hobson pp. 84-95.
- iii Author's analysis from Hobson pp. 84-95.
- iv Phone interview with Joe Brecka January 29, 2006.
- v Hobson, p. 85.
- vi Statement of Lieutenant Commander Joseph Brecka SAR Incident 06-1 January 6, 1967.
- vii Phone interview with Joe Brecka January 29, 2006.
- viii Naval Speedletter 19 January 1967 to Naval Aviation Safety Center from HC-1 Det 3, Report of Aircraft Combat Zone Mishap.
- ix Dinner interview in Little Italy San Diego with Joe Brecka January 30 2006 by Tom Phillips.
- x Statement of Lieutenant Commander Joseph Brecka SAR Incident 06-1 January 6, 1967.
- xi Damage Diagram and Summary SAR Incident 06-1 Report.
- xii Lieutenant Robert P. Lonergan, Jr. Medical Officer for DESRON 19, the staff of Commander, Destroyer Squadron 19.
- xiii Dinner interview in Little Italy San Diego with Joe Brecka January 30, 2006 by Tom Phillips.
- xiv Colucci, pg. 52
- xv Damage Diagram and Summary SAR Incident 06-1 Report.
- xvi Phone interview with Joe Brecka January 29, 2006.
- xvii Hobson, p. 85.