

My Remembrances of Missile, Missile, Missile

Or

What I Remember About a Miraculous Day

At the urging of Alan Russo and Mike Brown, I am documenting my experience of the day that Mike Brown was shot down by an SA-7. Mike's account can be found at <http://www.vhfcn.org/missile.html>.

My view as a participant:

On June 21, 1972, I believe it was in the early to mid afternoon, a heavy fire team of three Cobras (AH-1G) aircraft were assigned the task of escorting a flight of UH-1's on an insertion and extraction around a fire support base located on Highway 13. It was about half way between An-Loc and Lai Khe, near the Hamlet of Chon Thánh. ARVN was making a push to retake An Loc from the south, if I remember correctly.

The three cobra A/C's (aircraft commanders) were Ron Tusi, Mike Brown and myself. Tusi was lead (I apologize deeply for not remembering all the front seat pilots, they were brave men all). The formation approached the landing zone from the east/southeast. Ron was flying low with the Slicks (UH-1's). Mike and I were flying escort cover from altitude. I was at 3,000' and Mike was at about 4,000'. As the flight was on short final Tusi yelled on the radio the infamous, "MISSILE, MISSILE, MISSILE". Quite a few things went through my mind in an extremely short period of time. One was "not again" (and that is another story). After about 2-3 seconds I figured that it was not going to hit me. I looked up at Mike's aircraft. He had been hit and the tail boom was falling away. It was

very interesting how it separated. It was falling forward, down and to the left (aft looking forward). It was almost as though a saw had cut it off at the "4 Bolt" joint. No loose pieces, hanging wires, drives shaft, etc. Seeing this and fearful another missile might soon be on it way, I pushed the nose over, dropped the collective, and kicked the aircraft out of trim. We dropped like a rock. I recovered at the tree tops and looked to see Mike at about 1500-2000 feet. He was slowly coming down in a flat spin. My thoughts at that time were not hopeful. I circled the area that I presumed that he would come down in. Once he hit the trees, we went to find them thinking that this would be a recovery mission (I guess I could have been more optimistic, but it did not look good). Once we found the aircraft, we were surprised and elated. Mike was up and around and waving at us. Marco was also moving around. (as a side note, the aircraft was on its side (left I believe), and several trees were knocked down. Mike had crashed in a wooded area, which I believe was an aid to his survival. The trees kept him from spinning violently when he pulled collective at the bottom, thereby preventing any neck injuries.

I then asked my front seat pilot to lay out a few 40mm rounds (Again, I apologize profusely, can see the face, not the name. It pains me.) He dutifully sent the rounds flying. The reason for this was that we knew that there had been NVA troops in the area and it was an attempt to ward them off. I then looked around to assess the situation as to how we might effect a rescue (much better than a recovery). I attempted to contact Ron Tusi to no avail. The Slicks were getting ready to come out of the LZ and I was extremely concerned about the welfare of Ron and his pilot (which I thought was Alan Russo, but he said that he doesn't think it was him.

What is it that they say one loses first?). I then saw Tusi landing outside the wooded area. He had blown off his rocket pods, which would have been an essential action if he was to recovery Mike and Marco. He then got out of his aircraft along with his “front seat” and they started to run into the woods. I was at a bit of a loss as to what to do, with two crews on the ground.¹

Seeing the Hueys coming out of the LZ. I called up their lead and asked for an aircraft to rescue Mike and Marco. After some discussion and coordination a Huey was flying into the crash area to determine if they could pick Mike and Marco (M&M) up. I was trying to position our aircraft so that I might be able to see Ron and company and the operation to get M&M out. I could not see or find Ron. I was talking the Huey down. He was skeptical that he could perform the operation safely, but try, he did. His crew chief and gunner were hanging out the aircraft to help provide direction for clearance. The Huey was starting to take out a small tree with his tail rotor and had gotten as low as he could go. Mike then jumped up and the aircraft

¹ This was not the first time Ron had done something like this. He was a brave and fearless man and an ex Navy corpsman and SEAL. Before we started this tour we were both at Cobra Instructor Pilot school. One evening in the “O” club, I was sitting with a classmate of mine. He said to me, “you see that fellow over at the bar with the wavy hair?” I responded, “Yes, that’s Tusi.” The classmate then proceeded to tell me the following tale. He and Tusi were in the same unit their last tour in RVN. One day Ron, as aircraft commander, was shot down. They arrived on scene to pick them up. The front seater was dead and Ron was nowhere to be found. They looked for him for quite awhile, but no joy. Approximately 2-3 weeks later he walked back into their base and headed straight to G2 (intelligence) and debriefed for approximately 2 days. It appears that he reverted to old habits? I was impressed.

crew grabbed his arms and pulled him onboard. It was now Marco’s turn. Marco is not a man of great physical stature, where Mike was. In addition, we were not aware of the compression fractures that Marco had suffered during the crash². He kept trying to jump up but they could not reach him. The Huey pilot skillfully and courageously lowered the aircraft more and more until they were finally able to effect Marco’s recovery.

At this point my whole focus turned toward Ron. As I was looking for him and his “front seat” they were observed bounding out of the woods. I loitered on station until Ron took off. We then flew back to Lai Khe and met up with Mike. We talked a bit. Mike relayed some of his thoughts, etc. Ron had said the area he was running through was full of bunkers and fortified positions. I don’t remember talking with Marco, because I believe that he was being medivac’d out.

While this was just another view of the previously related incident (which may have some mental health value, but who knows), there is one view that I have thought on for a long time after this incident. At the time of this incident I was very young and on my second tour as a Cobra pilot in Viet Nam. In my

² I was told that Marco flew Slicks his first tour (I don’t remember who told me this). At about the fourth month of that tour, he was flying co-pilot on a “Hot insertion”. As they were performing their flare, prior to landing, they received the “gift” of a B-40 rocket in the belly of their aircraft. The aircraft subsequently crashed and Marco suffered a compression fracture. This might explain the physical stature challenge he had. (I lost almost three inches in height as the result of a compression fracture from being shot down on my first tour. I can empathize.) Oh, by the way, this incident occurred at about his 4 month mark on this tour. Interesting.

previous tour, I was in an Air Cav troop (same AO). As footnoted, I was shot down and crashed my first tour, all of which means little to nothing, except one thing. I have seen, as many other have also, men wounded, some killed, and some you just knew were "dead", but suffered little to no harm. I believe that most, if not all helicopter pilots in RVN, have witnessed the same, as have other combatants. There were times that I thought I was going to die or be severely damaged. I have seen aircraft full of holes and the only bullet that came near the pilot was one that went between his toes. On the other hand I have seen one and only one bullet go through an aircraft. That bullet passed through a close friend's neck (and he drowned in his own blood). Now why the macabre thoughts as part of this story? Well, it is not about macabre; it is about the hand of God. Some call them miracles, serendipity, being at the wrong place at the wrong time, being at wrong place at the right time, etc. It may seem that events such as these are unexplainable. They are not. While we may witness these events more readily in a combat environment, we see them every day. We see it in the wonders and order of our world. I see it outside my window, when an oak grows out of granite rock, the rising sun, the teeming and ordered life all around us, and the finality of its physical end. I see the hand of God. Mike, Marco, myself, the Slick guys (and their Pax) and Ron, etc. all witnessed the hand of God. In this case it brings great joy. In other cases it is a time of sadness. In all cases, it reminds us of our humanity, our frailty, and God's sovereignty. Unfortunately/fortunately His hand is very obvious in combat. I am thankful for God's mercy on all of us (and our present and future families) on that day. None of us "deserved" His mercy on that day. It shall always be a wonder of wonders that the sun

still rises each day. I hope that I will always be thankful and appreciative to Him and those who share this life with me. Thank you for your patience as I reminisced and rambled.