

**is honored on Panel 34E, Row 4 of
the Vietnam Veterans Memorial**

Full Name: EWALD ZIRFAS
Wall Name: EWALD ZIRFAS
Date of Birth: 8/14/1940
Date of Casualty: 1/8/1968
Home of Record: LOS ANGELES
State: CA
Branch of Service: ARMY
Rank: CAPT
Casualty Country: SOUTH VIETNAM
Casualty Province: PROV UNKNOWN, MR I



On September 1, 1965, 2LT Zirfas was assigned as a Project Officer with the United States Army Field Artillery Board, Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Later in 1967, he was assigned as a Test Officer for the Visual Airborne Target Location System.

The need for this item of equipment was critical to the combat operations in Vietnam, and it was determined that an operational test in country would best serve those needs. 1LT Zirfas accompanied the new equipment to Vietnam to conduct the test.

On January 8, 1968, while transporting components of the system to the test site, the helicopter in which he was riding crashed. All personnel and crew aboard were killed. Zirfas was posthumously promoted to Captain, and he was interred at the National Cemetery at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri.

Captain Zirfas was the first and only known operational tester to be killed in a combat zone while conducting an assigned test. He gave his life in the pursuit of operational testing mission accomplishment. He demonstrated outstanding effort that is an inspiration to current and future testers to go wherever necessary to satisfy the criteria specified for an operational test.

U.S. Army Operational Testers' Hall of Fame



Captain Ewald Zirfas

Inducted October 4, 1995

August 14, 1940 - January 8, 1968

Test Officer
U.S. Army Artillery Board
Fort Sill, Oklahoma, 1965-1968

Captain Ewald Zirfas was born in Bruehl, Germany. He was commissioned a Second Lieutenant of Field Artillery on August 31, 1965.

From www.flyarmy.org

Helicopter CH-53A 153710

Information on U.S. Marine Corps helicopter CH-53A tail number 153710

Date: 01/08/1968

Incident number: 68010863.KIA

Unit: HMH-463

South Vietnam

UTM grid coordinates: YD234260

Casualties = 46 KIA . . Number killed in accident = 46 . . Passengers = 41

Original source(s) and document(s) from which the incident was created or updated:

Defense Intelligence Agency Helicopter Loss database. Army Aviation Safety Center database. Also: OPERA, MAG-16 Unit History (Operations Report.)

Summary: Aircraft accident, crashed into mountain during IFR flight.

Loss to Inventory

Crew Members:

AC CPT SCHRAM FREDERICK LLOYD KIA

P CPT CHAPMAN JOHN THOMAS KIA

CE CPL STRAND PHILIP STANLEY JR KIA

G SSG OLSON BENNETT WALFRED KIA

G CPL VENEGAS VERNON BERNABE KIA

Passengers and/or other participants:

PFC BARRY KENNETH DONALD, MC, PX, KIA

PFC CURRY HOVEY RICE, MC, PX, KIA

SMA CYR LAWRENCE JOSEPH, MC, PX, KIA

SGT DAY MICHAEL ROBERT, MC, PX, KIA

PFC DIAZ DANIEL, MC, PX, KIA

CPL DIETZ GARY PHILIP, MC, PX, KIA

1LT DORNAK LEONARD EDWARD, MC, PX, KIA

PFC EADDY ISHMELL, MC, PX, KIA

COL ELLIS GEORGE WALTER, MC, PX, KIA

PFC FENNELL ALTON JIMMY, MC, PX, KIA

LCP FOX RONALD LEE, MC, PX, KIA

SGT FULWIDER DANIEL RAYMOND, MC, PX, KIA

SGT GARZA VICENTE, MC, PX, KIA

SSG GRIMES THOMAS ALLEN, MC, PX, KIA

2LT HALL MICHAEL JENNINGS, MC, PX, KIA

LCP HETLAND RONALD LEE, MC, PX, KIA

PVT KIRSCHNER STEPHEN BENJAMI, MC, PX, KIA

LCP MAY CRAIG NOLAN, MC, PX, KIA

LCP MILLER JAMES IRVIN, MC, PX, KIA

CPL NICHOLSON DAVID DONELL, MC, PX, KIA
PFC PATRICK JERRY, MC, PX, KIA
LCP PINTAR JAMES ALBERT, MC, PX, KIA
WO1 PRICE MILLARD ERNEST JR, MC, PX, KIA
LCP PROTANO GUY JERRY JR, MC, PX, KIA
CPL RUMLEY RICHARD ALLEN, MC, PX, KIA
LCP SCHAUTTEET LOUIS L JR, MC, PX, KIA
SGT SIGMON HAROLD WAYNE, MC, PX, KIA
LCP SMITH CHARLES HERBERT, MC, PX, KIA
LCP TEETER GARY ALAN, MC, PX, KIA
PFC UGINO JOHN JOSEPH, MC, PX, KIA
LCP VAUGHT MICHAEL EUGENE, MC, PX, KIA
LCP WHITE CRAIG PRESTON, MC, PX, KIA
PFC WHITE RAYMOND, MC, PX, KIA
1LT BARDACH ALAN JENSEN, MC, PX, KIA
CPL FREEMAN GLENN WAYNE, MC, PX, KIA
HM3 JACKSON DONNEY LYRCE, MC, PX, KIA
HM2 JONES HALCOTT PRIDE JR, MC, PX, KIA
HM3 SHAFFER WALLACE CLAIR JR, MC, PX, KIA
PFC WILSON ROBERT CHARLES, MC, PX, KIA
CPT ZIRFAS EWALD, AR, PX, KIA
SGT SKARMAN ORVAL HARRY, MC, PX, KIA

War Story:

The MAG-16 Command Chronology for 8 Jan reads: "At 1915H one HMH-463 CH-53A (YH-37 Bureau Number 153710) was declared overdue and missing after disappearing during an IFR flight. Search and rescue operations commenced." On the 9th and 10th, "The search for the missing CH-53A aircraft continued with negative sightings and search operations hampered by inclement weather." On the 11th, "The wreckage of the missing CH-53A aircraft was sighted by search aircraft at coord. YD234260, no apparent survivors. Adverse weather conditions precluded a search of the crash site until 19 Jan when a recon team was inserted. The aircraft suffered severe burn damage and there was no possibility of survivors." In the casualties (hostile) section, the names of the five crew members are listed and the place is described at 18 miles S Dong Ha, RVN. Ray Kelley's request for details on Fred Schram's plane crash definitely gave me goose bumps in terms of a 30-year flashback. I have been to the mass grave site at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery outside of St. Louis several times and I have spent time both at the grave marker for Fred's crash, as well as at the grave marker for Bill Dietz and Lou Tessier's crash. This area of the cemetery is reserved for mass graves, primarily crashes from World War II, Korea and Vietnam. As you may recall, I grew up in St. Louis and my folks retired to Columbia, Missouri. So when I flew into St. Louis to visit them periodically, while they were still living, prior to starting the several hour drive to Columbia, I sometimes took a detour to the Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery to spend some time in quiet reverie before I went on to visit my folks. Each time that experience provoked for me a lot of the same reactions that I have when I visit

the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington. Hearing that Ron Fox's mother and sister have been wondering what the details of the crash were for over 30 years gave me goose bumps from a slightly different perspective. Fred Schram's dad was a captain for United Airlines, whom I never met. However, since Fred and I were the closest of friends and lived in the same hooch in Vietnam (together with Ben Collins, Jerry McClees and later Rich Carlson), our adjutant, Bill Arnold, asked me to write the letter to Fred's parents after the crash. After I got back from Vietnam, I always felt I owed it to Fred's dad, as a fellow aviator, to sit down and go through the details of the crash with him, thinking it would weigh heavily on my mind if I had a son who died flying. As Dante said, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions;" inasmuch as I never had Fred's dad's address or phone number, I never made the connection with him and I presume he is no longer alive. So to find out someone was still out there who cared about the details of the crash was a little eerie for me. With that said, I guess Ray Kelley's inquiry offers me the opportunity for a piece of atonement for someone else's piece of mind vis-a-vis the accident. The cause of the accident, in my mind, would be attributable to "multiple factors", including poor ground communications, poor aircraft antenna design, combat environment, weather and, most regrettably, pilot error. It pains me to say the last, as Fred was my great friend and companion but, nonetheless, it is regrettably true. The story unfolded something like this. Fred and his co-pilot, John Chapman, were flying a reasonably routine logistics flight. As I recall, they had had a mission flying out of Dong Ha for the day with resupplies to the Demilitarized Zone and/or Khe Sahn. In the afternoon, at the end of their mission, they were returning to Danang from Dong Ha and were requested to take a load of passengers from Dong Ha to Phu Bai. It was monsoon season and the weather was overcast with the ceiling at approximately 1,000 feet. As you will no doubt recall, the Marine Corps insisted on proving its full capabilities by running air traffic control for all of I Corps and refused to turn air traffic control over to the Air Force, even though the Air Force wanted to take over the job and had the communications and personnel to do the job properly. One result of having Marine Corps air traffic control was that they could only communicate within one sector and had no land line communications to the next sector. Therefore, when we took off IFR (instrument flight rules; I realize I should define some of these terms for Ray Kelley and Mrs. Fox's understanding; I, of course, know you know what they mean, Dean), we did not have a through clearance to our destination, as we normally would have, if we were flying IFR in the United States or any place else in the world. In other words, you had a flight clearance to the end of a sector, then you had to call the next sector after you were already airborne IFR to tell them where you were and to get flight clearance into the next sector. Thus, for Fred's flight from Dong Ha, he would have anticipated receiving a clearance from Dong Ha departure control for their area, and a second clearance from Hue approach control for clearance into the Phu Bai airport for landing. On the flight from Dong Ha to Phu Bai (based on my discussions with Paul Walton, who was our squadron's safety officer and who did the accident investigation), the tapes showed that Fred was cleared out of Dong Ha on the 180° radial at 2,000 feet for 10 miles, with instructions to contact Hue approach/control for further clearance. Fred took off at 16:40 (local time) and flew the route for which they had been cleared. (Since receiving your e-mail on Tuesday, I have checked my Vietnam diary notes to verify Fred's take off time, radials, DME's and some of the other details). Once they were

airborne, they called Hue approach control for further clearance. (They were IFR in the clouds at this time and unable to see the ground). They reported into Hue approach control on the 310° radial of the Phu Bai tacan at 21 miles. Hue approach control cleared them for IFR flight and an approach to the Phu Bai airport, but instructed them to remain clear of various "save-a-planes". (As you know, Dean, "save-a-planes" are live artillery firings which are underway in an area and approach control would give us the location from which artillery was firing, the height of the firing and the impact of the firing or, alternatively, give us designated radials to fly to avoid the artillery). According to the tapes of the conversations, the save-a-planes apparently were complicated and it took some time for Fred and John to read them back to make sure they had them correct. In the process of continuing to communicate with Hue approach control (and presumably because they already had a flight clearance in hand), they continued past the 10-mile flight clearance limit which Dong Ha had given them and continued to fly on the same heading and altitude. Dong Ha approach control was tracking them as they flew. When they did not change heading and apparently had not started to climb, Dong Ha approach attempted to call them on "guard" (emergency) frequency to warn them that they were approaching mountainous terrain. As you may recall, on the CH 53A's which we were flying, there was only one UHF antenna and it was located in front of the "dog house" (the Plexiglas area that surrounds the hydraulics in front of the rotor mast). As a result of the location of the antenna, if a ground station was calling you from directly on your tail (which was Dong Ha departure control's location relative to Fred's aircraft), you often could not hear the transmission. You would have to turn 30° in order to allow the antenna to receive the message. This was a reasonably well known phenomenon amongst those of us in HMH 463 and the Naval Systems Command had ordered a fix, with a second antenna to be installed on the horizontal stabilizer. While some of the aircraft on the mainland had been retrofitted to solve this problem, none of our aircraft in Vietnam had been retrofitted as of January 1968. As a result, despite repeated calls from Dong Ha departure control, attempting to warn Fred of the hazard, Fred and John apparently heard none of their transmissions. Dong Ha departure control lost radar contact with the aircraft on the Dong Ha 190° radial at 17 miles. As you know, at our normal cruise speed in the CH 53 we flew about 2-1/2 miles per minute, so the time involved to go from 10 nautical miles to 17 nautical miles would have been a little less than 3 minutes. Although Fred reported into Hue approach control on the 310° radial at 21 miles, Hue never made radar contact with Fred. Fred never canceled his instrument flight plan, never landed at Phu Bai and Hue approach never reported them missing. When Fred's helicopter did not return to Marble Mountain, the squadron tried to locate him. Jerry McClees was the operations duty officer that day. When I heard Fred was overdue, initially, I was not too concerned. However, as the evening wore on without any word from his flight, I went down to the ready room. Jerry was there with Vic Lee, our operations officer. They had called every airfield in I Corps and Fred's helicopter had not landed at any of the other airfields. SAR (search and rescue) boats were launched up and down the coast without results. The weather was low overcast with rain and Phu Bai operations deemed the weather conditions too bad to launch SAR flights that night. According to my diary, I checked on the maps in our ready room and determined that in the area where Dong Ha departure control last had contact with Fred, the three highest mountain tops were at 2,800, 3,000 and 3,200 feet. The next day and

the day after the weather remained too bad to conduct SAR flights. As you and I know, a number of crashes occurred in Vietnam where the effort to find the wreckage was fairly limited, if the crash site location was not readily ascertainable. For instance, Bill Dietz and Lou Tessier's crash site was not found until several months after they crashed (and not until you and I had our "40° lock off" experience leaving Phu Bai and, as a result, figured out what had happened to Bill and Lou; which, of course, is another story). However, in the case of Fred's crash, with the SAR flights grounded, a force of recon Marines and a Marine engineering company made efforts, on the 9th and 10th of January, to find Fred's crash site from the ground. This amount of effort was unusual. We were later told that the reason for this extraordinary effort was not due to the large number of people who were on board the helicopter, but instead was due to the fact that one of the people on board was the G2 officer for the Third Marine Amphibious Force, a bird colonel, who had a fire proof attaché case with him which contained all of the defensive maps for the entire DMZ (Demilitarized Zone), including the locations for all of the defensive mine fields. This was the reason for the Herculean effort to locate the crash site from the ground during the bad weather; General Walt wanted to know whether the security of the DMZ had been compromised by the North Vietnamese finding the crash site first and getting the maps. On the 11th, the weather improved enough, for intermittent brief periods, so some limited SAR flights could be launched but the crash site was not located. The crash was found on January 12 on the Dong Ha 202° radial at 16 nautical miles at an elevation of 3,100 ft. on the 3,200 ft. mountain. They had just missed clearing the mountain! I flew over the crash site a day or two later. It was clear that there had been a devastating impact and explosion and that everyone must have died instantly. The crash site was clearly visible through the 60-ft. jungle canopy on the mountain. By the way, I understand the recon Marines recovered the Colonel's attaché case with the maps intact. To my knowledge, in terms of fatalities, Fred's crash remains the worst helicopter tragedy in the history of the world. I guess two other footnotes may be worth mentioning. Because the Marine Corps' terrain maps were designed for the infantry, they were awkward to work with in the cockpit. Fred went over to the Air Force facility at Danang around November or December and acquired Air Force VFR maps for Vietnam which showed both the airways and terrain for all of I Corps in a very usable format. Fred and I had studied these maps, including circling minimum safe altitudes in each quadrant and carried them with us so that if we inadvertently went IFR, we would always know what our minimum safe altitude was. This, of course, turns out to be an ironic initiative, since at the crucial moment, Fred was preoccupied with save-a-planes, as opposed to minimum altitude. I presume this is because he felt he was in an IFR environment, and about to fly a flight clearance which should have protected him from the terrain; as opposed to improvising for minimum safety altitude in an inadvertent IFR situation. I assume, based on his movement from the 180° radial to the 202° radial and his 3,100 ft. altitude at the time of impact, that they had started to climb to a new assigned altitude and were navigating to a new fix assigned by Hue approach. It's hard to know for sure. The other footnote is that we had been flying both VFR and IFR up and down the coast of I Corps for seven months and knew the terrain well. However, I think most of the pilots subconsciously thought of the coastal route as being north-south, which basically it was. However, between Dong Ha and Hai Van Pass, (south of Phu Bai), the coastline compass heading goes slightly

northwest-southeast by about 30°. If one remains along the coast, all of the terrain is flat, basically at sea level. After Fred's crash I asked 10 of our squadron pilots, without a map in front of them, what they thought the course heading was up and down the coastline below Dong Ha. 9 out of 10 of them replied "north-south or 360°/180°". That was also my impression prior to Fred's crash. My point is that while Fred had flown over this route for over 7 months, in both VFR and IFR conditions, I believe his mental mindset was that when leaving Dong Ha on the 180° radial he would be flying over the lowlands and rice paddies. I think this mistaken assumption may have meant that clearing terrain was not even a concern in his mind. Obviously, it was a very fatal mistake, one which apparently 9 out of 10 of us might have made. As we both know, when you're flying, preoccupation with one safety item can cause another one to reach up and grab you with a true vengeance. I'll leave it for you to forward this on to Ray Kelley. If he wants to provide me with either his address or with Mrs. Fox's address, I do have a newspaper clipping and photograph from the July 22, 1968 St. Louis Post Dispatch of the burial ceremony and report of the air crash. If they would like to have a copy, I would be happy to send them one or answer any other questions they might have, although I think the foregoing pretty well sets forth most of what I know and recall. If you succeed in getting a copy of the official accident report, I'd be very interested in seeing it. Semper Fi 13 Feb 1998, Peter Starn

This record was last updated on 06/13/2008

Comment on Incident:

According to the HMH-463 Squadron Command Chronologies for Jan and Feb 1968, the crew was reported as MIA on 8 Jan 1968. The crew was reclassified as KIA/DAI on 26 Feb 1968.

Personal Narratives:

CH-53/Dye-marker Mission

Compiled By Joe Jackson

On Jan 8, 1968 a CH-53A helicopter assigned to Marine Helicopter Squadron HMH-463 crashed in the Hai Lang Forest at YD 225275. The crew of five and 36 passengers were killed in the crash. Of particular interest was the presence on the aircraft of a Marine Corps Major known as, "Mr. Dye-marker". The Dye-marker Project was a part of Defense Secretary Robert S. McMamara's plan to construct a barbed wire and electronic barrier across South Vietnam to cut the infiltration of North Vietnamese soldiers and supplies across the Demilitarized Zone. The Major had the Top Secret plans in a briefcase chained to his wrist.

Team 6-1 Eagle Eye of the Third Force Reconnaissance Company was assigned the Search/Rescue mission. The Patrol was led by Staff Sergeant William Effinger. The

members of the team were:

Sgt. Joe Jackson Team Leader
Cpl. Ken Smith Assistant Team Leader
L/Cpl Randy Michaux
HN Authur Lodahl Corpsman
Cpl Joe Zachery
PFC Joe Jennings,
L/Cpl Dave Gally
L/Cpl Conrad Dazal

In addition two combat engineers from A Company 3rd Engineer Bn were assigned. These are the reflections of those involved as they were shared with me. They were collected through personal observations, personal discussions, e-mails and official documents. The intent is to relay this information in the words of the men who were involved. I have tried to be as accurate as I could but I sometimes took my memory over others when there was some disagreement concerning the facts. Like all good war stories I don't and cannot swear to any of it.

Captain Jon Shebel
S-3 3rd Force Recon Co

Third Force Recon was tasked with dropping into the crash site to recon for possible survivors and KIA's. The site was covered with debris and papers and the aircraft was almost totally demolished. Some of the other pilots from the squadron later told me they felt the aircraft hit the mountain at full cruising speed in the fog. This was speculation on their part.

Staff Sgt William Effinger
Platoon Sgt, 3rd Force Recon

This CH53 helicopter was to fly from Quang Tri to DaNang. It was my understanding many of the marines had finished their tour and were rotating home. There was one officer in particular that needed to be found. He had chained to his wrist a brief case that contained a drawing of all the dye marker positions in I Corps. The helicopter crashed into the side of a mountain due to lack of elevation. The elevation assigned by Quang Tri was not quite enough to clear this hill mass. An additional 500 meters would have put them clear of the hill. The air wing searched for quite a while in a remote mountain area before finding the downed aircraft.

Capt Digger O'Dell
S-2 3rd Force Recon Co

There was a great deal of high-level interest in the operation. This was due to the fact that one of the passengers had a briefcase full of top secret plans. These plans had to do with the McNamara Line, the operational and proposed string of bases that were going to line the DMZ (or a good part of it) and either stop the NVA infiltration or force it further west toward Laos. So there was some real pressure to not only find out if anyone survived the crash but to find out what happened to those plans. From my point of view, I was the S-2, there were several things that made this a very risky operation.

First, there was a good chance that the NVA were at the crash site and our team would be rappelling into a hot zone.

Second, the weather was terrible. The same conditions that caused the CH 53 to fly into that mountain were still present. This made me think that, once in, the weather might preclude an extraction if the team needed it.

Third, as I recall, the altitude at the crash site made it right on the outer edges of the operational envelope for the CH-46's that would insert the team.

Last, the only fire support that could reach the team was 175 mm guns. As I recall, we used these when we went into the Hai Lang forest and they were hardly precision weapons.

Major Olan Seay

XO, 3rd Force Recon Co

They rappelled into position because it was inaccessible by any other means. The jungle was so thick that we couldn't get in there. It was steep and higher headquarters had encouraged us – well, encourage is not the word; had threatened us almost that we better get in there and get those guys out, particularly the briefcase that Mr. Dye-Marker had on his person when that helicopter had crashed. We formed a patrol from the 6th Platoon and because the 6th Platoon was low on staffing – well, we were low on staff NCOs all over. A staff NCO by the name of Bill Effinger was selected.

Staff Sgt William Effinger

Platoon Sgt, 3rd Force Recon

The way I came to be associated with this particular patrol on the recovery was that Major Anderson who was the Commanding Officer of 3rd Force at that time captured me and said that, "You're going to be leading this patrol in." So, Lieutenant Pete had already been tasked with this responsibility of providing a team.

Lt. Guy Pete

Platoon Commander, 3rd Force Recon Co

I was a Platoon Commander of 3rd Platoon, Bravo Company, 1st Bn/26th Marines for nine months prior to volunteering for and reporting to 3rd Force in Oct67. The nine months with a great grunt platoon that spent the previous six/seven months at Khe Sanh I believe gave me a different perspective than other Lieutenants in 3rd Force that came in country with 3rd Force or reported into 3rd Force directly from Basic School. I had prior enlisted experience. I had been tested as a commander in combat. I was aware of the dangers and consequences. I was given a chance to learn my trade as a Marine Officer in a more supportive and forgiving environment than Force Recon. And this perspective gave me an even greater appreciation for the demands and responsibilities that 3rd Force placed upon young Corporals and Sergeants. It gave me an appreciation for small units deploying alone with little immediate support or command structure.

As Platoon Commander, 6th Platoon, 3rd Force Teams Eagle Eye and Penguin, there was never any reservation from any of the Marines and Corpsmen for any mission assigned and in particular this mission. What I can recall is that once we received the alert for this mission, we immediately began training the team in rappelling for the Observation Tower in the Dong Ha Company Area. I am told that originally, Penguin was also trained and designated to go, but it was later changed to Eagle Eye. I have no personal recollection of this. We trained from the tower and then from CH46's in the company area in Dong Ha. We practiced rigging the chopper for rappelling troops and equipment. The weather was terrible and unpredictable this time of year, particularly in the mountains where the crash site was located.

As Platoon Commander, I have always felt I should have led this patrol. However, because I was a short timer (around three weeks), I was told by the Company Commander (Major Anderson) that Gunny Effinger would lead the patrol. My belief has always been that the decision was made based upon Gunny Effinger's long recon background and time with the company. I have always respected Effinger as the professional Staff NCO he is, have served with him on follow-on tours, and consider him as a great friend. However, to this day I have always personally questioned and regretted why I did not insist on leading this patrol - I should have.

Staff Sgt William Effinger
Platoon Sgt, 3rd Force Recon

The next day or two we were able to make an over flight of the area. We had a briefing with Lt. Co. Kent, 3rd Recon Bn. Commanding Officer. There was another Marine Colonel from the air wing present, who piloted the huey. The air wing Col. Seemed to be in charge of the briefing. What I gathered most from the briefing was they wanted us to check the crash site for survivors. Shortly after the briefing we loaded the CH46 helicopter to proceed to the crash site for an over flight.

After a short flight we arrived at the crash site and with a quick look-see I knew we were in trouble. We were in the Hai Lang Forest, which has steep hills and valleys with plenty of tall trees and thick vegetation. The area primarily belonged to Charlie. On the ridgeline just above the crash site there was a foot trail that showed signs of use. Just below the crest of the hill there was a bomb crater, which we put to good use. To compound problems further, no one knew exactly where we were. By using the Tacan the pilot and co-pilot could give us a close fix but even they didn't agree. We were close to 25 miles south of Quang Tri, which means the only supporting arms available would be 175's. This distance was at their maximum range; we would not even consider using 175's for close support. I figured to myself we would primarily be a mission for the air wing, which meant we would be well supported by air. Even to this day I feel the Marine Corps air wing would have taken good care of us but over 60-70% of the time this area is covered by fog. Fixed wing will not drop bombs, and helicopters will not fire into areas they cannot see. It didn't take a genius to determine we were going to have to be self-sufficient.

L/Cpl Don Anderson

Team Penguin 3rd Force Recon Co

Team Penguin 6-2 was originally assigned the mission to rappel into the crash site, check for survivors, recover documents and blow an LZ. If my memory is right, the team included Charlie Johnson, Scott Butterworth, Ron Kienest, Rick Serrienne, Chris Ward, John Kaulu, Doc Tollefson, Gunny Effinger and myself. We did practice rappelling from the tower with four guys from engineering battalion. As I recall, we loaded cases and cases of extra M-60 ammo, C-4 and M-72 rounds. We flew several days and each time aborted due to weather. I remember one time we went to Phu Bai for chow and fuel and circled the site some more. It seems like we tried for more than a week to get in before the mission was re-assigned to Eagle Eye. I vividly remember Gunny Effinger being there. He talked the pilot into letting us rappel into the company LZ when we got back. I'll never forget when one of the guys started down the rope and his M-14 got hung up in the square hole in the deck of the Ch-46. Effinger grabs the hand guard, yanks it up, almost taking the guy's head off, and shoves the butt-plate back down through the hole.

Dave (DOC) Tollefson

Corpsman Team Penguin 3rd Force Recon Co

Penguin was in standby due to weather; Effinger was to take us out. We practiced rappelling onto the Helo pad until we all had rope burns. As I recall we stayed on standby 24-7 till we were all freaked. Eagle Eye took over and went out shortly after.

Cpl Charlie Johnston

Team Penguin 3rd Force Recon Co

After that "long week" of waiting, Lt Pete asked me if we would rather go out on patrol instead of keep waiting and we agreed. I was the guy who got my M-14 hung up and thanks to the Gunny I got down and hit the ground with more speed than I wished.

Sgt Joseph H. Jackson

Team Leader, Eagle Eye 3rd Force Recon Co

Our team had hit a booby trap on Jan 4 and lost two guys. We got two replacements and were put right back in the bush (to get back on the horse). We ran a couple patrols and were told that because Penguin had been on stand-by for so long we had the mission. None of us had rappelled before so we practiced on the observation tower in the company area. We did not get to practice on a helo.

Cpl Ken Smith

Assistant Team Leader Eagle Eye 3rd Force Recon Co

Well, basically corporals are like mushrooms. Keep them in the dark and feed them a lot of bullshit; and that's where we were at this particular time. Of course, we were told the entire NVA Army was at the bottom of this hill and we were going in on the top of it. So, you can imagine the pucker factor that we were experiencing at the time. And if anybody's ever rappelled out of the bottom of a helicopter at peace, then if you'll magnify that about a thousand times going into an unknown area, an area that you've never been in before, an area that is so highly vegetated that you can't even – you can't

see the ground and here you're dangling from the bottom of this helicopter on a rope and knowing that – or not knowing really how many people are aimed in on you, and here you've got to go down this rope and get on the ground and then have to stay there for a couple of days, well, you can imagine, you know, again the stress that we were under to get this mission accomplished.

Joe Jackson and myself carried machine guns with four thousand rounds of ammunition. We had no support whatsoever. Once we went in, we were on our own no matter what we ran into. And it was totally an unknown factor because nobody really had been in this area or operated in this area; and I can remember when we rappelled in. We were rappelling into the clouds sometimes and the fog and it was just the visibility was terrible, but we had a good team.

Sgt Joseph H. Jackson

Team Leader, Eagle Eye 3rd Force Recon Co

I was told that the enemy situation was unknown and that the only support we could count on was air support and for that reason they did not want to leave us on the ground if the fog came in.

Lt. Guy Pete

Platoon Commander, 3rd Force Recon Co

I remember three inserts into the mountains. The first insert we rappelled four to the ground, but had to immediately pull/extract them by hoist back up into the chopper because of the weather. The second we got everyone in on the ground for about two hours. They checked out the crash site for survivors and attempted to recover data. I believe Patrol Report dtd 191407ZJan68 was generated for this second insert.

On the third insert, everyone got on the ground. We lower supplies down to them via rope. After everyone was on the ground, it was recommended that we extract the team, due to weather. Gunny Effinger and the team decided that it was too dangerous and compromising to be extracted again without completing the mission.

FIRST INSERT

Staff Sgt William Effinger

Platoon Sgt, 3rd Force Recon

When we first got on the ground, it was one afternoon - late one afternoon, Colonel Kent our Bn Commander was in the aircraft. There was another Huey that was chasing us. It was some Colonel from the air wing who also had a great interest in this here as far as getting the body recovery exercise underway, who was in a Chase Huey. But that afternoon there was four of us, the best I recollect, that went down. We had to rappel into the zone, as there was too many trees and so forth and that there for the chopper to land. So, we rappelled in. After a couple of passes over the area we got our Swiss seat on and deployed the rappelling line. Myself, L/Cpl. Galley, Sgt. Jackson and L/Cpl. Michaux rappelled into the bomb crater. The crater made it nice to rappel into, it gave us a ready made fox hole and kept us out of the trees and vegetation to keep from fouling

up the lines. We used a double rappelling line for safety but this caused a slow decent. Our jungle utilities were made to fit loosely which sometimes caused the blouse to become tangled in the snap link. Now, this was probably a week, maybe two weeks or so after the aircraft had ran into the side of the mountain out there. So, it wasn't likely that anybody would have survived for that period of time and that type of a crash and so forth.

Sgt Joe Jackson

Team Leader Eagle Eye 3rd Force Recon Co

Gunny was the first man out and I was the second. I had a M-60 with two thousand rounds which made braking during the rappel difficult. I kept waiting for the gooks to open up on us. There was so much noise and the Hueys were buzzing doing some recon by fire it was difficult to tell what was going on.

Cpl Ken Smith

Assistant Team Leader Eagle Eye 3rd Force Recon Co

The weather was a tremendous factor. The fog was – the fog would move in on you at strange times. It wasn't like you could say, well, you know, a few hours we're going to have fog. It would hit you all of a sudden, and you'd be fogged in. And then what we were afraid of, obviously, is we have no support whatsoever at that time. You know, they couldn't come and get us out.

Major Olan Seay

XO, 3rd Force Recon Co

From being in the S3 and listening to the radio, I can remember someone say, I think, Gunny Effinger was on the radio at that time saying, you know, "Here comes the fog. If we don't get out now, it will be a overnighter," or something to that effect.

Sgt Joe Jackson

Team Leader Eagle Eye 3rd Force Recon Co

The fog started closing in and since we only had four guys on the ground the decision was made to abort the mission and get us out.

Staff Sgt William Effinger

Platoon Sgt, 3rd Force Recon

So, we then went back aboard the aircraft there. We had to be hoisted up. We went back to Dong Ha. So, we probably had, oh, maybe a day or two and so forth of practicing, on getting everybody ready to be able to repel. And we had some difficulties encountered with this and the fact that we were using a double rope for the purpose of safety purposes, and you could tell that the jackets were loose at that time. They kept getting tied up there; hung up in the snap-links and so forth and that. So, we had to do some rigging and so forth in order to get it to where we could get the men down as quickly as we possibly can with all of our gear and so forth and that. So, that's what we did for the next couple of days to prepare for this.

L/Cpl Randy Michaux

Pointman Eagle Eye 3rd Force Recon Co

All I can remember about the CH-53 mission was the trouble we had repelling into the site due to our utilities and gear. Also distinctly remember that once on the ground my M-16 was completely inoperable due to the dust. There I was, walking point with a jammed M-16.

SECOND INSERT

Staff Sgt William Effinger

Platoon Sgt, 3rd Force Recon

But this area now, and at that period of time, and the weather pattern, there was a lot of fog and this being at a high elevation up there, often that site was inaccessible. You couldn't get to it because of the fog, having obscured the zone and so forth and that. So, we tried, I guess - I'm saying probably four or five, maybe six times and so forth. When we finally got on the ground, we established communications with the "46" helicopters. The Huey slick with the air wing colonel hovered over the crash site.

Cpl Ken Smith

Assistant Team Leader Eagle Eye 3rd Force Recon Co

When we did get on the ground, Gunny Effinger split us up into two teams. One team that he took down to the crash site, which was pretty much totally obliterated from the helicopter crashing into the mountains, and then the team which Joe and I were on and a couple of other guys and the engineers set up perimeters up on the top of the hill and we were, of course, going to be the main defense.

Staff Sgt William Effinger

Platoon Sgt, 3rd Force Recon

Within fifteen minutes we were at the crash site. The crash site was not nearly as charred as I envisioned. There was some burning but all the bodies there were enclosed inside the helicopter except the two pilots. They were thrown clear of the helicopter and still belted into their seats. Their skin appeared to be boiled with ¼" holes in it, kind of weird looking. We made a 360° pass around the helicopter with Cpl. Michaux taking pictures from different angles, he would lay a rifle or bayonet down to use as a scale. We spent 30-45 minutes at the crash site, and then proceeded back to the bomb crater, we were hoisted up to the CH46 then flown back to Quang Tri for debrief. The air wing colonel and our BN Commander, Lt. Col. Kent, had a heated discussion about who was going to debrief. Lt. Col. Kent won the discussion and we flew to Dong Ha to be debriefed. I know of nothing that was discovered at the debrief.

Sgt Joe Jackson

Team Leader Eagle Eye

After we went in the second time, checked the crash site and looked for the papers we were told that we had to go back and blow an LZ for the body recovery.

Staff Sgt William Effinger

Platoon Sgt, 3rd Force Recon

We went back aboard the aircraft to go back to Dong Ha to prepare our gear and so forth and to do additional training on getting the team ready to deploy in for the purpose of blowing the zone there. The next day was spent practicing rappelling from the tower. We found that by wrapping an ace bandage tightly around the mid section, the blouse could be taken out of play, and by adding an extra snap link the rappelling rope could be disconnected quickly. The rest of the day was spent rounding up gear, test-firing weapons and attending to the last minute details. I determined a basic load of ammo for each patrol member would be 10 frag grenades; 16 magazines for the M-16 rifle with 20 rounds in each magazine; two M-60 machine guns with 2000 round each; an M-79 grenade launcher with 100 rounds of flachette; added to this was 10 claymores. I figured to use the trees removed from the LZ to fashion some kind of bunker for defense. It was crude but for one night it would have to do. I was well aware of the fact that we were on our own but this bunch of ass holes were as good as they come. They were prepared. There wasn't no lipping. There was no problem or nothing. They were ready to go on this job and they did an excellent job.

The next day the choppers arrived early in the morning and we loaded our gear to head for the crash site. When we arrived at the crash site it was socked in. We were above the cloud cover waiting for an opening in the clouds. We stayed on station until the gas situation forced us to leave. There appeared to be no opening in the clouds so the pilot called off the mission for the rest of the day. We were to try again the next morning.

The next morning the same routine was repeated with the same results. The clouds would not leave the area. After we were able to get on the ground we could determine the clouds did indeed leave the area but only for a short time. In order to take advantage of this opening we would have had to stay on station for long periods of time. With the limitations of the helicopter this was not possible. We would make our pilgrimage each morning only to be disappointed and return to Dong Ha.

This routine was extremely depressing. During the daylight the waiting was not so bad, but sleep at night was hard to come by. It was taking at least 20 minutes to unload the chopper, but during this time the chopper was a sitting duck. The CI-146 helicopter is not a small aircraft, while we were unloading, here is this big fat turkey stationary, just waiting to be shot out of the air. A helicopter is very vulnerable during this time. You could add to this the noise we were making, plus all the fly-overs of this area. A whole lot of attention was being paid to this small piece of real estate; surely someone would get concerned and come to investigate.

Sgt Joseph H. Jackson

Team Leader, Eagle Eye 3rd Force Recon Co

For over two weeks we would get up everyday and get ready for the mission. We had to move all the gear to the LZ by 0700. It got old, sometime during the day they would tell us that the birds were on the way. We would get geared up and they wouldn't show or they would and we would get on the helos and start out only to have to abort due to the weather. We just wanted to get it over with. I really believed they were waiting for us.

One morning the Company Gunny jumped me because we didn't fall out for police call that morning. I tried to explain that we were getting ready for a patrol. He would not listen or didn't care because he made us do PT in front of our hooch as punishment.

Staff Sgt William Effinger
Platoon Sgt, 3rd Force Recon

The pilots and CH46 helicopters were stationed at Marble Mountain in DaNang. Each morning the pilots would make the trip from DaNang to Dong Ha. In doing so they would fly over the crash site and were able to observe the crash site was always clear.

Sgt Joe Jackson
Team Leader Eagle Eye 3rd Force Recon Co.

Based on this observation it was determined that since Phu Bai was a lot closer to Da Nang and to the crash site the patrol would go to Phu Ba, spend the night and be picked up and fly to the crash site early in the morning. We packed all our gear in the chopper, flew to Phu Bai, spent the night with the air wing and left early the next morning.

THIRD INSERT

Staff Sgt William Effinger
Platoon Sgt, 3rd Force Recon Co

Luck was on our side; finally the crash site was clear. We immediately deployed, the rappelling lines and debarked the helicopter. We got all personnel and gear on the ground, which took quite some time. I would guess 20-25 minutes. To my understanding it takes some nifty flying on the pilot's part to keep the helo stationary. We had a great crew. We again used the bomb crater to off load into and the rope barely moved, which indicated the helicopter remained stationary.

Cpl Ken Smith
Assistant Team Leader Eagle Eye 3rd Force Recon Co

The rope got tangled up in one of the stumps. And, of course, the helicopter didn't realize the rope was connected to this stuff and the helicopter was trying to pull out into the air and he went full powered and figured out that something had him hung up. Lieutenant Pete luckily saw what was happening.

Lt. Guy Pete
Platoon Commander, 3rd Force Recon Co

Finally, we got everyone on the ground to clear a zone for the grunts. We lowered a lot of ammo and supplies down the ropes after everyone was on the ground. I had a crew helmet on the intercom. Finally, the pilot told me he had reached max power and we had to immediately pull out. No one realized that the ends of two lengths of 9/16th nylon ropes on the ground had been wrapped around a stump by the prop wash. As the helo struggled to lift off, I had my knife by the hell door which the crew chief probably thought was "hot dogging it" until I reached for it and luckily cut the ropes before we plowed in.

Sgt Joe Jackson

Team Leader Eagle Eye 3rd Force Recon Co

After we got everyone on the ground, it was recommended that we be extracted due to weather. Gunny Effinger didn't really believe in a democracy but we discussed it and decided that it was too dangerous and compromising to be extracted again without completing the mission.

Lt. Guy Pete

Platoon Commander, 3rd Force Recon Co

The only fire support the team had was two 175m guns which were to be turned and dedicated to them after they were on the ground. I had the helo pilot call the helo COC at Phu Bai to have the guns turned. After we returned to Phu Bai, I went to the COC to find that the COC forgot to turn and dedicate the guns. I guess my tirade in expressing my displeasure with the team not having fire support, got me thrown out of the COC by a Col. But I did not leave until the guns were turned and dedicated.

Sgt Joe Jackson

Team Leader Eagle Eye 3rd Force Recon Co

The first thing the Gunny had me do was take a man and do a recon of the ridgeline we were on. There was a well-defined trail that ran up the ridgeline, through the LZ area and on to the crash site, but it did not appear to have been used recently.

Staff Sgt William Effinger

Platoon Sgt, 3rd Force Recon

Once all the patrol members and gear was on the ground the machine guns were deployed on the backside of the work zone. Cpl. Zachary was in charge of both guns. The rest of the patrol, along with the two engineers went to work clearing the zone. I thought work progressed rather quickly. C-4 charges would be set and blown trees would then be removed and a bunker fashioned. This routine was repeated until late afternoon. The chopper was on station some times checking on us to see if they could give assistance. At this time the chopper was called in to check out the zone, the pilot determined there were some stumps that would need to be re-blown. I wanted to finish the landing zone and get extracted before dark, but it wasn't to be. We needed some more blasting caps to finish the job. If we were going to spend the night we would need some additional supplies. We radioed the list to the pilots and they departed for Dong Ha to obtain the supplies. The pilots returned just before dark and belayed the gear down.

Sgt Joe Jackson

Team Leader Eagle Eye 3rd Force Recon Co

Since the engineers had estimated it would only take 3 hours to blow the LZ we didn't have enough food or even ponchos to keep dry.

Staff Sgt William Effinger

Platoon Sgt, 3rd Force Recon

Prior to the choppers departure we were given the option of leaving and returning the

next day to finish work. This option was immediately shot down. There was no way we were going to leave and return. With the knowledge we were going to spend the night, work on the LZ was ceased and work commenced in making our log bunker livable. We knew the night would be long and cold.

Cpl Ken Smith

Assistant Team Leader Eagle Eye 3rd Force Recon Co

We stayed out overnight, which again is when you're in an area where the – that the NVA controlled this area. So, we had no fire support whatsoever and we had to rely on our team. And by this time we'd been – helicopters had been flying over this area for days - trying to get in for days. So, I'm sure the NVA was thinking what the hell is going on up there; you know, we need to go see what's happening up there. But for whatever reason, they didn't show up.

Staff Sgt William Effinger

Platoon Sgt, 3rd Force Recon

We lucked out in that the night was uneventful. The sun rose early the next morning and work on the LZ was resumed. Somewhere around mid morning we called the chopper in for a look-see of the LZ. He was reluctant to come in; reluctant to land because of the fact some of the stuff he thought was a little bit too high. They re-supplied us again, it was roped into us.

Cpl Ken Smith

Assistant Team Leader Eagle Eye 3rd Force Recon Co

They did re-supply us and we had to blow a few more of the trees out and the stumps out, and I can remember that we ran out of blasting caps. So, we were taking our grenades apart and sticking the blasting caps for the grenades down into the C4 that we had wrapped around those stumps, and then we'd run like hell before they blew up; and that's about my take on it.

So, once he left the area then we went ahead and done some cleanup and so forth and got rid of some of the taller stuff and probably within a couple of hours, somewhere around noon or something like, he was able to come back and then be able to land his aircraft and pick us all up for an extraction out of there.

Staff Sgt William Effinger

Platoon Sgt, 3rd Force Recon

Upon landing the pilot determined the LZ was sufficiently clear to serve its purpose. We hurriedly loaded our gear aboard the chopper and departed. Now, the grunts came in about two days or so after we left. They were able to get them organized and get them in; and they had no difficulty coming in. And they did then recover everything from inside of the aircraft. And was able to find the dye marker information that they needed.

Sgt Joe Jackson

Team Leader Eagle Eye 3rd Force Recon Co

Several months later after Lt. Pete and the Gunny had rotated I was sent to attend a briefing to plan an operation to recover more of the remains. Part of the discussion concerned the fact that the crash site was just wasn't on the map.

Submitted by Joseph H. Jackson, Team Leader of EAGLE EYE, 3rd Force Recon

Personal Narrative:

As a platoon commander with A/1/3, it was my unpleasant task to command a reinforced platoon that was dropped above the crash site to hike down to where the actual aircraft came to rest. There was more to the story than just a body recovery operation, as I found out later. I thought the flight commander was a Major at the time, I found his flight jacket with name patch. We had CID, graves [registration] and a Colonel from MAG-? in Da Nang there with us. Seems some important documents were on board.

Col. Ellis was traveling with the "Die Marker" plans, McNamara's defensive positions in I Corps. I searched his wallet and found his CA driver's license. SgtMaj Cyr is a mystery. One of the SSgts, SSgt Grimes, I knew from OCS at Quantico.

The aircraft literally slammed into the side of a mountain, in the fog and was off course. Bringing Marines back from R&R, I believe. Found part of WO Price wrapped around a tree. Most of the bodies were unrecognizable. Col. Ellis' body was remarkably intact. It looked like he was stretched out sleeping near part of the aircraft. It is my understanding that the aircraft had been there three weeks before we went after it. Spooky area, Hai Lang Forest, R&R for NVA. I was there on 28 Jan.

There was an arty FO [Artillery Forward Observer] with us and he took a few photos, but I don't remember his name. The graves people put bodies in bags. Don't know if anyone went in after we left. I wasn't told to look for a briefcase with the "Die Marker" plans.

Found out about it a few days after we returned to Quang Tri.

Submitted by Bruce S. Lewy, A/1/3, platoon commander, recovery platoon

Sgt Orval Skarman, MIA/KIA:

Sgt Orval Skarman was enroute to R&R on 1/7/1968 from his unit near the DMZ at Alpha 3. It was assumed that he was going to China Beach by his fellow Marines, but his Company Commander indicated that he was going out of country on R&R. He was MIA when he did not return to his unit. It was assumed that something had happened to him enroute.

There is a strong possibility that he may have been aboard the HMH-463 helicopter that crashed on 1/8/1968, although he was not on any manifest. He is, therefore, being carried on our casualty list with the other men from this flight, many of whom were also going on R&R.

Submitted by Alan H Barbour, Historian, USMC Combat Helicopter Association