

## 7. S-01 Story

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During the course of our lives we experience events whose vivid memories remain undiminished in spite of the passage of time. My unforgettable event is the loss of eleven fellow crewmembers who failed to return from their mission over North Vietnam on 29 December 1967. They flew in a Stray Goose Combat Talon MC-130E that belonged to Detachment 1 of the 314<sup>th</sup> TAW based at Nha Trang Air Base in South Vietnam.

Even though we were assigned to the 314<sup>th</sup> TAW at Nha Trang, we belonged to the Studies and Observation Group (SOG) in Saigon. SOG issued our flying assignments, which during the day consisted of shuttle flights in support of the US Army Special Forces throughout Southeast Asia (SEA) and clandestine, combat flights, at night. Daytime flights were routine and did not require mission planning. Nighttime missions were all very specific operations that were classified as TOP SECRET. Security required that information on these missions was available only to the command element and the crews that was tasked to fly them. Consequently, unless a member of our detachment was assigned to fly on a mission, he had no need to know what the mission was and where it was to go. We had four Combat Talon I C-130s and six eleven man crews to do the job.

I was one of the three mission planners who charted the route for this tragic flight. S-01 crew, commanded by Captain Edwin N. Osborne, was tasked to fly it. It was a challenging mission that consisted of two air drops. The first one was a high altitude leaflet drop over the Red River west of Hanoi and the second one a low level resupply drop on the other side of the mountains east of Dien Bien Phu.

Before the aircraft took off, I walked through its inside length touching the lined up cardboard boxes that were secured to the floor mounted skateboard rails. They were filled with millions of propaganda leaflets that would be freed from the boxes once they ripped open after rolling off the exit ramp. After them were two palletized resupply bundles. After I exited the crew door, loadmaster James Williams closed it giving me thumbs up. We witnessed an orderly engine start and watched them taxi out to the end of the runway. From our vantage point, we saw the aircraft take off and disappear into the darkness over the South China Sea.

Three hours later, we, the flight planners, returned to our Detachment's Operations Office to monitor the aircraft's flight progress. All went well. Leaflets were gone and Gene Clapper, radio operator, sent a two Morse Code letter message signifying that the drop was successfully completed. The aircraft was back in a terrain following configuration, flying at 230 knots and headed westwards through the mountains. Then they would turn south for a drop of two "notional" resupply bundles before exiting from North Vietnam.

While we waited for the next report, that would come when the aircraft turned southward along the western side of the Black River valley, we talked about some of the peculiar missions which we called "notional" resupply drops. These were drops of resupply bundles into drop zones where we did not have previously infiltrated South Vietnamese Special Forces teams.

These bogus resupply bundles were designed to be discovered by the enemy who would then spend much time combing the area searching for non-existing infiltrators. Among the usual resupply items of food, ammunition, explosives and medicines would be false targeting plans and even points of contact with friendly supporters that would cast doubts on the loyalty of some local officials. Some bundles were booby trapped, designed explode during disassembly by those who discovered them. We knew that the two resupply bundles that were about to be delivered were not of this type.

Their drop zone was just north of highway 6. North Vietnam's western early warning radar at Na San would have an unobstructed scan of our aircraft's pre drop slow down and the post drop acceleration on its escape heading. The enemy would have a good indication for where to look for whatever the intruding aircraft delivered. We planned it that way.

At 0430 we received a coded letter signal that all was still normal. The aircraft was now headed southward and the crew was running the air drop checklist. The next report would be made after the drop when the aircraft headed for the Laotian border and from there home at normal high altitude. We planned to return to the hotel right after the next report and get a couple of hours of sleep before coming back to greet the returning crew. But as we waited, nothing happened. There were no further reports from the aircraft. Our first assumption was that something went wrong with their radios. We would surely hear something once the aircraft emerged from radio silence over the Skyline TACAN in Laos. That is where the aircraft would report a small problem like that to our radar sites in Thailand. Once again, there was nothing. With that we returned to the hotel and reported our concerns to the Detachment's Commander and the Operations Officer.

There were anxious moments as the aircraft's return time approached. We made calls to find out if any landings were made in Thailand or at Da Nang. Then we notified the command at Studies and Observation Group that took over all subsequent search and rescue efforts. Several F-4 Phantoms were launched to scan the area south of the last known reported position. The weather turned bad. New weather front moved in as expected and the F-4s could not see a thing on the ground. They monitored radios for signals from the aircraft's crash position indicator and from crewmember survival radios. They heard nothing. After several attempts, the search was given up. The crew was declared as missing in action (MIA).

The fate of the S-01 crew remained a mystery for at least 25 years until a Joint U. S. – Vietnam team responded to a report of a previously undocumented large aircraft crash site in the Lai Chau province some 32 northeast of Dien Bien Phu. The Joint Task Force – Full Accounting (JTF-FA) team's site survey and interviews of witnesses, conducted on 29 October through 8 November 1992, confirmed that the crashed aircraft was our Combat Talon C-130 number 64-0547.



*Route flown by the S-01 crew.*

The survey team pinpointed the crash location at 21-39-80N 103-31-20E. It is at 4780 ft. on a steep 60-degree slope of a north-northwest facing crescent shaped mountain. The crest of this mountain goes up to 4870 ft. The main peak of this karst studded mountain range known as Nam Bo rises to 5174 ft. and it is one mile due west of the crash site. The crash site measures only 105 by 72 feet. This is a very small area for an aircraft as large as a C-130. Since all of the crew remains were recovered from this small location, it can be safely concluded that the aircraft



did not bounce and break up along its track before coming to a stop. Its crash heading must have been perpendicular to the face of the mountain. With that, the destruction of the aircraft must have been instantaneous.



*Rectangle marks the nose impact point. Note the stretched safety line on upper right.*

The crash site contained very little top soil that was mixed with decaying foliage trapped in rocky crevasses and tree roots. It was subjected to continuous erosion from frequent rains and all light weight debris such as bones had already washed down the mountain side over the years. Stories of witnesses who reported burying bodies in graves were not credible because there was no terrain in which one could excavate a grave. Bodies could not be buried in a conventional manner. They could only be wedged in cracks and crevasses and covered up by plentiful rocks. That is how the scavenging natives must have disposed of the burnt and decaying bodies while they were stripping everything usable from the aircraft's wreckage. No one had turned in a fire damaged 38 caliber pistol that each crewmember carried. Not a single weapon from the resupply bundle was turned in or found. Only four .38 Cal bullets and one 5.6 mm shell were excavated. There wasn't much more that our forensic people could hope to recover in their methodical search for more remains. Forensically, the scene was completely compromised by the natives



who had already scraped the limited soil surfaces for remains. They turned over eight small bundles of what they believed to be human remains. These bundles of few bone fragments from eleven crewmembers were about all that the site would yield. Because the crash area was so remote and the surrounding terrain so treacherous, the survey team recommended that the location should be declared a burial site and that further recovery efforts should not be undertaken.



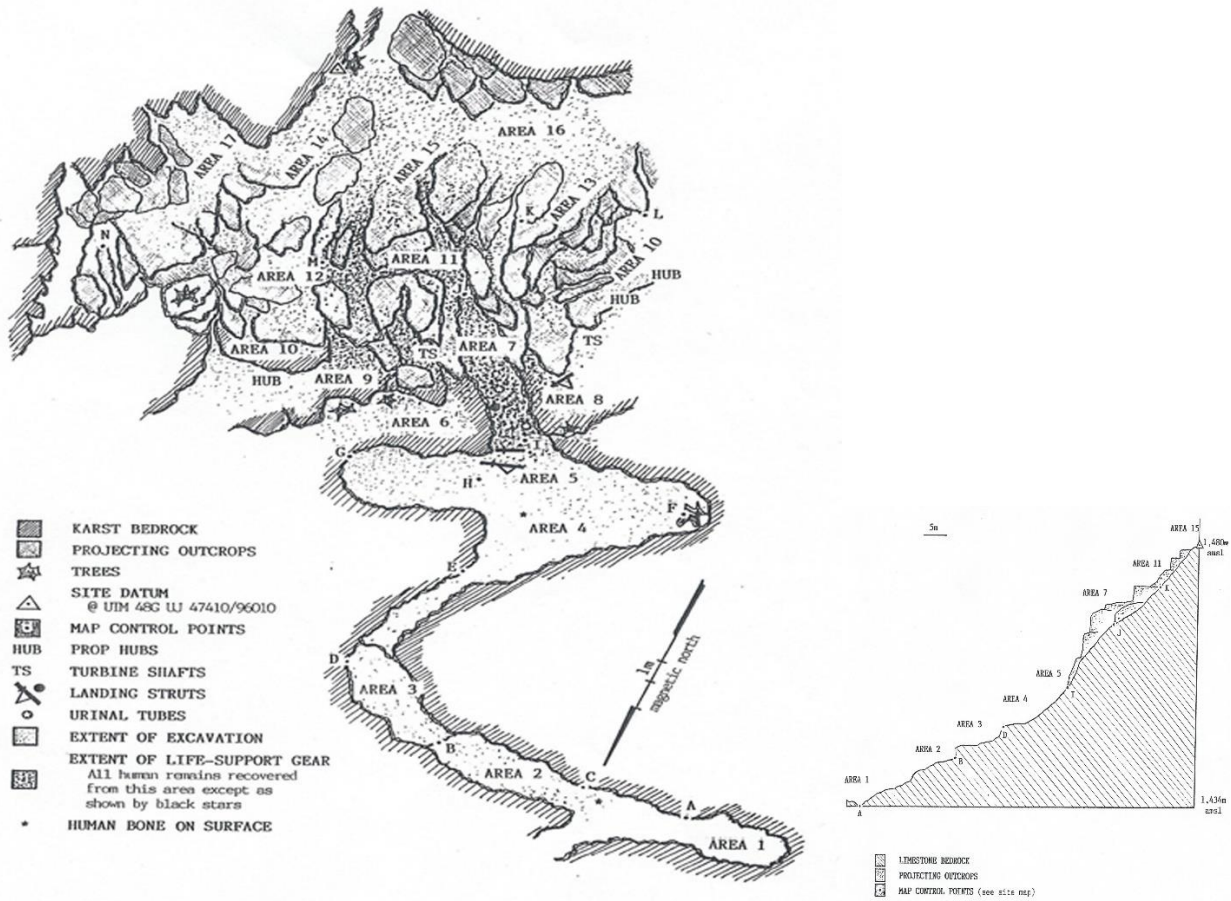
*Side view of area just below the point of impact.*

Nevertheless, the JTF-FA Detachment 2 Commander, Lt. Col. John Donovan, re-surveyed the site on March 29-30, 1993 and recommended a complete well-planned excavation between October 24 and November 8, 1993. After all, this was the largest single aircraft loss of the war in North Vietnam. Eleven American airmen perished at this site. It needed more thorough attention.

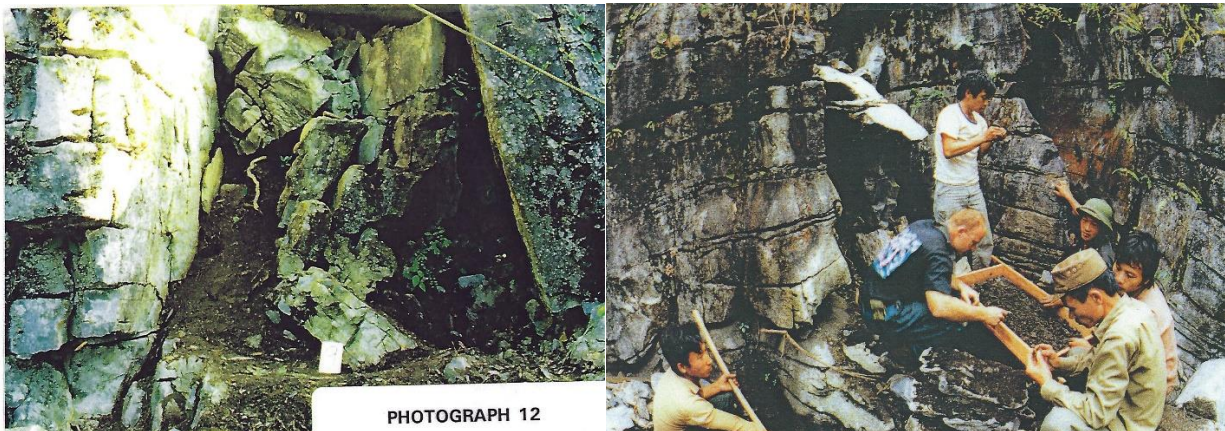
The 1993 recovery team came well prepared to conduct a full scale professional recovery. They divided the crash site into 17 distinct excavation areas and sifted all top soil and debris through a 1/4in mesh. They carefully screened everything for aircraft parts, personal effects and human remains. Sifting and screening recovered 187 pieces of human bone fragments, including 16 teeth, six of which had dental restorations. Small aircraft remnants consisted of all types of rings and buckles from the crew seats safety belts and aircraft bucket seats. These were items that for some reason did not interest the scavenging natives. The crash site was officially closed



at 1100 hours on November 8, 1993 by the CIHLI team leader and anthropologist.



*Frontal and side view of the steep crash slope.*



*Crevasses like this were the only places with top soil vegetation and rocks to cover the bodies. Work areas were small and congested in the crevasses.*

Interviews of witnesses is a significant part of JTF-FA's effort to recover human remains and articles from crash sites. This phase of recovery continued while the remains were processed



at the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii (CILHI).



*Engine turbine shaft and landing gear strut.*



*Personal artifacts and metallic pieces from survival equipment.*

The first witnesses were those who came to the aircraft crash site while it was still burning. Others, interviewed during the on-site excavation and recovery process, were people who searched for and recovered some of the turned in crew remains. Potential witnesses to the crash kept turning up in other parts of North Vietnam. Some bypassed the Vietnamese channels for reporting suspected sites and contacted the US authorities in Hanoi. Three such contacts were through intermediaries and contained possible ties to the S-01 crash site. Checking these leads took a lot of time. Two leads ended up as suspects for other crash sites and one eventually led back to the nearby village whose residents had had already turned in collected remains. Unfortunately, witnesses who provided references about other potential holders of human remains caused only delays in bringing the recovery and positive identification effort to a much earlier conclusion.

Local district chief provided the team with a good explanation why it took so long for the government officials to learn about the aircraft crash. The crash was in a sparsely populated remote area with ethnic minorities who did not stay in touch with local and district authorities. When their local leaders heard about the crash from witnesses, they did not know what to do.

Then, when the US and Vietnamese governments began to account for the missing airmen, the information trickled down to the local levels, they realized that the crash site they had been aware of for so long should be reported to higher authorities. (CJTFA Det. One Bangkok TH 230220Z NOV 93. 3).



*Small pieces of human remains found by the recovery teams.*

The Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii, the best equipped lab in the world for this type of forensic work, was challenged by the collected crew remains. Recovered fragments were too small and some very badly burnt for DNA analysis technology available in the 1990s. Only five crew members could be matched with several better preserved remains. The lab could only conclude that because they were all of human origins and came from the same crash site, they had to belong to any one of the eleven men. Consequently, when the CILHI turned over the six packages of remains to the Air Force Mortuary Services for return to the families, the families agreed to have the unidentified remains buried in one casket at the Arlington National Cemetery. This event took place on November 15, 2000. It was well attended by friends and members of Florida's Combat Talon community. Their common grave is located in Section 60, Site 7915. Names of the crew members are also engraved on the Vietnam Memorial Wall panels 32E and 33E. Visit them every time you are in Washington.

S-01 crewmembers on aircraft "Romeo Charlie" #64-0547 were:

- Captain Edwin N. Osborne, Jr. Aircraft Commander
- Captain Gerald G. VanBuren - Pilot
- Major Charles P. Claxton – Pilot from S-05
- Lieutenant Colonel Donald E. Fisher – Navigator
- Captain Gordon J. Wenaas - Navigator
- Captain Frank C. Parker III – Electronic Warfare Officer
- Technical Sergeant Jack McCrary – Flight Engineer
- Staff Sergeant Wayne A. Eckley - Flight Engineer



Staff Sergeant Edward J. Darcy – Loadmaster from S-03  
Sergeant James R. Williams – Loadmaster from S-02  
Staff Sergeant Gean P. Clapper – Radio Operator



*Common grave for the S-01 Crew is located at the Arlington National Cemetery in Section 60, Site 7915.*