

HAWK-33

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A VIETNAM COBRA PILOT

BY THOMAS MCKELVEY CLEAVER

U. S. Army Bell AH-1G Cobra
(67-15865) of the 361st Assault
Helicopter Company near Phu
Cat, South Vietnam, on April 20,
1971. (Photo courtesy of Norman
Taylor via rfd)



March 20, 1971, was not a good day for American and Vietnamese forces engaged in Operation Lam Son 719. Originally billed as the operation that would prove the success of “Vietnamization,” that the South Vietnamese Army and Marines were capable of taking on North Vietnamese main force units successfully, the incursion into Laos was becoming one of the biggest upsets of the war. Rather than demonstrate South Vietnamese military competence, North Vietnamese superiority was on full display. As Army Aviator Major Terry Morris remembered the battle, “Lam Son 719 was much worse than they ever let on. Officially they said we lost a couple hundred aircraft, but it was really more around 1,200 or so. They would tell us before a mission that if we went down, to try and bring back something from the aircraft so they could call it ‘combat salvageable.’ But for 90 percent of those, there was nothing to salvage. They were dead.”

Lam Son 719; A Hoped-For Victory

The objective of Lam Son 719 was disruption of a possible future offensive by the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN). The Americans hoped that a quick victory in Laos would bolster the morale and confidence of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), and demonstrate that South Vietnamese forces could defend their nation as U.S. ground combat forces withdrew. Unfortunately, Lam Son 719 collapsed into a disaster for the ARVN that decimated some of its best units and destroyed the confidence built up over the previous three years.

Cobra pilot First Lieutenant Terry Morris had joined the Army in 1963, where he served in the 82nd Airborne, volunteering for Special Force in 1966 and serving as an explosives expert with the 10th Special Forces Group in Germany. His request for flight school came through in 1967. “The CO said if I would stay, he’d guarantee E-7 in six

months. I turned it down to go to flight school and go to Vietnam.”

Forces base at Lang Vei up on the Vietnam-Lao-tian border, though we were regularly based out of Phu Bai.” As a gunship pilot, he flew the new Bell AH-1G Huey Cobra. “The Cobra was wonderful to fly and great for combat compared to the UH-1C I flew during my first tour, but the missions were awful. We in the Cobras would pick up a formation of 30-40 ‘slicks’ (transport helos) going into Laos with troops, and the Cobras would



be out to the side looking for guns. The NVA would open up on the formation, and they would concentrate on one bird. The others would spread out away from that one, and the NVAs would keep at it until they got it, then

they would do the same to another one, and then another one. Below 2,500 feet, you were taking 7.62, .50 caliber, and 23 millimeter ZSU stuff. Above 2,500 feet you would take fire from the 37mm and 57mm guns, and above 10,000 feet you’d get 90mm AAA. The AAA concentrations in Lam Son 719 were some of the heaviest of any wartime operation ever, including the Ruhr

Above: The Cobra’s strike capabilities and crew protection have steadily improved. The twin-engine Cobras being flown today, although based on the same airframe, are greatly superior over their Vietnam era ancestors.

Left: A-Shau Valley from north end looking south. Hamburger Hill is on the right. (Photo by Terry Morris)

in Germany in World War II. The first couple days, it was a turkey shoot for us, but then they brought in their AAA and it was a turkey shoot for them. Some of the slick units got their clock cleaned for losses. After the first two days, it was suicide going in there. If you were down low, an NVA company might just open up with their AK-47s, firing straight up, and you'd fly through it."

"We weren't supposed to fly more than 80 hours a month. If we flew more than that, we were supposed to be certified OK to continue flying by the flight surgeon. I had 160 hours in 20 days during this op. The flight surgeon would ask us if we had trouble getting in and out of the bird, and if we said we didn't, he said we were OK to fly, that's how bad things were."

The AH-1G Huey Cobra, developed from experience with UH-1B and C-model Huey modified as gunships earlier in the war, arrived in the nick of time for the kind of combat now happening. "When they started bringing in the AAA, we found that the 20mm cannon on the AH-1G had longer range than their ZSU-23. If we could see where the smoke was coming from when they opened up on us, we could hit them and be out of their range. But then they started mounting the positions in triangles, so if you went after one and you were out of its range making the attack, it would put you in range of one of the other two. If a ZSU-23 caught you flat-footed, it could really tear you up. Most of the time, their sights were set for a fast-mover, so you would get air bursts ahead of you,



A Christmas card a couple of us had made to send home to family. They didn't see the humor in it. (Photo by Terry Morris)

Cpt. Fletcher, CW2 Browning and Lt. Bryson standing beside AH-1G waiting for mission launch during Lam Son 719 (Photo by Terry Morris)





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which was a good warning they were down there. The same was true of the 37mm. This gave us time to get out of the way and come back at them. The 57mm would explode with a puff of smoke about as big as a house."

A Most Satisfying Mission

Morris' most satisfying mission in the midst of the disastrous operation occurred on March 20, 1971. "We were operating near Firebase Lolo, 20 miles into Laos, and got a call from ARVN Rangers cut off and needing pickup. They were in a 'hover hole,' a small clearing in the jungle, where a helicopter would have to come to a hover above the canopy and then drop in to get them. The slicks said it was too tight to get in there, hovering in under fire. I told them we'd give them support. When we got there, I saw it was a real small valley—maximum performance in and out, it was so high. The slicks didn't think they could do a hover to get in there. I said we'd hose the place, but they said it was too hot and too high and they were aborting.

"I told my wingman I was going to fire off my



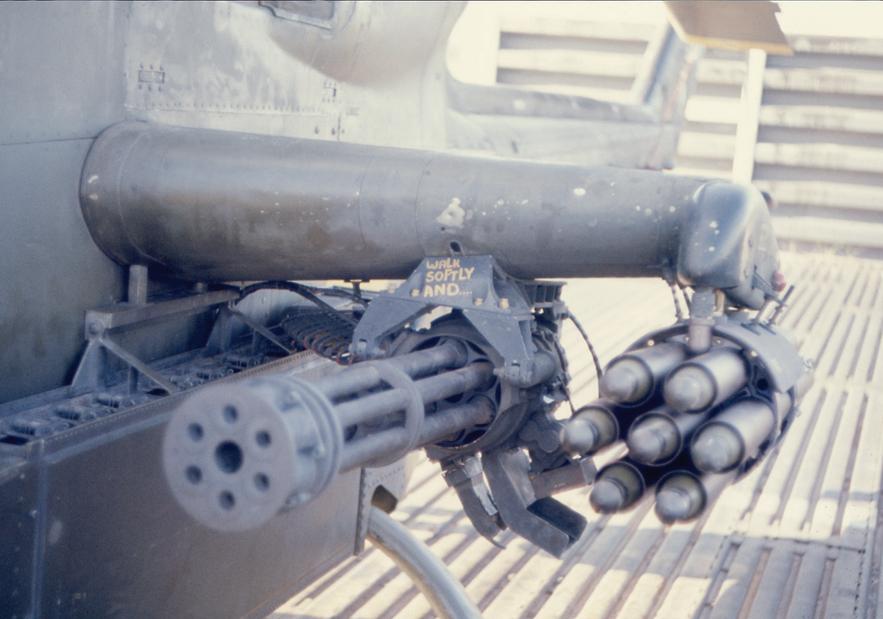
ordnance and burn off fuel and he should cover me because I was going in. I hosed down the area and got myself down to about 200 pounds of fuel. I told my front-seater that when we got in, we would be able to take four of them out. They should tie themselves to the skids with their pistol belts. He told me there were eight hanging on now, so I had him lower the ammo doors, and we got two on each door, after we got them to drop all their gear and weapons to lighten the load. I brought the collective up to 40 pounds of torque and pulled all eight out of there, it was really tight. We flew at low speed, scaring the hell out of them, and got them down to Lang Vei. I never saw them again."

One "Fire Alarm" After Another

For Morris, Lam Son 719 was one "fire alarm" after another.

Top: The only known photo of Bell UH-1D Iroquois, or Huey, helicopters at Landing Zone Xray during the final hours of the Battle of Ia Drang Valley on November 18, 1965. The helicopters belong to the First Cavalry Division (Airmobile). (Photo courtesy of Robert F. Dorr collection)

Above: Soldiers of the 4th Battalion, 173rd Airborne Brigade, load wounded aboard a Bell UH-1D Iroquois, or Huey, for medical evacuation after the assault on Hill 875, near Dak To, South Vietnam, on November 23, 1967. (Photo courtesy of Robert F. Dorr collection)



Top: The pilot's flight console in the back of the AH-1G Cobra. (Photo by Terry Morris)

Above: The business end of the 20mm Gatling gun and rocket pod on the AH-1G. (Photo by Terry Morris)

"A week after that rescue, we were on our way out of Firebase Vandergriff when I saw a Loach (OH-6A) on its side, halfway down a mountain slope and real close to a sheer cliff. I spotted the pilot and crew chief at the top of the hill. There were NVA coming up the other side, so there was no time to call for a slick. I brought the Cobra in and put the front tips of the skids on the cliff edge with the rest of the aircraft out over the edge, and the guys got onto the ammo doors and I got them off just as the NVA arrived. When we got back to Vandergriff, the pilot, a captain, asked my name and told me he wanted to write up a recommendation for a medal. I told him I hadn't gotten the Soldier's Medal yet, so he said he would recommend that. Instead, because the rescue had been made under fire, they gave me the Distinguished Flying Cross. No other Cobra crew managed any

rescues like those that I know of.

"Throughout Lam Son 719, we were pulling people out of tight spots. We'd find ARVNs on a hilltop, with NVAs 30-40 yards away, and the Cobras would give support while the Slicks pulled them out."

Morris has no difficulty remembering the worst mission during Lam Son 719. "We only lost one Cobra. We got a call to cover the extraction of ARVNs who were surrounded in a bomb crater. The slicks couldn't put down in the pickup zone due to enemy fire and the fact there was so much smoke they couldn't see the ARVNs. Our commanding officer ordered Captain Keith Bryant, our maintenance officer, to take one of the Cobras to provide cover. Captain Bryant was set to leave the next day on R&R to Hawaii, and his wife was already waiting for him. He was told he would have to take the mission because we were short-handed. I flew as his wingman. We got over the position and there was lots of smoke. He went down to mark the pickup zone and took a lot of fire from the ridge overlooking the position. He called they were hit and had a fire, that his hydraulics were out and he was activating the accumulator. That would give you enough power to make three control moves in a crash, which could be the difference between living and dying. He came out of the smoke and I could see the fire, and then he called 'I've lost the accumulator.' The Cobra rolled over and went in. His body and his co-pilot's were only recovered in 2006."

In the midst of the operation, Morris had the opportunity to demonstrate what the Cobra could do in all-out combat. "There was a Special Forces Hatchet Team in Laos—five Americans, 20 Montagnards—who were surrounded by the NVAs. They'd set up a 37mm anti-aircraft gun on a nearby hill. The team was bait to get any helicopter that tried to get them. The slicks were waiting to go in. I volunteered that I'd nail the 37mm so the slicks could make it. My gunner turned white when I said that. I told him if he didn't want to go I'd put sand bags in front and go by myself."

Checking the situation on arrival, Morris came up with a plan for a surprise attack. "I flew north of the position, then got right down over the triple canopy and came in. I popped up to 1,500 feet and saw the gun right away. They saw me and started training it around. I fired all my rockets, then hosed them with my 20mm cannon and took out the gun. I made a hard break to the right, and every warning light on the panel went off! I thought I'd been hit, but the engine and controls still worked, so I nursed it back to Phu Bai while the slicks got the team."

Back at base, the Cobra was thoroughly checked. "We found the wiring bundle was chafing against the fuselage, and when I pulled that maneuver, I made it short out. That probably was the biggest pucker factor of any mission I flew over there."



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Hitting the NVA In Laos

A few weeks later, the Cobras were called when a Special Forces team in Laos reported an NVA force constructing bunkers, and the Green Berets could hear them working in an open field. “They decided to send in a Hatchet Team to try and grab prisoners after we attacked while the slicks were extracting the team. We came around the hill south of the target. The ground team let us know the NVAs had heard us and most had taken cover in a ditch while the others were running for the trees. I made a run on the ditch and strafed with 20mm, then my wingman fired rockets when they came out of the ditch. The Hatchet Team was on the ground four minutes when the NVAs came out of the treeline. I slowed to 40 knots to maximize my time and hosed them with everything. The slicks picked up the team.

“When we landed back at Marble Mountain, these guys came running over, slapping the bird, I thought we had done something wrong. A slick pilot thanked me for coming alongside when he was under fire and interposing myself so they could make the pick-up. I wasn’t doing that! When I checked the Cobra, there were seven .50 caliber hits that had just missed the tail rotor controls. I hadn’t heard anything over the noise



of the 20mm I was firing. The Army gave me the Silver Star for that one.”

The Huey Cobra Was A Real Fighter

Having flown the UH-1C Huey modified as a gunship during his previous tour in Vietnam, Morris really appreciated the AH-1G Cobra. “The UH-1C had an L-9 engine with 900 shaft horsepower engine with a 540 rotor system, and was underpowered. It was like driving a Model T. You had to ‘porpoise’ to build up speed—dive at the ground, pull up, then do it again. When you’d refuel, the crew chief and the gunner would have to run alongside the aircraft until you got lift, then throw themselves aboard. As a gunship, it carried 5,000 rounds of 7.62, and 14 rockets in two pods. You had to have finesse to fly it on its best day.

“The Cobra on the other hand, had lots of power. But even with all that, with a full load

Top: In the AH-1G, the crew had an enormous amount firepower, including 20mm Gatling guns, 7.62mm Gatling gun, and 40mm, which was in addition to a pair of rocket pods on each side. It was as lethal as any ground attack machine ever built. (Photo by Jay Miller)

Above: The rocket pods can be two 17-shot units and two seven-shot outboard of those. (Photo by Jay Miller)

Cobra gunship at Fire Base Libby on Highway QI 20. The photo was taken in June 1969, near the city of Xuan Loc, Nui Soc Liu mountain, Đồng Nai Province, Vietnam. (Photo by 1LT. B.J.Khalifah Co. A/5th Bat/12th Infantry /199 Light Infantry Brigade)



WHEN WE ARRIVED, THE HILL, WHICH HAD BEEN CLEARED OF TREES, SEEMED TO BE MOVING. AS THE SUN CAME UP, I COULD SEE WHAT LOOKED LIKE A THOUSAND NVA SOLDIERS CLIMBING THE HILL.

ball field. The Cobra was highly maneuverable, and since it was only 36 inches wide when it was head-on, it was a very hard target to hit.

"Flechettes could do real damage. We once had an NVA lieutenant surrender. He told us he and his company were under the canopy when he heard helicopters overhead and he took cover. After they passed, he went back on the trail and there were all his men, dead, and he hadn't heard a thing. It was a sniffer mission, a UH-1 flying 50-100 feet above the jungle, with equipment that could sense ammonia below. The operators at first couldn't tell if it was humans or animals, but they later got pretty good at telling the difference from the size of the return. They'd call the Cobra that was escorting them and mark the spot and the Cobra would fire nails. There's no noise when the flechettes went into the jungle, and they could take out anything."

As good as the Cobra was, even armed with flechettes, there were times it wasn't enough. "During Lam Son 719, I once flew 23 hours straight out of 24, giving support to a Special Forces camp above Khe Sanh that overlooked the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. They reported they were being overrun. When we arrived, the hill, which had been cleared of trees, seemed to be moving. As the sun came up, I could see there was what looked like a thousand NVA soldiers climbing the hill. I went to the other side and saw more of the same. I came back and salvoed my nails and rockets at the first target, then hosed the other side with the 20mm, the minigun and the 40mm. After I expended everything, I called the Air Force FAC and asked him for a body count. He told me "I stopped counting after 300." The sad thing was, the camp still got overrun and we still lost the team in the end."

The Hairiest Mission Didn't Involve Combat

Morris' hairiest flying incident didn't involve combat. "The monsoon came in May and closed everything down, storms that had just sheets of rain. After a couple weeks we got this beautiful clear day and I decided to take a run out over the Ashau Valley. Jim Browning, a very experienced pilot with 7,000 hours, went along with me as co-pilot (I had 2,500 hours at the time). We went out and as we turned to return to Phu Bai, I could see the wall of water of another storm coming, between us and where we wanted to go. Neither of us were fully instrument rated or current. We got into the storm and you couldn't see twenty feet in any direction. We got down real low and opened the side windows, and with Jim looking

left and me looking right, we hovered down the river that flows out of Ashau, all the way to the coast. Once we got there things cleared and we were able to fly on up to Phu Bai and recover."

Terry Morris had been promoted to captain when he returned from his second tour in Vietnam and returned to Special Forces. "We supported a unit called Greenlight, better known as the Delta Force." Later he was promoted to Major and became commander of the First Special Forces Company. After twenty-five years in the Army, he retired in 1988 and went into law enforcement in Alabama, where he served another 20 years before retiring for good. During his two tours in Vietnam, Major Morris earned the Silver Star, four Distinguished Flying Crosses, 53 Air Medals (three with V Device for Valor), the Bronze Star, four Purple Hearts, ARCOM with V, and miscellaneous "I've been there" medals. †