

Gunshot at Kratié

On 8th May 1970, I was not scheduled to fly. On stand-by for a while, I went into the Operation Room of the Transport Group, hoping to find nevertheless a slot to fill for a next sortie. Reading on the great table chart, I saw that a re-supply mission had been programmed in support of an encircled outpost not far from Kratié. Scrutinizing more closely, I found that the crew assigned to the mission was composed of only three members; Captain Leng Doeun, First Pilot, Captain Nouth Saras, flight mechanic, and Lt Chim Bantoum, navigator. Bantoum and I were from the same training class and together we attended advanced training in France, at Franczal Airbase. I still remembered his jokes in the streets of Toulouse.

Determined to have a hop in this particular C-47, I went directly to see his pilot, Leng Doeun, which I knew particularly well, for he had trained me on the SE 210 Caravelle jet-airliner while we were on detachment with the Royal Air Cambodge Company. I told him that he was flying without a co-pilot but he replied that these were the orders, for we had to save enough transport pilots to fulfil all the required missions. In fact, by awaiting the graduation of new transport pilots, at this early stage of the war, we were fully mobilized, often flying up to four or five sorties, alone, per day. I insisted, stating that a round flight to Kratié took around only two hours, in addition to around twenty minutes over the area to drop the bundles. That would leave me largely enough time to fulfil my next assignment of the day, a commercial flight for Air Cambodge.

Ok, he told me, go ahead, but you would be the First Pilot. That would allow you additional training. I thought that we were both in need to be at the top of our skills considering the tough times that we were going through. He would arrange the matter with the Operation Officer. "Go to take a parachute, your individual weapons and begin the briefing with the crew and the dispatchers".

I was really relieved to have an opportunity to fly. Otherwise, I had to return to town, after passing through, one more time, the scrutinizing check-point at the entry of the base as well as a platoon of armours that controlled all the road traffic. The weather was beautiful and my favourite C-47, the Tango Golf, was shining under the sun. The loading of food and ammunition was completed and I was proceeding to the visual checking before boarding; ailerons, tails' mobile surfaces, brakes, everything was okay. I passed one foot under the space between the fuselage and the tail wheel, checking that it could pass through without problems, a sure sign indicating that the aircraft was not overloaded and well centred.

Entering the aircraft, the faces appeared tenser and more pessimistic than usually. We only fully realized that the time of innocence was over. The words of a traditional French aviator song suddenly came on my head; "on the squadron's bar, among the cheers and laughs...then the joyful laughs ceased". Reassessing my senses, I went into the high perched, cramped cockpit, where it was impossible to move without hurting a throttle. While I was adjusting to the seat, Captain Doeun took the co-pilot place, while behind me Bantoum seated at the navigator place, spreading its maps, turning on the radio. He had already planned the route even if he took a grave grin when he looks over the chart. The flight mechanic had in meantime taken place between the two pilots and started the check-list procedures that seemed, however, taking a lot of more times than usual.

Methodically, we went through each point of controls and each of us knew his part of the job. The number two engine caught to life, followed by the number one. Each of us was

tensely absorbed by the task. We were already reaching the entry of the runway when we finished the procedure. We marked a stop; we were waiting for a returning T-28 fighter-bomber finished his landing run.

- Phnom Penh Tower, Tango Golf ready for take-off
- Tango Golf, you are cleared for take off
- Tango Golf, Rogers.

I firmly directed towards the centre of the Runway 23, the heavily loaded aircraft responding sluggishly. I gradually opened the power throttle, but still firmly maintaining the brakes jammed. I then released them, accelerating down the runway until reaching the lift off speed.

- Phnom Penh Tower, Tango Golf take-off
- Tango Golf.

The aircraft was suddenly filled up with silence. The C-47 was a very reliable aircraft that I liked very much. However, if we lost an engine on take off, it was unable to hold the altitude and quickly sank. With all our ammunitions on-board, that would make an interesting firework. Well done, no problems, and we continued to climbing to our cruising altitude.

- Wheels up?
- Wheel up and locked
- Flaps up?
- Flaps up
- Phnom Penh Tower, authorization to joint the stack
- Proceed Tango Golf
- Thanks and bye, I switched to the military frequency
- Good journey Tango Golf.

After a quick radio contact with the military radio operator, we proceeded to the drop zone. There would be no other contacts with the base until the end of the mission. The beautiful landscape, with the rice fields surrounding the building zones of the capital, everything was inviting to peace. The tainted roof tiles of the Royal Palace were reflecting the sun. In front of the Palace, on the riverbank side, the Tonle Sap River joined lazily the Mekong River and together with majesty flowed past the city and the great plain. Over the regular roar of the engines, I transported myself to another sky, thousands of kilometres away. I remembered the house on the Paris suburb where I spent my week-ends when spring came back. Remembrance of happy days was arising once more. I stared at the horizon line that appeared unreal and secluded myself into my thoughts, far away from the men's world and their sins. I always appreciated these moments of relief, far high in the sky, appreciating the beauty of the nature. But this beloved fatherland was now burning by the trial fire of war.

A slight drop on the engines' rpm brought me back to reality. Sarras had already readjusted the power. We had just crossed the Mekong River and spotted the nearby provincial capital, Kompong Cham. Behind the city, a large dark spot indicated the location of the huge Chup rubber trees plantation. It was time to return to work. All the flight parameters were on order. Sarras immediately understand my thoughts and acknowledged by a glimpse of his eye; our old Tango Charlie had never left up, and not this time again. Bantoum was still in his maps, assessing our correct route. I grinned to him, old dear friend from the same Class 5/1, "the best Class" of course. He putted his thumb up, indicating that I was right on course.

Captain Doeun also appeared very serious and tense. It was gone the time when after levelling off from the Caravelle jet-transport; he was used to play music with a flute in the cockpit!

Kompong Cham was now behind us, we were still at the correct altitude, speed at 130 mph. Approaching the drop zone, we sensed tension growing among the crew. Now Kratie appeared in front of us. Only a bend of the Mekong River to cross and we would be right over the target. Looking back, I saw that Bantoum was already drawing a return route while Sarras intently surveyed the engines dials. I didn't lose sight of the small blotch on the ground that was the area where to drop the bundles. I crossed for the second time another bend of the Mekong River and began reduced power and loose altitude. We had been informed, without many details, which would be a "hot drop zone", completely encircled by the North Vietnamese. The drop pass would be made at the lowest level possible otherwise the dropped supplies would be landed into enemy hands. We would also make a minimum number of passes before the enemy realized that we were not escorted by fighter-bombers. Doeun called to attention the paratrooper Corporal in charge of the dispatchers, telling him to get ready.

I continued to lose altitude, and then suddenly I caught a glimpse of a woman with a red shirt and a black Sampot walking with a basket on his head on the edge of a rice field. Then, right there in the middle of this field, a white cross indicating the Drop Zone. I reduced the speed to 109mph, lowered another crank of flaps, Doeun accompanying my moves while Sarras surveyed carefully the engines parameters. I suddenly had the impression that the things moved now more slowly and my throat became dry. No matters, I had a mission to accomplish!

Farther, on the bank of the river, I spotted men in black pyjamas rushing to board boats and paddling towards the Drop Zone. Doeun and Sarras had also spotted them. Instinctively Sarras grabbed on his hands the engines' control throttles so hard that I saw that his fingers became white. Bantoum asked Doeun a vector for the return flight. A last glimpse, I was well on the axis, so low that I could clearly see the grape fruits on the palm trees. Doeun lighted up the green light signal while the klaxon whiled over the cargo compartment. After the departure of the parachutes, I immediately turned right and made another run to drop the remaining bundles. Here they gone, I clearly saw the opening of the camouflaged chutes and their immediate impact after a swing, right on the spot. The chief of the dispatchers informed me that they were still some bundles on-board; his new team was inexperienced. We needed to make a third pass; a risky decision to take. Another thing had alarmed us; we did not see any soldiers coming in the open to pick up the supply. Apparently, they had chosen to stay hidden due to the enemy action.

We nevertheless decided for a third run. Just at the vertical of the Drop Zone, all hell broke loose. Streams of heavy anti-aircraft machine guns converged on the aircraft. I turned hard left, but another gunner took lead on us. I distinctly heard the impacts on the fuselage, and then I saw my right leg shattering by a bullet, broking the femur, and two others grazing my left leg. Before I could ask him, Doeun screamed over; "I'm taking over the control". With his left hand he pushed me back against my seat while I was crawling forward, trying to held together pieces of bones and fleshs. Extremely shocked and disoriented, I looked at the blood spraying out of my wounds at great pressure. My co-pilot, as well as Sarras and Doeun unbuckled me and dragged me onto the cargo compartment while bullets were still whistling through the fuselage.

Bantoum, Dear Old Chap, immediately tried to lay me down and put my head on a parachute, thus improvising a kind of pillow. Doeun, in the meantime, had cut the hit left engine and feathered the propeller. In his haste, Sarras by mistake, instead of selecting the

remaining hydraulic pump of the right engine, lowered the main undercarriage! Doeun struggled to control the aircraft that fell furthermore towards the trees tops. But suddenly, apparently disoriented by such a move, the North Vietnamese for a moment stopped their fire, probably thinking that we wanted to land. Acting quickly, Doeun raised the wheels and added power on the remaining engine, climbed away right under the nose of the Communists. In fact, while thinking over the incident, I firmly believed that such "mistake" was in fact a sign of heaven, or called it "fortune", that allowed us to cross over the Flack hornet nest without more damages. Otherwise, we surely had been brought down. Even if we survived the crash, we had no illusion about our fates in the enemy hands; usually they beheaded our pilots.

Laying on the ground floor, I was very preoccupied by losing such a blood. Having no medical equipment on board, I decided to cut the harnesses of a parachute with my bayonet in order to make a tourniquet on my left leg. Then suddenly the chief of the dispatchers presented himself. He was a very young NCO, just graduated. I later learned that was his first operational mission. Despite that machine gun bullets still passed through intermittently the fuselage, he stayed on attention and saluted me:

- Sir. You cannot cut these harnesses.
- And why?
- How could I justify that I had deteriorated a parachute!
- Don't bother. I would sign for you a discharge.

Satisfied by my answer, he returned with his team to drop the remaining bundles in order to lighten our badly hit C-47. I now began to lose consciousness, resigned to await death with serenity. Then the image of my son, a beautiful newborn baby, with his wide open brown eyes, brought me back to reality. I decided to focus on this image to try to remain conscious. Every half hour, I released the pressure on the tourniquet. I was obsessed by a possible gangrene; I was told that the enemy often soaked cartridges with excrements in order to provoke striking infections on the wounds. Bantoum came over some times to look after me.

I knew that Doeun had to take a difficult decision. He could nursed the badly hit Dakota to the nearest airfield, which was at Kompong Cham, or choose instead to fly directly to Phnom Penh. If he landed at Kompong Cham, it was not sure that I could be evacuated on time on a military hospital. May be I had to wait the arrival of a rescue helicopter until the next morning. I had already lost too much blood. Doeun decided to press on to Pochentong, knowing that was probably my only chance to survive. No one on board contested his decision. The last thing that I remembered was my arrival, laid on a stretcher, at the hospital. I was welcomed by no less than the AVNK Commander, General So Satto. He came over me, saying some encouraging words. I had the force to reply; "Sir, they got me".

The next day Captain Doeun was summed up to the Technical Department at the Headquarters. There, a bureaucrat officer protested over his decision. By not trying to land immediately at Kompong Cham, he had increased the chance of losing a precious aircraft of the Khmer Air Force!