Surviving the Trap

Air Commando Phil Conran's Courage and Leadership Under Fire

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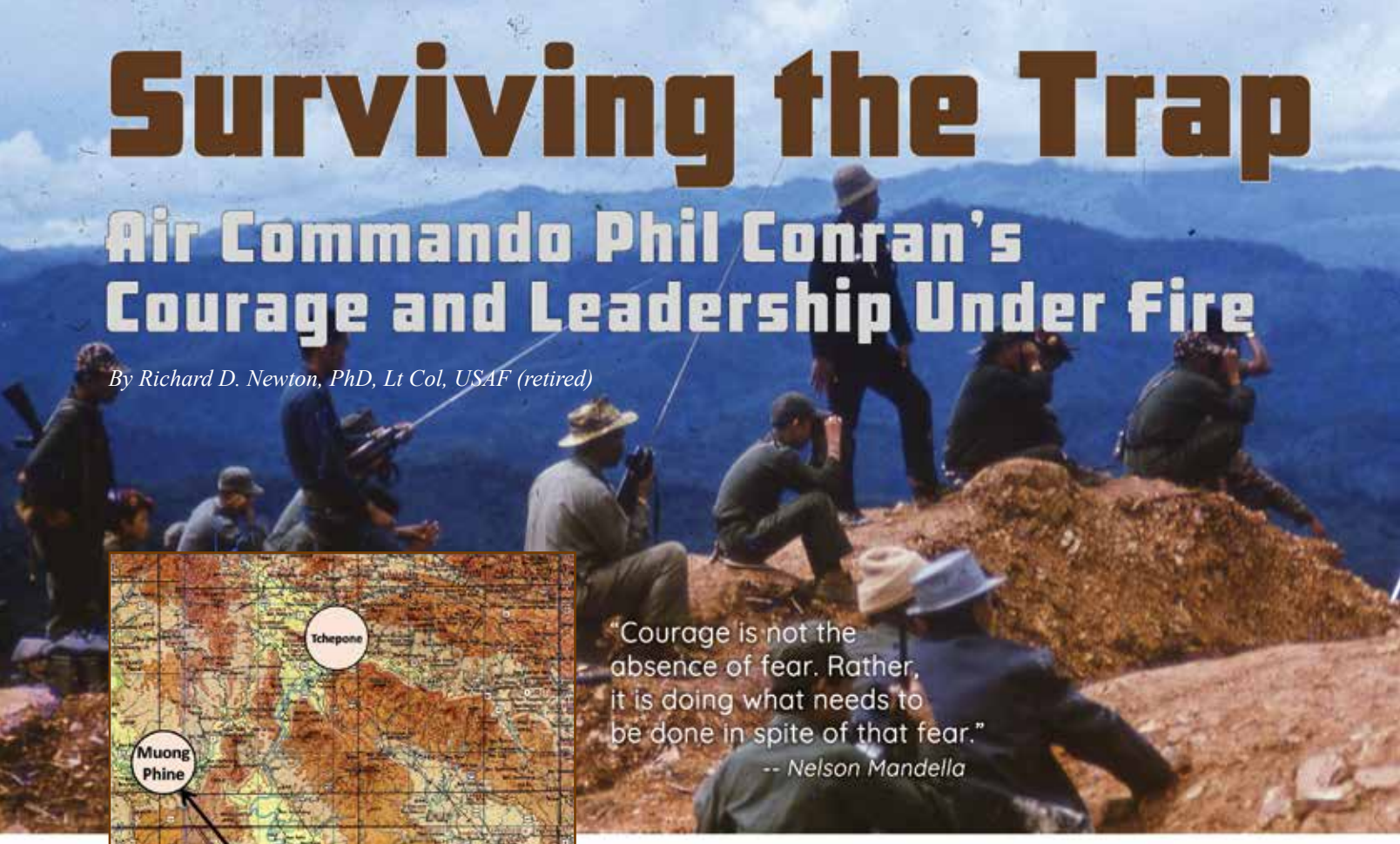

On 6 October 1969, five Sikorsky CH-3E helicopters from the 21st Special Operations Squadrons (SOS) and the 20th SOS were tasked to insert 125 Lao irregulars from a Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) into Lima Site 300 (LS-300, one of many remote airfields in Laos, usually fortified and cached with fuel and limited supplies for covert air operations) near Muong Phine (Muang Phin), in the panhandle of southern Laos. The SGU's mission was to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail as part of Operation Junction City Junior. Unfortunately, the garrison at Muong Phine had been abandoned by the Royal Laotian Army (RLA) two days earlier – without telling the Americans – and the helicopters flew into an ambush. This is the story of Air Commando Philip Conran's bravery, leadership, and courage during the successful rescue of eight Americans and their Hmong allies from imminent capture and likely death at the hands of the North Vietnamese.

Background

In July and August 1969, RLA forces and Lao irregulars from CIA-trained SGUs began converging on Muong Phine, the only communist controlled village in the central Lao panhandle. Muong Phine was the communist Pathet Lao's headquarters in the region and the site of a prisoner-of-war camp. It was also a communist supply, maintenance, and medical depot along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Allied ground operations by Lao regular and guerrilla forces in the region were supported by Royal Laotian Air Force T-28s and USAF A-1 Skyraiders from the 56th Special Operations Wing at Nakhon Phanom (NKP), Thailand. By 6 September, the critical road junction on the west side of Muong Phine, where Routes 9 and 23 crossed, had been occupied. The next evening SGU battalions seized the village and the airfield,

capturing 45 communist soldiers and freeing 165 Lao citizens that the communists were holding hostage. The SGU also captured 2,000 small arms and 2,000 tons of enemy supplies.

Flush with success, the Lao, with U.S. concurrence, decided to press on to Tchepone, a major transshipment point on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, North Vietnam's transportation and logistics network that supplied communist forces

CH-3E at unidentified Lima Site. (Photo provided by Bob Arnau)

fighting in South Vietnam. Because Tchepone was defended by five North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regular battalions from the 968th Infantry Division, CIA planners realized it was unlikely friendly forces could capture the town. Instead the plan was to occupy critical road intersections north and east of Tchepone so as to isolate the NVA garrison and cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

By the end of September the Lao units had failed to achieve their tactical objectives around Tchepone. Worse, NVA counterattacks had pushed the RLA and SGU units into defensive positions around the airfield at LS-300. On 4 October, the Lao defending Muong Phine made a catastrophic error and mistook an approaching group of refugees for NVA troops and fled, leaving the village and the airfield undefended. That word never made it to the CIA planners who were arranging to send reinforcements to relieve the Lao battalions at Muong Phine. When the U.S. helicopter crews landed at LS-210 for their local intelligence updates and to pick up their passengers, they were briefed that the airstrip at Muong Phine was still in friendly control. Also unknown to the Americans was that the enemy had hidden heavy weapons in the hills around Muong Phine as a "flak trap" hoping to shoot down any U.S. aircraft sent to relieve the Muong Phine garrison.

The Mission

On the morning of 6 October the flight of five CH-3Es and a UH-1 landed at LS-210 near Thateng on the Bolovens Plateau, 75 nautical miles south of Muong Phine to pick up 125 Lao irregulars from the SGU's Red Battalion (the irregular Lao battalions were designated by colors, red, black, green, etc.). The Lao soldiers were broken up into single-file "sticks" of 25 soldiers each, one stick per CH-3. Their weapons were a mish-mash of M-16s, AK-47s, and a few ancient bolt-action rifles. They had ammunition belts crisscrossing their chests and bags of rice hanging from their belts. About half the soldiers carried live chickens. Just before boarding the helicopters, they broke their chickens' necks, tucked the now dead birds up under their belts with the head above the belt to secure it in place, and then climbed aboard.

After loading the troops, the formation was led north to LS-300, the airstrip at Muong Phine, by a Beech Baron from Air America. Lt Col Ted Silva, commander of the 21st SOS, flew as the mission commander and copilot in Knife 61, the lead helicopter in the formation. Maj Claret D. "CD" Taylor was Knife 61's aircraft commander. Knife 62 was the number two helicopter in the formation, piloted by Maj Philip Conran with Capt Pete Costa as the copilot.

At about noon, the formation arrived over the dirt landing strip near Muong Phine. The standard procedure was for the CIA case officer on board the Air America airplane have his Lao interpreter get voice confirmation and a colored smoke signal from the SGU contact on the ground notifying him that the area was safe for the helicopter formation to land. On this particular day, however, after several unsuccessful attempts to establish communications with the ground and making multiple low passes over the airstrip, the case officer assumed there was a problem with the radios and made the decision to authorize the landing without verbal confirmation that the airstrip was safe. He had been into Muong Phine a few days earlier, and with no reports telling anyone the Lao had abandoned the site, he assumed it was still safe.

Major Taylor in Knife 61 lined up and began his approach into the airstrip, with Major Conran and the other CH-3s close behind in assault landing formation. As the helicopter was on short final to land, Major Taylor's helicopter was riddled with small arms fire. Enemy rounds took out the helicopter's auxiliary hydraulics servo and the number one engine. H-3 helicopters are unflyable without the auxiliary hydraulics, so Taylor turned 180 degrees and crash landed Knife 61 on the western edge of the runway.

Observing the lead helicopter's crash, Major Conran in Knife 62 went around, assumed command of the formation, and led the other three aircraft to a holding point west of Muong Phine and away from danger. At that point, he asked the UH-1 gunship crew to try and rescue the crew of Knife 61. The danger from NVA anti-aircraft weapons was too great, however, and after trying to get into the airstrip, the Huey was forced to abandon its efforts.

Major Taylor's semi-controlled crash onto the airstrip made it possible for the crew and passengers of Knife 61 to exit the aircraft and take up hasty defensive positions in ditches and bomb craters off the side of the runway. Only one Hmong soldier had been killed by enemy fire into the helicopter. At that point Major Conran directed two A-1E Skyraiders from the 602nd SOS, call sign Hobo, that had been accompanying the helicopter formation, to suppress the NVA threats to Knife 61's crew and the Lao guerrillas.

Refueling CH-3E at LS-210. (Photo courtesy of USAF)

Now, Major Conran had some urgent decisions to make. Because the special operations CH-3s were not air refuelable, Major Conran had to balance his remaining fuel and time available to loiter in the local area against the danger facing the survivors on the ground. Returning to LS-210 to refuel would take about an hour's flying time each way, plus the time on the ground needed to pump fuel from 55-gallon drums into the helicopter. Realizing that a single platoon of SGU fighters on the ground with the Knife 61 crew would not be enough to fight off the large numbers of NVA regulars, Conran made the decision to insert the platoon of guerrillas from his aircraft into LS-300 to reinforce the defenders on the ground and also to extract the four Americans from the site. An added concern was that unlike Knife 61, Knife 62 was unarmed. Only the lead helicopter had been equipped with M-60, 7.62-millimeter machineguns, for protection. After discussing his options with the Hobo pilots who had been providing suppressing fires, Conran chose what they collectively assessed to be the best possible and least dangerous, approach path, from the south flying a northerly heading.

Knife 62 lined up for its approach and started down. As Major Conran's aircraft approached the landing zone (LZ), enemy small arms fire took out his CH-3E's primary hydraulic servos. This is an emergency situation but does not disable the helicopter nor cause the flight controls to go into an extreme hard-over condition. Major Conran pressed his disabled aircraft's approach into the LZ, knowing that the friendly forces on the ground would not likely survive without the reinforcements from his helicopter. Heavy North Vietnamese fires continued without letup, killing one of the SGU guerrillas in the back of the aircraft. Despite the withering NVA defenses and a partially disabled helicopter, Conran landed and unloaded the platoon of SGU irregulars. As the crew from Knife 61 was attempting to board Major Conran's CH-3E, continued enemy fire damaged the helicopter's main rotor blades and the transmission. With escape no longer an option, the two American helicopter crews abandoned the second CH-3 to join their Hmong allies on the ground.

Once the helicopter crews and Lao soldiers made it to the relative safety of the ditches and bomb craters at the edge of the airstrip, Colonel Silva and Major Taylor coordinated air strikes with the A-1Es while Major Conran organized the ground defenses. In the rush to evacuate Knife 61, however, the crew had left the M-60s and ammunition on board. Colonel Silva did escape with his camera, though, which is why a few pictures survive today.

Realizing that it would be impossible to defend themselves without the weapons and supplies on the two wrecked helicopters, and without regard for their own safety, Major Conran and an SGU fighter, nicknamed Charlie, ran back to the two helicopters. The two men exposed themselves to heavy enemy fire while crossing the 50 yards of open ground to retrieve the machine guns, remaining ammunition, and other needed supplies such as the water jugs, food, and parachutes to use as cover from the scorching heat of the day. While Conran was inside the helicopters, NVA bullets sprayed the cabins and ricocheted back and forth until falling to the floor when their energy was spent. By sheer luck, Conran was not hit.

It took multiple trips for Conran and Charlie to retrieve everything they needed from the helicopters. The effort required multiple, increasingly dangerous, crossings of the 50 yards of "death ground" between their defensive positions and the helicopters. They continued, though, because they knew that without those weapons and supplies their chances of surviving were dismal. Before one of those trips, Colonel Silva took pictures of Conran and Charlie. In retrospect, Phil Conran remembers that moment as being comically surreal.

Conran and Charlie at Muong Phine. (Photo courtesy of Ted Silva)

While Conran and Charlie were retrieving the weapons and supplies, Colonel Silva was hit in the back by an enemy round. The bullet went in on the left side, missed his spine, and exited the right side of his body. Once the last of the weapons and supplies had been moved from the crashed helicopters, Major Conran took charge of the defenses. Moving between the different defensive positions to direct friendly fires, he continually exposed himself to the enemy gunners. When, from inside the defensive perimeter, the six-foot-tall Conran stood up he could see the attackers' positions. After a couple of hours of attacking, the North Vietnamese brought rockets and mortars up to use against the Americans and the Hmong. By using his survival radio to communicate with the Hobos, Conran used the compass from his survival vest to direct aerial fires onto the NVA and disrupt the mortar attacks. Unfortunately, the enemy also could see Conran whenever he stood up and in the late afternoon Conran was hit in the leg by an NVA round. He

did not mention the wound to anyone until later, when he lost all feeling in his leg and realized that if another rescue was attempted it was unlikely he would be able to run to the helicopter without help.

Once the call went out that the two Knife helicopters had been shot down and that the crews were fighting for their lives, 7/13th Air Force in Saigon directed overwhelming air support into the area. The Air Force and Navy fast-movers that showed up attacked without respite, but because of their high speed they were unable to precisely deliver their munitions. The FAC had them drop their bombs away from the downed crews' position. The result was lots of noise, but ineffective fire support. It was the slow moving A-1s that proved to be the crews' lifesavers.

Over and over again the A-1s flew into the "hornet's nest," precisely dropping their bombs and strafing the NVA positions. Despite horrific fires, the North Vietnamese kept advancing to close the circle tighter and tighter around the American and Lao defenders. It seemed that no matter how much ordnance the A-1s delivered, the NVA ignored their losses and kept pushing more soldiers into the fight, many of whom were destined to become casualties.

Jolly 19 and a second HH-3E rescue helicopter were scrambled from alert by 7/13th Air Force. They arrived on scene about an hour after the two Knife helicopters had been shot down.

The two rescue birds and their escorting HC-130 tanker orbited nearby, listening to the battle rage on the ground, while the on-scene commander, Lt Col John Vargo, Hobo 22, worked out the recovery plan.

After orbiting for almost three hours, and with more NVA troops arriving in the area, permission was finally given for Charlie Langham in the low bird, Jolly 19, to attempt a rescue.

After Jolly 19 was shot off the LZ, the on-scene commander decided to wait for the larger and more capable HH-53s before authorizing another rescue attempt.

At about 4 pm, a rescue HH-3E, call sign Jolly 19, from the 40th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron at NKP, flown by Capt Charles D. Langham, valiantly tried to rescue the Knife 61 and 62 crews. By that point, though, NVA anti-aircraft defenses were fully established. When Jolly 19 landed to pull out the eight Americans the helicopter was struck numerous times in the engines and transmission. Captain Langham had to abort the rescue attempt before the survivors could board the aircraft. Jolly 19 then limped home to NKP.

After Jolly 19's unsuccessful rescue attempt, things were starting to look desperate on the ground. Sunset was little more than an hour away, ammunition was running low, and one of the two M-60 machine guns was out of commission. C-123 Providers, call sign Candlestick, had arrived on station and were overhead and ready to drop LUU-2 illumination flares for any close air support aircraft helping to defend the survivors on the ground. In addition, 7/13th Air Force had scrambled four "Sawdust" A-1Es from NKP, just in case.

The Sawdust A-1s were equipped and trained to drop CBU-19, cluster bomb munitions containing 528 canisters each of CS-gas, a short duration form of tear gas that incapacitated any humans not wearing gas masks. The CBU-19 was originally designed for delivery from helicopters, so the munitions had to be delivered from below 600 feet AGL (above ground level) to ensure the aerosol powder reached the ground. Use of the weapon by the Air Force was restricted to slower aircraft, like the A-1, because the cluster munitions could not survive the air pressure when delivered by faster aircraft.

There were also political restrictions on the use CBU-19. Concerned about charges of chemical warfare, authorization to use CBU-19 was held at 7/13th Air Force. Even though the Sawdust A-1s were on station, there was no guarantee they would be allowed to use their controversial weapons to help rescue the Knife crews.

Just before nightfall, with the situation looking grim, two HH-53, Super Jolly Green Giants, Jolly 71 and 72, attempted another rescue. Col Daryle E. Tripp, the 56th SOW Director of Operations, made the decision to use the A-1s' CBU-19 munitions and accept the consequences. That decision did not seem to hurt him as he retired in 1983 as a major general. With permission granted, the Sawdust A-1s dropped their CBU on all four sides of the survivors as other A-1s strafed the known enemy positions. The plan was for the first HH-53 to land and pick up the Americans and any wounded Hmong. The remaining Lao were to then make their way overland to join other SGU battalions.

The USAF did not have chemical personal protection equipment for helicopter aircrews in 1969. Instead, the crews carried the same gas masks used by ground soldiers. If the helicopter crew knew they were flying into a chemical environment, they would take off their flying helmets and

don the gas masks. What this meant, though, is that they had no protection for their heads and they were disconnected from the aircraft communications systems. The crew could not talk to each other or to entities outside their aircraft.

The alternative, though, was much worse. One American pilot who was saved when the rescue force used CS-gas told what it felt like when he was hit with the debilitating aerosol powder, "… I ran into a tree and was wrapped around the tree urinating, defecating, and retching all at the same instant ... It also made me want to sneeze.... It goes into effect instantaneously. Physically and mentally you can't control yourself." In 1970, a war correspondent erroneously reported that the U.S. was using sarin nerve gas against the NVA. The charges were fully investigated and it was found that CS-gas had been used. The nerve agent story was retracted and the reporter and producer were fired. Years later, Phil Conran would tell of lingering effects from having been subjected to the gas … but it helped save his and Ted Silva's crews' lives.

When Jolly 71 landed the survivors ran to the ramp at the aft of the helicopter. The Americans were among the last to arrive, slowed down by Colonel Silva and Major Conran's wounds. By the time the Americans got to the aft ramp the helicopter cabin was full of Lao irregulars. Thinking quickly, Conran yelled, "Let's go to the side door." When the two crews got to the right side door, though, they realized it was not the same as what they were familiar with on their CH-3s. The HH-53 has a Dutch door that splits in half. The helicopter's minigun is mounted above the bottom half of the door and the opening is about six feet above ground level.

It was impossible for Colonel Silva to climb up to the opening because of his wounds, so Major Conran got down on all fours to give Colonel Silva a step. The other Americans pushed and the HH-53 door gunner pulled the wounded pilot into the helicopter. Three more Americans climbed up and into the aircraft and then they pulled Major Conran inside. At that point, Jolly 71, with 46 Lao guerrillas and 5 Americans on board, could not take on any more passengers and the aircraft commander, Capt Holly Bell, made the decision to take off. With 51 survivors and 5 crewmembers on board, Jolly 71 established a record for the number of people safely rescued by one helicopter.

As the overloaded Jolly 71 lifted off the airstrip, Captain Costa and two Knife flight engineers, SSgt Clarence Cossiboom from Knife 61 and MSgt Homer Ramsey from Knife 62, were left behind. One of the Americans used his survival radio to broadcast that there were still three survivors on the ground. Capt Gary Nelson, the pilot of Jolly 72, landed immediately and retrieved the three stranded Americans. It took a little more than an hour for the two HH-53s to deliver the survivors to NKP. Maj Conran's leg wound was treated at the base hospital and Colonel Silva and the two wounded Laos were transferred to the regional hospital at Udorn AB in Bangkok.

Aftermath

That was Phil Conran's last combat flight. He returned to the U.S. and his family shortly after the mission and was assigned to the 6594th Test Group at Hickam AFB, Hawaii. Colonel Silva recommended Major Conran for the Congressional Medal of Honor because of the bravery, leadership, and selfless acts of courage he exhibited that day. In 2019, Silva told Air Force magazine that he "lived to see another day because Conran risked his life to save me and my crew."

Domestic U.S. politics in 1969, however, prevented the award of the Medal of Honor to Major Conran. The war in Laos was still a "secret" war and President Nixon was not willing to admit to the American public what the U.S. was doing in what was supposedly a neutral country. Both before and after the incident at Muong Phine, the President stated that there were no American troops in Laos. A public award ceremony would have forced the President's hand. Instead, Major Conran received the Air Force Cross, the nation's second highest medal for courage under fire, and one that did not risk the publicity of a medal ceremony in the White House.

In 1995, U.S. operations in Laos were finally declassified and a number of awards for heroism during those operations were upgraded to reflect the original recommendations. One of those upgrades from Air Force Cross to Medal of Honor was for CMSgt Richard Etchberger, awarded posthumously in September 2010 by President Obama. (*Air Commando Journal*, vol. 1, no. 3, Spring 2012) Sadly, Major Conran's award has yet to be upgraded to truly recognize his selfless act of courage.

The upgrade of Major Conran's award has been sponsored by Conran's representatives in Congress and is strongly supported by those who were at Muong Phine that day and witnessed the Air Commando's courage. The upgrade effort continues.

About the Author: Lt Col (Retired) Rick Newton volunteers as an editor for and occasional contributor to the Air Commando Journal and to Air Commando Press, while also researching. writing about, and teaching air power and the multiple dimensions of irregular warfare.