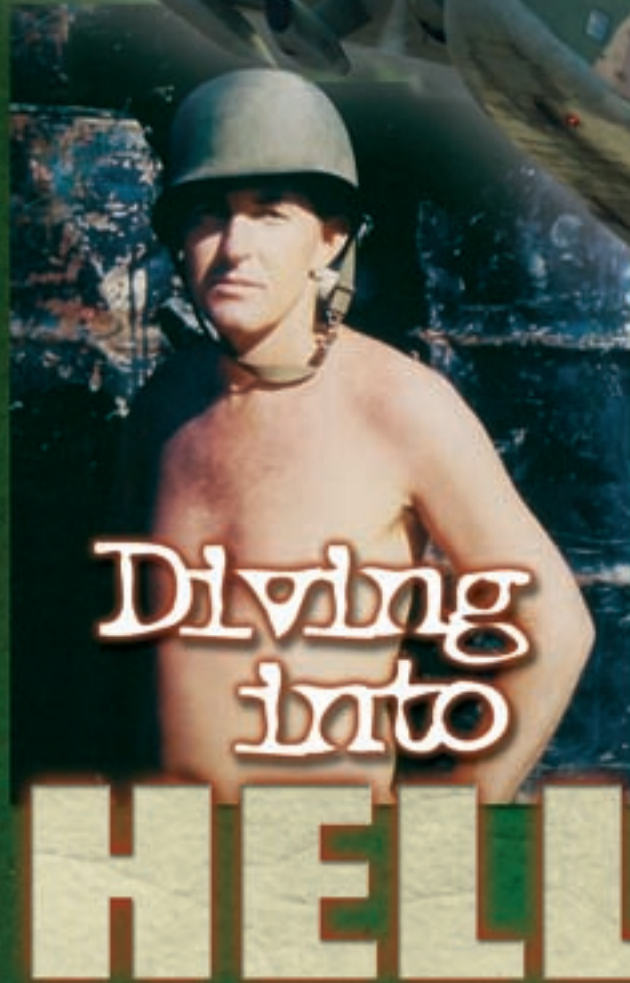


10,000 feet over Khy Sang  
and



## Diving into

# HELL

As a young boy, I wanted to do something very exciting. As I had my family's Cherokee blood running in my veins, I felt the need to explore things that carried lots of excitement. I decided to join the US Air Force and see the world. I am sure my family thought it would be a better idea than just becoming a farmer or whatever we did in those days.

After the Air Force basic training experience I traveled to Sheppard AFB for A & P School, then to Chanute Air Force Base for B-29 Superfortress R-3350 engine school at Chanute Air Force Base.

My mechanical aptitude helped me to become a flight engineer. I also attended US Army Parachutist Jump School at Fort Benning, Georgia, and Jungle Training in Panama. All of this training prepared me for many exploits I would encounter while flying with the 315th Air Commandos. Wow, now this was exciting. Here I was, an old farm boy from the flat lands of Oklahoma, flying in one of those big old airplanes.

*Written by Marshall Tall Eagle Serna as told by Dewey Shoemaker, retired Air Force Master Sergeant, who now lives in Salem, Oregon*

I arrived at a place called Vietnam. It was hot and so humid you could bathe in your own sweat. After some in-country processing, I found myself assigned to the 315th Air Commando at Phanrang in 1967. Phanrang had been used by various other countries, the Japanese, the French and I believe the Australians. Now it was our turn, the Air Force's best, the Air Commandos.

The principal duties of my unit were to make cargo drops and carry troops, alive, wounded and otherwise. We supported a number of Special Forces units throughout our area of operations, supplying them with their combat and personal needs. As we conducted many search and destroy missions, I found my jungle and jump training very useful. We flew various missions over Cambodia and Laos in support of Special Ops missions, of course the government denies that we were ever there.

Because of the many jumps I made in various combat zones, I was awarded the RVN Jump Wings. I also performed the duties of Flight Engineer, Load Master

## *I heard the loud sounds of bullets pounding our aircraft followed by a tremendous shock and loud explosion.*

and Para-rescue. The Air Force got their monies worth from our Air Commando unit. We went beyond the call of duty many times in places we were not supposed to be.

Sometime in December 1967 our plane, an unmarked C-123, was called on to deliver three large pallets of ammo to the besieged fighting Marines at Khe Sanh. As I recall, it was mid morning as we made our approach from an altitude of 10,000 feet onto the short runway at Khe Sanh. Many other flying units had already been making airdrops and landings on this bombed out airfield to deliver their precious cargo, food, ammo, medical supplies and other materials needed to fight off the Viet Cong that surrounded our Marines. These great guys needed all the help they could get and we were going to get them their desperately needed ammo one way or the other.

“Get ready for the ride of your life” our pilot radioed to the crew. We started a combat dive from 10,000 feet. The wind was warm. I admit I was worried that this just might be the day I would buy the farm. The angle of decent was steep and we held on to the cargo tie downs to keep from falling to the forward section of the plane. It seemed like it took forever to reach the well worn runway. It was not a perfect landing but it was a good one considering how quickly we touched down. The air was hot, we kicked up lots of dust and you could hear the louder noise of reversing the props and the applying of the brakes.

On the runway, near midfield was a damaged C-130 that had been hit by enemy fire before it could take off. I must admit this scene could put the word of Jesus in your mouth. Our pilot was responsible for taking all of us to hell and back in order to get this much needed ammo to our Marines. I later found out that the entire crew died in a burning inferno, unable to get out of the floundering C-130 we had taxied by on the runway. Flying crews all over Vietnam were respected for their bravery and pure guts.

Our skilled pilot taxied our aircraft to the drop area. Almost without stopping we lowered the rear loading ramp and started pushing the pallets out of the plane. We made an other successful drop. As our pilot hurried the aircraft back onto the runway without stopping I

could see the Marines on the ground rushing towards the pallets of ammo.

“Hold on” the pilot shouted. He was preparing us for a combat lift off as he didn’t want us to be an easy target for the Viet Cong who were surrounding Khe Sanh. The burned out C-130 was evidence of their marksmanship.

Our pilot did not want us to suffer the same fate as the C-130 on the runway. We gained speed as I placed myself on the right side of the aircraft about 5 or 6 feet from the left side loading door. This time as we held on the to cargo ties we prepared for a steep incline and braced ourselves for the ascent. My thoughts were get us the hell out of here. I prayed that we would gain altitude quickly and safely so that we could return to the relative safety of higher sky and



*We were able to continue down the runway and raced towards lift off speed.*



The C-123 Struggles to gain speed and altitude quickly to avoid enemy fire

deliver more supplies another day. I held on for dear life. Just as we the aircraft started to lift off the ground, something went wrong.

I heard the loud sounds of bullets pounding our aircraft followed by a tremendous shock and loud explosion. We were able to continue down the runway and raced towards lift off speed. As my eyes refocused I began to realize that we had major damage to the aircraft. The left side loading door was gone. I could hear a ripping as the skin of our aircraft peeled back. Rounds from the Viet Cong were continuing to pound our ticket home.

As bullets were hitting our aircraft, I felt a dull pain in my right shoulder. It seemed like a very long time until the raining ammunition stopped. It was replaced by the wind rushing past the gaping hole in our aircraft as we gained altitude. The safety of higher sky had arrived, but the damage of ground combat still had taken its toll.

One of our crew members started to walk toward

me. I think he knew that I was wounded. Only then did I notice I was hit in the right shoulder.

I yelled "Hey I've been hit". He grabbed some rags and placed them on my arm. I immediately felt the blood oozing down my arm and felt a sharp pain from the metal that had cut open my shoulder. The realization that I was wounded set in.

As the pain grew continually worse a crew member could tell that the pain was getting to be too much for me to handle. He immediately retrieved a tube of morphine from our aircraft medical kit. Upon returning he looked me in the eye and then injected me near the wound with the morphine. It seemed that within seconds the hard pain became bearable, he patched me up the best he could, helped me to sit down and strapped me in. I just wish I could remember his name so I could thank him for helping me that day.

Sitting there with the left loading door ripped away

*An angry person is seldom reasonable; a reasonable person is seldom angry.*

from the aircraft and the loud sound of the hot Vietnam wind rushing through, I knew that this wound was my ticket home, away from all of the carnage and death lurking at every corner just waiting to bite my skinny butt.

During our take off, a rocket had hit the rear loading door, and caused major damage to our rear loading ramp, rendering it in-operative. Burdened with a wounded crew member and a heavily damaged aircraft, our pilot had to do some quick thinking to get us all home safe while at the same time trying to save the aircraft.

He needed a place to land that was safe and where there was a medical unit to take care of me. I was the only one wounded on our aircraft that day. He decided our best bet would be to set down at the air field in Da Nang and he alerted the necessary folks there. There were emergency crews on stand by as we started our approach.

We knew that the rear ramp damage meant we were going to have to land with the ramp down. This would be adding lots dangerous sparks to our landing. As we descended towards the runway we became shocking aware of the impending danger. Of course the morphine had a calming effect for me so I was a little more at ease with this situation.

As our aircraft got closer I could see the fear in the eyes of the crew members. When we touched down I heard the agonizing sound of the rear ramp dragging across the run way. Sparks were flying all over. As we came to a stop, which seemed to be only a few minutes, the medics came aboard and gently took me off the aircraft. They rushed me to a US Navy medical unit there at the airfield.

The medics patched me up and gave me some more pain medications. After a two or three days of rest, the medical doctor examined me and instructed me to report to our base doctor as soon as we returned to Pranrang. While I was in their hospital our aircraft was getting re-fitted and the holes patched up, so that she would fly again. We were both receiving medical attention.

On the return flight to Pranrang we made a stop over and replaced our damaged aircraft for an other. Our ride to Pranrang was a very quite one.

My thoughts of getting a ticket home were not going to happen. After we landed at Pranrang, I report to our medical unit. The doc examined my wound, replaced the bandage and told me that when I could raise my arm up and down without pain I was good to return to duty.



Top: Propellers spin as the C-123 prepares for take off. Above: The actual C-123 used by the crew in this story. Note the lack of markings.

I made sure that within a week I could do as the doc instructed. Of course I had to fake a straight, “no pain” face which wasn’t easy, but he released me for full duty. I went back to flying with different crews, but at least I was back up in the heavens and performing my gallant duty once again.

The rest of my Vietnam tour was uneventful, other than a few more bullet holes in our aircraft. Returning to the states I was assigned at Castle Air Force Base in California and retired in 1978.

I have not been able to locate anyone who served with me during our flight over Khe Sanh. It would be nice to get in touch with some of those guys that went through the same events I did. I never did get a purple heart for my wound. I still suffer from long term memory lost which is a common symptom of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome.



Dewey Shoemaker  
USAF Master Sergeant (Ret.)