



FIST OF THE FLEET ASSOCIATION

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The Following Is a Compilation of Various Articles and Documents Related to VA-25's Air Support Efforts During the Battle of Lang Vei in February 1968

Narrative of events by Toby Rushforth as FAC on scene presented to Senator McCain's Staff

2-68 Rushforth - 1

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Unit and Year:

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FAC Support 1968: Battle for Lang Vei - Khe Sanh Hill 64!

[My first KSV Reunion My FAC perspective of the Battle for Lang Vei 7 February, 1968: Lang Vei 8 February, 1968: Hill 64, Alpha 1 Firefight and day after Lang Vei POSTLOG: At the KSV Reunion in San Diego - September, 2000](#)

It was late last Century, in fact, late in 1999, that I first became aware of the Khe Sanh Veterans' Association. I couldn't imagine how I missed it over all those years. I had been a Forward Air Controller, flying O-2 aircraft out of Hue Citadel and Danang AB in 1967-68. That was a very vital time in my life, as it certainly was for all of us. I looked forward to my first Khe Sanh Veterans Association Reunion in San Diego, during September, 2000. In preparation, I had a baseball cap embroidered with a FAC badge and my radio call signs. The idea was to help anyone who might have something in common, come up

and talk. That way I wouldn't have to go around tapping everyone on the shoulder to introduce myself and explain how an AF FAC ended up at a mainly Marine and Army/Special Ops type Reunion. I was somewhat prepared, because I had traded some correspondence with Ray Stubbe about the Association and about combat operations in and around Khe Sanh. I had also read his book, "Valley of Decision," and recognized a number of operations in which I had taken part. So, the idea of maybe getting to talk to guys that were on the ground during the Siege, while I was overhead, was curious and exciting.

My first KSV Reunion:

After I had checked into the Hotel in San Diego, I prepared for the cocktail hour around the pool in the courtyard. As I passed a profusion of guys, with lots of red on hats and shirts, bearing unit designations, it was a very comfortable feeling (for a guy who was virtually a total stranger to all). As I strode out by the pool, I hadn't gone more than 25 steps before I heard someone yell "Covey!" Geez! Did that feel good. I turned to be greeted by Jim Speer who had been on the USAF Combat Control Team there at KS. He was well acquainted with a number of FACs that we knew mutually, who had been in and out of KS early in the Siege. It was a neat way to start out the Reunion, as I noted with some satisfaction, that my "hat trick" had worked. Jim had apparently been to previous Reunions and quickly began to fill me in. As the conversation moved between people, places and events, I mentioned that I had been at Lang Vei the morning it was overrun. Jim quickly pointed out a fellow a couple of tables away and said he was there during the battle. I thanked Jim and quickly moved over to stand next to this fellow who was engaged in conversation with a couple others. There was a certain intensity, yet off-handedness about him. I must have moved in such a way that he got a hint I was waiting to talk with him. He briefly paused and looked up at me. I asked if he had been at Lang Vei when it was overrun. He looked at me with both surprise and curiosity and said, "Why yes I was." I explained that I was an AF Forward Air Controller who had been there that morning after the North Vietnamese had overrun the camp. As we ran through a quick Battle chronology of that fateful morning of 7 February, 1968, he talked about how he had evaded during the battle, and showed up later in the PM after much of the process of evacuating survivors was about concluded. At that point, I blurted out: "Wait a minute, you aren't 'Spunky Hanson 28 Bravo' are you?" He looked startled and said "yes I am." I paused, then said "we had assumed you were killed by the North Vietnamese!" It's hard to explain, but this turned into quite an emotional moment. Who knows how and where that wells up from? Let's go back to recount events long past.

[^ Top](#)

My FAC perspective of the Battle for Lang Vei:

I had been in country and at Danang AB for a few months and by that time, was feeling pretty confident about myself as a Forward Air Controller. By that I mean I had not only survived getting shot at pretty regularly, but managed to live through some episodes of "the stupids" in which I was lucky not to have killed myself. Early in the tour, I sometimes even wondered if I wasn't as much a threat to friend as to foe. In any event, at this point,

Captain Rushforth was more of a steely-eyed predator (in his own mind). In January '68, along with other FACs, I was shifted from the "Tally Ho" mission, above the DMZ to "Operation Niagra" over Khe Sanh and its approaches. As we became better acquainted with our new mission area, it was clear that something unusual was in the offing. Signs of enemy activity on the approaches from the North and West were particularly revealing. On the night of 25 January, the Laotian community at Ban Houaysan (otherwise called "Elephant") was overrun [several miles West of Lang Vei, along Route 9]. Among the intelligence reported by us FACs was that there were tracked vehicle impressions all along Route 9, both East and West of "Elephant." In fact, it was later reported by a FAC that we had killed a tank during that battle (however, the tank quickly disappeared). After the battle, the Laotians and their Vietnamese (ARVN) Ranger liaison retreated to the Special Forces Camp at Lang Vei.

[^ Top](#)

7 February, 1968: Lang Vei:

This account of happenings on 7 and 8 February, 1968 is from my diary and reflects the facts as I knew them and my feelings at the moment. Well! Gerry Harrington and John Buckles had their work cut out for them last night. Lang Vei was being overrun by a large enemy force supported by at least 9 tanks. They said it was an unbelievable sight, walls of tracers, explosions, what looked like flame throwers, yelling on the radios and tanks rolling right over the tops of friendly bunkers. They had difficulty sorting out targets on the ground, but said they did have a B-57 drop some what we called "funny bombs" (a frag and hot chemical explosive pattern) on tanks breaching the Camp's Southwestern perimeter. They thought the tanks were disabled by that strike? I got up about 0500. After a fairly inclusive Intelligence briefing on what little was known about the battle, I moved quickly for the flight line and finished the preflight. Aircraft # 396 was in good shape. It had a standard wing load, two pods of 2.75" white phosphorous rockets, a total of 14. The sense of urgency began to grow as I made the radio calls and taxied for takeoff at Danang. The weather was not that good. I'd have to climb on instruments to get on top and cruise to the Khe Sanh area, then figure out how to get under the clouds and over to Lang Vei. I took off at 0710. After about 40 anxious minutes enroute I used heading time and distance to get down through the clouds West of Lang Vei. Cloud bases were ragged at about 1000 feet above the terrain. Following Route 9 back to the East, I approached the Camp, and checked in with "Covey 688," a FAC from Ubon, Thailand who was currently in charge of air operations over the battle area. I could see his O-2 ahead, between cloud layers (forming a sort of fishbowl), circling over patches of occasional trees and brush, which were intermittently visible. Columns of smoke drifted up through the low clouds that were virtually settled on the Camp and the rolling terrain around it. It was about 0800 as I fell into loose trail formation with 688 to listen and try to figure out what was happening. I would be taking over shortly. Our Special Ops personnel, call sign "Spunky Hanson," were holed up in their Tactical Operations Center (TOC). They were talking to 688 via FM radio. The NVA were swarming all over the TOC, throwing satchel charges, plus smoke and frag grenades down the ventilation shafts and any place they could find access. Spunky Hanson 15A and some CIDG, who had stormed the Camp to rescue the troops, were pinned down by machine gun fire. 688 told them to withdraw so he could bring in some A-1, Skyraiders (Canasta Flight) with lots of guns and ordnance to get the NVA off the TOC. He had the A-1s hold while he dove his O-2 through a "sucker

hole" to see if the A-1s could work under these conditions. The terrain was actually in and out of the clouds, an extremely treacherous operation to attempt. I virtually held my breath waiting for him to pop up through the clouds, all the while fearing a flash and column of black smoke would appear instead. After what seemed like forever, his O-2 popped up through the clouds and he began to talk with the A-1s. It was very risky. They would be in and out of the clouds and in the tree-tops. All the Canasta pilots (4) agreed to give it a try. They formed a "daisy chain" behind 688 and one after the other, dove through the hole in the clouds to see if 688 could lead them close enough to engage the NVA on the TOC. After a short time 688 came back up through the cloud deck. Now we had four A-1s in a tree-top free for all, ripping up the landscape, mainly with their guns, strafing the TOC and area around it. I again held my breath, while from an altitude of about 800 feet, except for the drone of my engines things seemed ghostly quiet. Time was suspended. Again, the tell-tale smoke of an air ground disaster was almost an expectation. When the A-1s came back above the clouds, time started again. Spunky Hanson, in a quiet tone, said they were apparently successful, as the enemy activity on the TOC had ceased, at least temporarily. I was greatly relieved that the Canasta flight got the job done and were all still flying. It was an amazing feat of airmanship. The A-1 guys were all balls. It was not hard to envision those four A-1s ripping through the treetops, in and out of the cloud bases, high-G turns at treetop level, firing away at the TOC and somehow not hitting each other. By now, the inside of my cockpit windows was getting pretty well covered with my grease pencil notes about what was going on and who all the players were. That was a pretty standard practice for FACs, trying to keep track of what is happening on the ground while managing all aspects of the air support.

The clouds were beginning to break up, revealing much of the Camp. The TOC had a tank on its side adjacent to it, and the trail/road coming up from the river, down by Route 9 (at the Laos border) had two tanks knocked out at about the Camp perimeter. I took pictures of the Camp and the tanks with my Intel Nikon Telephoto. At about this point, 688 had an engine acting up and had to depart for home. I took over the air operation. The A-1s, bless 'em, were still able to loiter and had napalm and 250/500 lb. bombs remaining. Meanwhile, we had been trying to coordinate a rescue effort from Khe Sanh. First word was that a ground team would not be sent, because the NVA had certainly set up ambushes at advantageous points along the way. It was also stated that a Helo-Assault Evacuation would not be attempted for awhile due to weather conditions. As disappointing as this was to us, it made our course of action clear. We had to conduct a holding action to keep the NVA away from the TOC until help arrived. Perhaps Spunky Hanson 15A and the local troops could fight their way in? It wasn't long before Spunky Hanson (SH) came up on "Fox Mike" (FM) again, relating that the NVA were back. "They're all over us out there. Give 'em everything you've got," SH said. At this point, he seemed calm and almost resigned to his fate. Initially the fighters were pressing so hard to be effective that after release, the bombs didn't even have time to arm and hit the ground as duds. In one case that may have saved us an A-1. I had aligned myself, coming right "down the chute" behind him on his bomb run. His bomb release was very close to the ground, a dud, which kicked up the dirt. The dirt then briefly swirled behind as the A-1 flew through the dirt plume. If it had gone off, it might have nailed him. The A-1 pilots quickly adjusted and managed to keep the NVA occupied with their remaining ordnance.

I asked SH if they could come out and make a run for it. "We've got badly wounded people down here that can't move, some may even be dead. We're not coming out until you come and get us." We periodically continued our calls for reinforcements and hoped for a helo evacuation task force. It wasn't happening and we were hearing words like it wasn't going to happen for awhile. I couldn't understand what the problem was? It was frustrating! Meanwhile, Spunky Hanson 15A was having a hell of a time getting the CIDG

and Elephant people to move against that machine gun and mortar fire. SH15A, a Sgt Ashley, went back to get a 37MM Recoiless Rifle to bring fires upon the NVA positions. He subsequently knocked out at least two of the NVA gun positions with the weapon. Even then, he and the Bru / Elephant troops were again driven back. At about this time, I noted a green smoke on the Northeast perimeter of the Camp. Even from 500 ft., I couldn't determine its origin. Was it a friendly trying to let me know he was there? Was it the NVA trying to spoof me so I wouldn't bomb him/them? I never did figure that one out, but elected not to bomb that area unless I determined it to be the enemy, or absolutely had to. Hobo 01 and 02 then arrived to replace the Canasta Flight. I had them work on the West side of the compound, around the TOC with CBU (cluster bombs), napalm and strafe. They did a terrific job, but the NVA were still not ready to back off. At this point, my own front engine overheated, coughing and sputtering from being run at full throttle for hours. That really caught me in the gut. I could just see a forced landing among the NVA down there, after beating them up all morning. Not good!

Major John Seats, another Covey FAC (Bruce Goodhue I believe) took over for me and continued the holding action, while waiting for the reinforcements we assumed would be coming sometime soon. The engine continued to shudder and sputter, but held together well enough to climb out of the area enroute to Danang. The landing was uneventful, and I proceeded directly to the Intelligence debriefing room where I was told to call directly to Headquarters 7th Air Force in Saigon. A Colonel answered the phone and began the debriefing. When I mentioned tanks, he fired off and as much as called Captain Rushforth a liar or maybe just mistaken? After all we had been reporting that day and for weeks prior, I thought it incredible that he was questioning me like this. He was so adamant I became adversarial in tone, if not in words, and described the vehicles as "ya know, they have tracks on both sides, this thing that looked just like a turret on top, with a big long thing sticking out of it (like maybe a big gun)!?" Not only that, I was only 500ft. above them. To my amazement, he still wasn't buying it? I played my Ace of Spades -- "I have pictures!" "Pictures," he shouted! You get them right over to the photo lab and we'll divert a plane to pick them up immediately! I did, and he did, like within the hour. I'm sure the pictures were great on the briefing circuit (they came out well), but we never heard about them again. Note: So far, the most comprehensive account I have read, of what happened on the ground during this battle is "The Night of the Silver Stars," by William R. Phillips, published in 1997 as part of the Naval Institute Special Warfare Series. It was indeed a night of heroism and gallantry. Among decorations the defenders received: a Medal of Honor, a Distinguished Service Cross, 19 Silver Stars and 3 Bronze Stars with "V" for valor as well as numerous other awards and decorations.

[▲ Top](#)

8 February, 1968: Hill 64, Alpha 1 Firefight and day after Lang Vei:

These are the thoughts and experiences recorded on 8 February, the day after the Lang Vei Battle. Back in my quarters at 2200, after a full day at Khe Sanh, then debriefings and planning. 0550: It was hard getting up. The bed (eat your heart out guys) really felt good. Got mission briefing for the KS area and things had apparently gotten quiet. The expectation was that the NVA were repositioning for another direct assault in strength, on Khe Sanh. The weather at Danang, enroute and on the Khe Sanh plateau was poor. At

Personal Equipment, Scottie, was in rough shape, really bleary eyed. He'd been up for about 24 hours. I had some maintenance problems, but pressed on. Aircraft #331 was really in pretty good shape. (Note: this is the O-2 currently on display at the USAF Air Museum at Wright Patterson AFB.) 0645: Take off and climb enroute was all weather until on top at 10,000 feet. Using the same procedure as yesterday, I went out into the flatlands in Laos so I could let down through the clouds without hitting anything. I broke out of the clouds at about 1000 feet above the terrain, found Route 9, and followed it back toward Lang Vei. Joe Johnson, Covey 251, was in the area ahead of me and we began to coordinate areas to Recce so we wouldn't be hitting each other in the low clouds. Lang Vei appeared to be abandoned. There were several hundred refugees on Route 9 between Khe Sanh City and Lang Vei, headed West? Guess they know where the action will be. The Marines didn't know who they were and were seriously thinking of putting artillery on them. I had to make sure - low pass on the tree tops - oops! Damn trees all around me, zipping by the wings. The tops were defoliated and I hadn't seen them - very tall. The refugees were mainly women & children carrying belongings, etc. - old men, some younger. That sure tore at me. Those poor people just don't know where to go - getting it from both sides, one way or another. So - so sad! I felt as though I could actually see it on their faces. Garden Valley 14 Actual at Khe Sanh called - need air to hit mortar and rocket positions just WSW, off the runway, on the ridgeline. Joe Johnson, Covey 251, went out to the West, along Route 9 at about the border to escort some fighters into the area through the cloud layers. We got Canasta 403, a flight of 4 A-1Hs (Navy). They were loaded with bombs (250lb & 500lb) and 20MM strafe. After pre-briefing the fighters, and discussing tactics, I marked the ridgeline targets with one of my 2.75" "Willie Pete" (white phosphorous) rockets and cleared them in "hot." We quickly got two secondary explosions indicating that the bombs had indeed found worthy targets. However, at this point, Garden Valley 14 Actual asked us to hold off on the airstrike and to my amazement, briefed me on a firefight on a nearby hill last night. HILL 64: Garden Valley 14 Actual described the hill and events as they knew them. The hill wasn't apparent on my map, but there was no doubt that there was still a firefight of some sort going on just to my South. The NVA assaulted the hill in force during the night (mortars, rockets and ground assault) and there was ferocious hand to hand combat as the night wore on. The main base supported the marines in the hilltop defensive positions with direct fire on the East face of the hill (toward the main base) from heavy weapons. However, the NVA simply moved to the back side of the hill to continue the assault. Garden Valley 14 Actual had not talked to the defenders for some time. Apparently their radios were destroyed or lost in the battle. GV14A said " We don't know what is going on up there. We don't know if our guys are still defending in the trenches, or whether they were driven out of the trenches and are trying to get back in?" My immediate reaction was "How come you didn't tell me this sooner? Here we were dropping bombs on a ridgeline, when we had nearby troops in contact?" Couldn't dwell on that. Had to get busy. I decided that the only way to sort out who was where, was to make a low pass and look in the trenches. From about 1500 feet, I could see explosions and tracers on the hill, but not much more. I planned to get that little sucker going as fast as I could, in a dive from the base side of the Hill where there were fewer NVA. I dove, at full power, on the Eastern base of the hill, then snapped it up over the defensive trench lines in about 90 degrees of bank at about 150-200 feet. As I flashed over the trenches at about 230 knots I saw troops in hand to hand combat, grenades going off in the trenches, and about a grand total of 60 troops. The NVA were caught off guard by the pass, but hosed me down real good anyway. As I dove down the opposite side of the hill I thought, "how do I get back to altitude with this little thing without giving the bad guys a great tail shot at me hanging on a sky hook? I flew away for a while, dodging

trees, then began my climb while I tried to digest what I had seen. The predominance of the guys in the trenches were wearing flak vests, and a number had on US style helmets. "That's it!" The good guys are still duke-ing it out in the trenches with the bad guys. I notified GV14A of my conclusions and told them we were going to start putting the fighters on the exterior of the hill and its North and West approaches. I briefed the A-1s on the situation and what we were going to do about it. I had them come in from the North to strafe the bases of the hill and work the strafe up the hill toward the trenchlines. These guys really got down in the weeds for this one, so they could see the whites of their eyes. The A-1s looked beautiful, terrific, skimming through the treetops, blazing away. Sure wish I had one of them. Next it was the bombs in the trees and brush along the Western base of the hill. Seemed like this suppressed the NVA for awhile, but they were soon up and at it again. I know we got a mess of 'em, but they were still ready to join the fight. We had put in an emergency request for prop aircraft that could operate in these mountains, ridges, valleys in this weather. The A-1s were always preferred, because they could carry so much ordnance and loiter for 4 hours or so (depending upon how far they had to travel). Joe Johnson, again went West to rendezvous and escort them back to the battle area. However, we were getting short on fuel. Bruce Goodhue, Covey 226, arrived and took over air support for the Hill. He had some A-26s enroute (twin engine, WWII, Korea vintage). They are also great for close air support, working close in bad weather, and being able to hang around for awhile. As Joe Johnson and I were preparing to leave, we spotted some troops in the open on the backside of the hill headed for the adjacent ridge to the West. With great satisfaction we both unloaded 27, 2.75" white phosphorous rockets on them. We were on target, but had to RTB (Return to Base) due to lack of fuel, and did not get a good assessment of the situation after our attack. Enroute Danang: I get a crazy feeling flying around watching those poor guys in the trenches getting blown up. How would I feel if I was down there. Hard to think about. Got a touch of that invincibility complex again too - I was awful low and they were shooting like hell. I'd have given anything for a mini-gun. I was about fired up enough to strafe with my M-16 out the cockpit window. Maybe we shoulda gone to Dong Ha for a load of HE rockets from the Army guys? Hell! For awhile there we were about the only ones that could fly in that weather (500'-1000' overcast, scattered to broken scud from 500' to 1700'). Had trouble letting down into Danang for landing. The base was shrouded in a thick overcast. Their radar was overloaded, so I had "Panama" GCI Radar vector me down over the South China Sea. Broke out of the clouds at about 500' above the water. Hmmm! An aircraft Carrier right over there! If I had come through the clouds a little further to the left, I might have made a real mess. Really had to piss bad - went right there on the O-2 maintenance ramp. Called the Tac Air Control Center to debrief, got something to eat and went back to Intel for a detailed debrief for the rest of the troops. My pictures of the tanks at Lang Vei yesterday came out very well and are a great hit on the briefing circuit. Blah! Yesterday, Spunky Hanson 15A, a Sgt Ashley, was killed on the 5th assault to rescue the troops in the TOC at Lang Vei. There were more than 9 guys rescued, not sure exactly. Tony Sazanovich was the FAC in charge for the chopper evac, yesterday afternoon. He did a hell of a job. They got the crap shot out of them, but got all but one of the troops out? They also got some CIDG and Elephant people out, though I understand it was ugly. Initially the Helos couldn't take off because they were overweight with people hanging on the skids. Had to knock (shoot?) some off or lose the whole mission and get everyone killed. During all this Tony Sazanovich was contacted by a Special Ops troop who had apparently been evading after the Camp was overrun. His call sign was "Spunky Hanson 28 Bravo." SH28B came out of the trees at the old Lang Vei Camp to where Tony could see him. The Helo Evac force was already fully (over) loaded and pulling out to head for Khe Sanh. It became apparent that the Helos

were out of the picture and Tony was preparing to land on the torn up, bombed out, airstrip at the old Camp. However, a large number of NVA arrived first and chased SH28B back into the trees and brush. Tony related that it looked like a lot of shooting during the chase. Last transmission from SH28B was "They're coming up from the other side of the strip." No way SH28B will come out of that alive. If Tony had tried to land for SH28B, it would have been nothing short of a miracle if they made it off the ground. The front prop had only 10" clearance and the ground was too irregular. It would have caught in the dirt and debris. Meanwhile, today on the hill West of Khe Sanh, Bruce Goodhue worked some more A-1s (Canasta flight), A-26s (Nimrods) and T-28s (Zorro) on the NVA around the hill. They did a great job. When it was over, the good guys were able to get up, clear the outpost, and walk off the hill. After discussions with the relief force from the main base, they went up and reoccupied the hill. After the battle, first glance showed about 50 NVA bodies, plus plenty of captured weapons. [Understand that later a total of 150 NVA bodies were found, along with a number of machine guns, etc.] Fingerpaint 50 (Marine FAC) did trap 2 tanks in the river Southwest of Lang Vei, and Covey 672 had some "tracked vehicles" pinned down near "Elephant." Hope this weather breaks soon. If it does, we could really clean their clock.

[^ Top](#)

POSTLOG: At the KSV Reunion in San Diego - September, 2000

So here I am, with a lump in my throat and a tear in my eye, shaking hands with Spunky Hanson 28 Bravo - after all these years. His name is Dennis Thompson. I have since found out that he was captured and escaped several times during the next few days. He was a rather belligerent cuss and not amenable to being a prisoner. For this, he got lots of broken bones and worse. After a nightmarish 6 month trek to Hanoi, he was incarcerated with the other POWs, until the end of the war. Dennis is a retired Command Sergeant Major of the Special Operations Command and, wouldn't ya' know, he was the featured speaker at our KSV Reunion Banquet. We've gotten a lot better acquainted since then. Dennis has a line on all the survivors of the Lang Vei Battle and some of us who supported in one way or another. We plan to meet this September in Las Vegas. On the other hand, we have been trying very hard to find Tony Sazanovich, the FAC who was flying over Dennis when he was captured. No luck yet. We'd also like to find that "Covey 688," from Ubon, who was there at Lang Vei that morning. So why do I like Reunions? Gee, hard to figger out! This is only one story. Note: For those that haven't read it, the best account I've found of the Battle for Hill 64, on 8 February 1968, is in Chapter 16 of Eric Hammel's book, "KHE SANH, Siege in the Clouds." It was only during the reading of this book that I began to realize that the 8 February, 1968 entry in my diary was about "Alpha-1" in this Battle.

Toby Rushforth Covey 252 Danang AB '67-'68

The following page is a message from Captain James E. Biltz, USAF who also was on scene as a FAC at Lang Vei.

20TH MEDICAL AIR SUPPORT SQUADRON PACAF
DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
ATTACHMENT 12 UBON THAILAND
APO SAN FRANCISCO 96337

FROM: JAMES E. BILTZ, Captain, USAF

11 Feb 68

TO: COMMANDER, ATTACK SQUADRON 25

1. On 7 Feb 68, while working in support of Khe Sanh AB, RVN, I was called upon to assist in the rescue of eight U.S. Army Special Forces personnel trapped inside a bunker at their outpost at Lang Vei, RVN. The camp had been overrun by NVA regulars and the eight troops were the only survivors remaining within the confines of the camp.
2. Upon request to the ABCCC for air to support the withdrawal of the friendly troops, I was sent a Canasta 402 flight. This flight of four ALH's remained over the target for fifty minutes and was instrumental in successful withdrawal of seven of the eight Army personnel. As a note of interest the eighth man was later rescued.
3. Through Canasta flights' pinpoint bombing and strafing, all resistance was reduced along the avenue of escape which the survivors had selected. When the friendly troops finally made their dash for freedom, the flight made continuous dry passes over them at extremely low altitudes and succeeded in thwarting any attempts by the enemy to stop the survivors withdrawal.
4. I consider it an honor to have had the privilege of controlling this flight of highly professional and devoted pilots. Through their efforts, eight men were saved from an almost sure death at the hands of the enemy.
5. For their exceptional performance, one of the finest that I've seen in eight months as a FAC, I recommend that your unit's Awards and Decorations officer submit them for the Distinguished Flying Cross.

James E. Biltz

JAMES E. BILTZ
Captain USAF



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This is a copy of an article by "Speed" Ritzmann who participated in the Lang Vei Close Air Support (CAS) effort to rescue the SF members on 7 Feb 68. Unfortunately LCDR Ritzmann passed away shortly after submitting this material to the Lang Vei website in 2008.

William H. Ritzmann, Jr. Lieutenant Commander, USN(Ret),

for which "thank you" is far insufficient.... If it wasn't for the air support from these fine men, I would not be typing this today. (RA)



Last November, Attack Squadron 25, (VA-25), United States Navy, held a reunion in Pensacola, Florida. We, the veterans of the squadron, are under the impression that VA-25, (now redesignated VFA-25), has the longest continuous service of any squadron serving aboard Aircraft Carriers in the Navy today. The history of the squadron may be found at; <http://www.fistofthefleet.org/>

First, although I ventured into "Harms Way" periodically, ("it was my job"), I always considered; Medics/Corpsman, Rescue Helo Pilots and Crewmen, Special Forces/Seals, and Forward Air Controllers on a higher rung of the "Ladder of Risk" than I ever was. Again, thank you for your service to our country.

Secondly, the research of the on-line documentation, (including the post war testimony of the North Vietnamese), that we did to prepare our presentation at last November's Reunion, persuaded some of us that the Battle of Lang Vei was arguably as pivotal as say, the Battle of the Bulge in WWII. Therefore, we are kind of proud we were able to do what we were trained for in support of your efforts.

Sadly, I do not have any photos of the Lang Vei area on the battle day. Nor do I think any of my squadron mates had any time to snap any pics either. The type of runs we made under the overcast were too much of a handful to permit me the use of a camera. Due to the number of assets that were there when I arrived, I was directed to make a single pass, and salvo my two Mk 117's and six Mk71's "on the bunker". I did however, notice two of the tanks that were destroyed and numerous bodies on the ground. I could not tell whether those bodies were friendly, enemy, or alive during my one pass.

I have attached a pic, "NL405onCVA43". I believe it was taken to recognize the young man, Ltjg. Ted Hill, as the pilot of the last A-1 Skyraider attack mission in the U.S. Navy. After his mission on February 20, 1968, all other Close Air Support and Rescue Combat Air Patrol missions were flown by the USAF Sandy Skyraiders. A few days later, the Coral Sea and its Air Wing departed for home via The Sea of Japan to "show the flag" during the USS Pueblo incident.

In the picture I have been able to identify the fourteen squadron pilots who flew in the six missions in support of the battle. I've italicized the numbers of their flight, the position in that flight and a time. (ie. "(1-2-0100)", indicates the first flight - wing position - approximate time each flight came under the FAC's control). The listing below, identifies each pilot that flew in our six support missions.

The picture is from the USS Coral Sea, CVA-43, taken circa February 21, 1968. The occasion was a presentation to Ltjg. Ted Hill, for piloting the final combat mission of VA-25, in the last U.S Navy, A-1H/J Skyraider, Canasta 405, Bureau (Serial) Number 135300. The pic includes all the VA-25 squadron pilots and the other officers in the squadron.

Presenting the award to Ltjg. Ted Hill, (6-4,1500), (standing center), are (standing left), Cdr. Cliff Church, CO VA-25, (3-1-0945) and (standing right), Capt Bill Shawcross CO, USS Coral Sea, CVA-43.

Sitting on the wing are(l to r) Lcdr. Carter Moser, Lcdr. Ralph Smith, (5-1-1330), Lt. Al Nichols, (5-2-1330), Ltjg. Bob Hagen, (3-2-0945), Ltjg. Bruce Marcus, (4-2-1215), and Lt McGee.

Standing in same order, CDR Stu Skelton, XO, (6-1-1500), Lt. Zip Rausa, (1-1-0730), Ltjg. Dale Pellot, (2-2-0930), Lcdr Speed Ritzmann, (4-1-1215), Ltjg. Larry Gardiner, (1-2-0730), Ltjg. Chuck Thom, (2-1-0930), Lcdr. Ron Bolt, (6-3-1500), Lcdr. Jack McDermott, and Ltjg Jay Stone. Missing from the photo is Lt. Jack Jordan, (6-2-1500).

Toby, It would appear from your e-mail that Bruce Marcus and I checked in with the FAC about 1215, which would be after you departed at 1100. It's doubtful we shared air space with you then. My log book indicates I flew Canasta 405 in the pic above on that mission.

As an aside, that airplane was in the flight that scored the first air-to-air cannon kill of a North Vietnamese MiG in June of 1965. Since Canasta 405, (Bureau Number 135300), flew the last Skyraider attack mission, it was retired and now sits in the Museum of Naval Aviation in Pensacola. (They still allow us that flew her to climb into the cockpit when we visit.)

William H. Ritzmann, Jr.

"Why am I telling you this? The Squadron call-sign is "Canasta". Toby Rushforth in his FAC Perspective of the Battle of Lang Vei, referred to our A-1's as the "Canasta Flights". I am one of twelve of our pilots that flew sorties from the USS Coral Sea to the Lang Vei Special Forces Camp on February 7, 1968. You probably do not know how pleased all of us in the squadron were, when the news came back to the ship that, "The survivors that were trapped in the bunker, had managed to vacate the bunker and run down the road to Khe Sanh". I wish to take this opportunity to thank you, and the other members of your detachment for your service to our country.....God Speed."

Sincerely, William H. Ritzmann, Jr. Lieutenant Commander, USN(Ret)

Outline/Timeline of Events Presented to Senator McCain's Staff



FIST OF THE FLEET ASSOCIATION

Email: fist@fistofthefleet.org

Web: www.fistofthefleet.org

THE BATTLE OF LANG VEI

The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) began their assault on the Special Forces base at Lang Vei the night of Feb 6, 1968. This is the first use of tanks by NVA in the south.

The battle rages through the night into the morning and on to late afternoon of the 7th with the NVA overrunning the camp. Special Forces (SF) troops are holed up in the Tactical Operations Center (TOC) and being heavily assaulted by troops and tanks.

Around 0800 USAF Captain Toby Rushforth, call sign Covey 252, a Forward Air Controller (FAC) from DaNang, arrived on scene where another FAC, Covey 688, was beginning to work with a Canasta flight of 4 A-1H Skyraiders from VA-25 aboard Coral Sea (CVA-43). "Canasta" is their tactical call sign.

The weather was marginal at best with fog and clouds from the ground up to a ragged 1,000 overcast and irregular hilly terrain.

The first two Canastas with LCDR Zip Rausa as flight leader and LTJG Larry Gardiner, his wingman, agree to follow Covey 688 in a daisy chain pattern into the clouds and fog to attack virtually at ground level.

Covey 688 eventually leaves the scene and Toby Rushforth (Covey 252) takes over as FAC directing the attacks by the Canasta flights. Along with subsequent VA-25 aircraft on scene, they continue to drive back the NVA using the daisy chain pattern. A total of thirteen VA-25 pilots take part in this extended battle to help rescue the SF detachment at Lang Vei. Fourteen SF members are finally rescued and able to egress from Lang Vei.

After returning to the ship and during their transit home to the states, the Carrier Air Group Commander (CAG) would not endorse recommendations for citations for the VA-25 pilots because they had broken the Rules of Engagement (ROE) by flying too low. This new effort to recognize these men for their valor has arisen after veterans of the battle attended a Lang Vei reunion and the Special Forces survivors were astonished to learn that the Navy had never recognized the VA-25 pilots for saving their lives.

The following recommendations for citations were submitted to the Navy in the fall of 2011:

Zip Rausa	Navy Cross	Deceased
Larry Gardiner	Navy Cross	
Bruce Marcus	Silver Star	
Aubry Nichols	Silver Star	
Robert Hagen	Silver Star	
William Ritzmann	Silver Star	Deceased
Chuck Thom	Silver Star	
Dale Pellot	Silver Star	Deceased
Cliff Church	Silver Star	
Jack Jordan	Silver Star	
Ron Bolt	Silver Star	Deceased
Ted Hill	Silver Star	
Stewart Skelton	Silver Star	

The submission of these citation recommendations has gained support from both Senator Saxby Chambliss of Georgia and Senator Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire.

The awards are awaiting letters and documentation from the FAC's and surviving members of the SF on the ground at Lang Vei who actually witnessed the events surrounding the VA-25 Canasta pilots' involvement.

We are hopeful that Senator McCain will consider adding his support to this effort to properly recognize some of his fellow Naval Aviators who have, for too long, been overlooked for their valor.

For further reference regarding the Battle of Lang Vei please visit www.LangVei.com

Very Respectfully,

Gary Kerans
President
Fist of the Fleet Association (FOFA)
www.fistofthefleet.org

Following is a copy of the letter that was hand delivered to Senator McCain in March 2013 with the above items.

Hand Delivered
March 28, 2013
The Honorable John McCain
Senate Russell Building
Washington, DC

Dear Senator McCain:

Attached are three documents related to the Battle of Lang Vei, February 6, 1968, in South Vietnam. They contain (1) a Summary of the Battle of Lang Vei, the participation of pilots of VA-25 in the battle and request for support (2) Testimonial of Toby Rushford (Forward Air Controller) who directed the air battle and (3) Testimonial of William Ritzmann, deceased, a pilot with VA-25 who fought in the battle.

The issue is the fact that none of the VA-25 pilots were recognized for their meritorious action in the Battle of Lang Vei.

Although I was not a member of VA-25, as a Vietnam Veteran and Naval Aviator, I am very interested in supporting this matter. Therefore, I am joining with the Fist of the Fleet Association in asking for your support in appropriately recognizing the VA-25 pilots who have, for too long, been overlooked for their heroism.

Thank you for your many years of service to the Nation as a Naval Officer and your continued service to Arizona and America in the U.S. Congress.
Sincerely,

Malcolm Barrett
2054 N. Old Kettle Drive
Prescott, AZ 86305
928-776-1881
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For additional information about VA-25 and the Lang Vei battle see our Fist of the Fleet Association Newsletters located on the News page from July 2013 thru July 2014 at www.fistofthefleet.org.