

**Shoot-Down at Katum Special Forces Camp (ODA-322)**  
**Northern Tay Ninh Province**  
**C-130B, 61-0965\***  
**Aircraft TDY from 772d TAS, Clark AFB\***  
**23 June 1969**  
**Reg Manning**  
**Command Sergeant Major (Ret)**  
*(part 1 of 2 parts)*

**The Katum (A-322) Special Forces Camp was opened officially on 21 February 1968 in northern Tay Ninh Province. It was a border surveillance camp located just slightly more than 4 kilometers south of the Cambodian border in War Zone C. All resupply was by air onto the 2900-foot North-South runway which had been built on top of an old unused road. Or by Huey helicopters onto the pad within the West starpoint inside the camp or by Chinook helicopters onto the chopper pad just East of the runway.**

**Katum had long had a reputation as a "hot trip" for the Air Force crews making resupply runs from Bien Hoa or Tan Son Nhut. Every fixed wing aircraft or helicopter which landed could count on being mortared while on the ground or at any time during the landing and take off. Additionally, there was at least one crew-served weapon located to fire on approaching and departing aircraft. All approaches were from the south and departures were also to the south. Nobody flew north of the camp except the F-4's, B-52's, Cobras, and MEDEVAC Hueys. Too many bad guys with guns up there.**

**Staff Sergeant (E-6) John Campbell (Junior Commo Man) and I (Senior Medic) had been out on a 5 day sweep straight north from Katum up to the Cambodian border, then turned East along the border for about 4 clicks. We had a 40-man Combat Recon Platoon (some of our better troops) and had had a relatively quiet time on this excursion.**

**On day five, we had started back sort of Southwesterly in the general direction of Katum. Just taking it slow and easy because we didn't want to enter the camp confines until after dark anyhow. That way, the bad guys perched up in the trees with the glasses wouldn't know if we were back inside or still out roaming around out to the Northeast.**

**About 2.5 clicks Northeast of Katum, we pulled up in a real thick place to eat the absolute last of our rations at about noontime. Then, the CIDG (Civilian Irregular Defense Group) have to take pak-time. Everybody takes a nap. The good guys. . the bad guys, everybody. The whole war comes to a screeching halt for pak-time.**

**So, we'd eaten whatever was left for lunch and I had leaned back against a tree to cool it for awhile when I heard my PRC-25 radio go off with one of our ALLEN FACs in his O-1E announcing "C-130 coming into Katum on fire". I grabbed up rifle and radio and stepped out of the thick stuff so I could see. I could hear the C-130 Southeast of me and approaching but couldn't see it yet for the trees being in the way.**

**I moved about 15 meters further to get out from under some stuff and then could see the airplane flying South to North just to the East of where we were on the ground. When I first located him, he appeared to be less than a mile away to the South crossing across my front as I faced to the East. I'd guess that he was somewhere around 1500 feet AGL, had the rear ramp down, the nose trimmed 'way up, was flying very slowly, and had fire streaming off the back of the right wing 'way back past the tail. The fire would sort of blossom and die, blossom and die.**

**When he was at a point due East of us (John had joined me by that time), we saw the nose pitch up sharply and all forward motion stopped. The right wing dropped followed by the nose. Big increase in engine noise. It entered a relatively flat spin with the right wing still tilted lower than the left with the nose down about 15 to 20 degrees. It made two complete 360 degree spins before it went into the trees with the nose pointed along the line of the original heading.**

**Did you ever run over a beer can in the Club parking lot? That's the exact sound that it made when it hit the ground. Of course, there was a thump which we felt and heard. Followed almost immediately by a billowing cloud of black smoke going straight up.**

**One point I should make here. The aircraft was carrying 3 speed pallets of 105mm HE ammunition.**

**As we watched the aircraft spin down, we both saw something fly off (or out of) the aircraft. To this day I believe that it was the Loadmaster being pitched out the rear ramp by centrifugal force.**

The ramp was down and the nose was pitched up. It's my opinion that they were attempting to jettison their load of ammo. I also firmly believe that when the pallets were rolled to the rear of the aircraft to push them out, the Center of Gravity shifted aft. That caused the nose to pitch up and stall the airplane. And when it started going around and around, the Loadmaster (who probably would have been the one cutting the tie-down chains loose and jettisoning the cargo) just got spun out the ramp door.

I started yelling at my troops to get them up and organized so we could start back toward the crash. We got organized and started back up the same trail we had just broken through the brush earlier except, now, we were going back in the opposite direction.

We had been holed up in tall trees but had to cross about 250 meters of chest-high brush to get to the next bunch of tall trees where the C-130 had impacted.

By this time, ALLEN is orbiting over us and the crash, we're strung out in the weeds and brush moving back to the Northeast, more airplanes are responding to the ELT beacon (Emergency Locator Transmitter on 121.5) and to the column of smoke that was up to Lord knows what altitude by that time.

We had been moving for less than ten minutes when ALLEN reports to me that one of the helicopters which had arrived had reported "a column of about 40 people approaching the crash from the Northeast and that the point man had what appears to be a machine gun".

Whoa! I looked up ahead and saw that our point man was carrying an M-60 machine gun so there followed several exchanges attempting to determine whether the "40-man column" was approaching from the Northeast or towards the Northeast. Finally, one of the OH-6s which was buzzing around made a low pass over us, I waved my hat at him, we exchanged some hand and arm signals to give him our radio operating frequency, and we got it straightened out that we're the good guys and we're headed Northeast.

By then, the air was really starting to get crowded. Another one of the ALLEN FACs had come over from THIEN NGON (A-323 was our sister camp on the border about 30 or 40 clicks to the West of us). Our ALLEN told us on the radio that he had put the other ALLEN to work directing traffic and keeping all the sightseers at different flight levels.

**There were helicopters of every shape and size. Cobras from the 1st Cav Division AO just down to the South of us, Loaches, even a Chinook. And fixed wing! We had everything but a B-52. It was amazing to look up and see all the stuff orbiting around up there. I guess you could see the smoke all the way back to Bien Hoa and Saigon because it was going just about absolutely straight up for forever.**

**I already knew what was going to happen with all the FACs and fighters. Everybody in the world is here now when we don't especially need them. And when we really do need some help, everybody will be out of gas and gone home. And that's what happened later . Everybody left at about the same time.**

**So, we're moving and talking to ALLEN and he's saying that the crash is just inside the next bunch of big trees. We'd just about figured that out because we could now see the fire through and above the trees. And, by this time, the propellant charges inside the 105 ammo are starting to cook off from the heat. When that happened, the inert projectile (no fuze) would fly in one direction and the brass shell casing would take off at high speed in the other direction. And those things were starting to pop like popcorn.**

**We eased on into the trees and the first sight I had of the aircraft was when I bumped into the port side elevator. It was about belt high and the entire tail was intact. In fact the whole airplane was intact except for the back being broken about two thirds of the way back from the nose. It had come straight down flat and only contacted one tree. That was with the left wing. It had bent over that 8 to 10 inch diameter tree at about a 45 degree angle and dented the leading edge of the wing..**

**John and I had moved to the front of the column as we approached the trees because I didn't want a possible survivor who had just lived through a plane crash to open up on my friendlies. I wanted them to see two white faces first.**

**When we bumped into the stabilizer, I told John to go around the left wingtip, that I'd go around the right side and meet him at the right front corner of the airplane. I stepped up on the stabilizer and had taken about three steps to walk across to the other side when the whole thing blew up.**

**I can remember seeing my feet going through the air and the trees pointed the wrong way. It seems as though it took 20 minutes to ever hit the ground. Finally did and immediately gathered up my rifle and radio bearer and got us behind a BIG tree. He'd taken the same ride I had and didn't seem too anxious to expose any skin at all anymore.**

**I hollered at John to see if he was OK. He'd almost reached the left wingtip when it blew and he, too, had hunkered down behind a tree. I told him to stay there 'til things quieted down a bit.**

**Radio Toter and I are about 10 feet directly behind the rudder which was still sticking almost straight up. Brass casings are flying, projectiles are thumping our tree and knocking really big limbs down off the trees around the crash. I have no idea where my little people are with the one exception of the radioman.**

**By this time, I'd guess that maybe twenty minutes had elapsed since we had heard ALLENs first call of "C-130 on fire".**

**We're hunkered down behind our tree, John is behind his tree, and all the booming and banging in the world is going on the other side of the tree.**

**Our ALLEN comes up on the radio and asks if we can "find and turn off the ELT". There followed a long conversation about what it was and where it might be found. He said it was back by the tail somewhere and was screwing up the Guard Channel commo all over half of South Vietnam.**

**I asked him what the thing would look like. He had to talk to one of the (many) C-130's that were overhead by this time. He came back and told me that the ELT panel was about 2 feet by 3 feet by about 4 inches thick and would be somewhere back by the tail. I looked down at my feet and there was a Styrofoam lined panel the size and shape he'd described.**

I scooted down and got the thing and got back behind my tree. I read the directions on the thing and still remember that it said something about "Take the 9-volt battery from the pocket. Apply the 9-volt battery across the two terminals". Problem was that there was no 9-volt battery in the little pocket. Informed ALLEN and there was more conversation about how to turn the beacon off. Someone in one of the C-130's overhead started talking about a "thorough review of Maintenance Procedures to insure that the battery is in place on every single aircraft". We really didn't need a review of Maintenance Procedures at this particular point in time, so I made a friend for life by telling him to "hush up".

ALLEN came back and told me to shoot it. But since I didn't know where my people were, I wasn't about to shoot anything. So I decided to stab it to death. I pulled out my Buck knife and started poking holes in the Styrofoam trying to hit something vital. I poked it in one place and apparently shorted out the wires from the (unseen) internal battery and the Styrofoam started smoking and stinking and melting down. Radio totter got the big eye and was about to take off! But it stopped smoking and ALLEN told us that we'd killed it.

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*(continued on part 2 of 2 parts)*

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After about a half hour or so, things had quieted down enough that we felt comfortable enough to start again to work our way around the aircraft. Still some rounds cooking off. Enough to cause some slight nervousness. Not going across the tail this time though. I found some of my CIDG in a cluster about 25 meters off the right rear of the tail as I went by. They were all clustered around a body in a flight suit. You could tell by the pale streaks that they had stolen his watch and his ring. They'd also taken his bootlaces.

There followed some rather loud words about getting the watch and

**the ring back. They gave those items back as well as a wallet. I put them in a zippered pocket on the flight suit and zipped it shut.**

**I gave Radio Toter my .45 and told him to guard the body and shoot anyone who took anything while I worked my way around to the nose of the aircraft. By now, mostly all that's left of the aircraft is the tail from about the jump doors aft, the outer wing panels outboard of the #1 and #4 engines and the basic outline of the fuselage burned to the ground. The radome had sort of melted and drooped over towards the front. The cockpit and center section of the troop compartment had been totally burned out and blasted to pieces. The front of the fuselage appeared to be embedded about a foot to a foot and a half in the ground.**

**We rounded up some of our troops and organized a sweep through the woods around the aircraft extending out about 100 meters or so and found nothing else. No parts and no other bodies.**

**We had put some of our troops out about 75 meters (as far as they were willing to go) to the North, to the Northeast, and to the Northwest. I figured these to be the most likely approaches if the bad guys were to pay us a visit. I wanted a little advance warning if they did.**

**By now, we're getting more advice on the radio than a little bit from everybody in the world. Our priority, however, was to get the recovered body out of there in case we had to make a run for it.**

**We could talk to Katum on the radio and they had done a very good job of keeping quiet and staying off the air except when necessary. I called them and asked if they could round up a DUSTOFF to come and pick up the body. They came back about 5 minutes later and said that the DUSTOFF folks had told them that "the evacuation of deceased personnel is a Quartermaster responsibility and that they declined to do so".**

**Some Huey driver overheard that conversation, came up on the air, and told me that if I'd secure an LZ, he'd come get it. So, we round up some little people, move back out of the trees to the West, send some people out as far as they'd go (especially to the North edge of the LZ) and call for the helicopter.**

**He came in and just about landed and John and I placed the body aboard. And for some reason that I still don't understand, I wrote down the tail number of the helicopter. I'd never done that before and really have no idea why I did it then. The Huey departed towards the Southwest and Tay Ninh City.**

**Rounded up the little people again and went back to the crash site. We had decided to hang around for awhile to see what "higher" wanted us to do.**

**We'd just gotten a sort of a perimeter around the airplane again when a voice on the radio announced that he was Colonel SomebodyOrOther in a "Command" C-130 and that "you will" RON at the crash site and "you will" secure it until tomorrow when the crash team and the mortuary team and Lord knows who else will arrive.**

**Now, here we are under a plume of smoke that has to be 10,000 feet up in the air, all the airplanes in the world are flying around, and the Cambodian border is less than 2 clicks away. Every bad guy in the whole of the two countries knows exactly where we are to within about 10 meters and there is no way in the world that "we will" RON here overnight.**

**If we had not been out of food I probably would have moved off somewhere about a click or so away, stayed there overnight and come back to the crash carefully from a different direction the next morning. But absolutely, positively, we're not hanging around the**

crash site overnight. So, I called him back on the radio, respectfully declined to do so, called my Team Leader at Katum, and told him we were coming home.

That's the fastest I ever saw our CIDG move except when they were running away from a firefight. They flat out moved heading for the barn. Reminded me of an old mule at the end of a day of plowing.

Still, it was fully dark by the time we got to Katum and got inside the wire. Got something to drink and some chow and started writing up the After Action Report. When I got to the part about the crash it occurred to me that as much as I had been around the tail and as close as I was to it, that I had never even looked at the tail number. I remember seeing that the red lens on the very top of the fin was broken but don't ever remember even looking at the numbers. I don't know if the red lens was broken in the crash or by some of the stuff that was flying about. The first time I looked at the fin it appeared to be in perfect condition except for one long diagonal wrinkle down the port side. Afterwards, it looked as though it had been in a war. Gaping holes everywhere.

Finished up my report, took a cold shower (the only kind out of a 55 gallon barrel) and went to bed.

The next morning, early, somebody came over to my dispensary bunker and woke me up and said that the CO wanted to see me right now. So, I rolled out, slipped on my cutoffs, my blue sleeveless OR smock and stuck my feet in some boots.

When I went in the Team House, there was an Air Force Colonel who got right in my face demanding to know "what I had done with the deceased personnel". I got my AAR from the Operations Sergeant and gave him the helicopter tail number.

**Well, later we found out that the helicopter had a problem of some sort on the way to Tay Ninh City (West) Airfield and they had to park it in the trees about halfway there. Then, that crew had to be rescued along with the body. And somewhere along the way, the body had been misplaced.**

**At daylight, the Team Leader had gotten a Huey from someplace and had sent some of our folks back out to the crash site and had recovered the remaining bodies. All were badly burned. According to the folks who went on this recovery mission, all were in places where you'd normally expect to find the crew.**

**The remains were placed in the shower building until a fixed wing aircraft came in to pick them up. The Colonel by this time having departed the camp in his Huey.**

**I never heard any more about the missing body until about 3 months later when I was down at our C-Detachment at Bien Hoa. I got word that the G-2 folks wanted to see me and we went all through it again. I never did find out if the problem with the missing body was ever solved or not.**

**I should point out here that just prior to all the excitement with the C-130, A-322 was in the process of lining up a 100-man company heliborne operation alongside the runway to go out to the West between Katum and Thien Ngon.**

**The lift helicopters were inbound when the whole incident started. The Team Leader immediately decided that the operation would go Southeast instead of off to the West.**

**There were two roads which came together at Katum. One came up from the South from Tay Ninh City (it skirted around the eastern edge of Nui Ba Dinh) and the other came up from the Southeast.**

**These two joined at Katum and then that road went to the North and then turned Northwest into Cambodia.**

**Down the Southeasterly road about 4 or 5 clicks had been the village of Bo Tuc which had been evacuated years earlier because this whole area was a Free Fire Zone. Bo Tuc was now the home of the "Duty Antiaircraft Gunner" for the other side along with his .51 cal Russian machine gun. We knew it was not a US .50 caliber just by the sound it made. You did not fly up the Bo Tuc Road without getting popped at. He's who got the C-130.**

**I can't tell you how much time and effort went into trying to find this guy. Small Listening Posts were put out to try to locate him by sound and then, when he had been triangulated by sound, call all the big dogs and go after him. Found squat!**

**So, the helicopters arrive, everybody loads up and off they go down the Bo Tuc Road. They get there and offload in the big dry land rice field (not a paddy) just on the East side of the ex-village. They moved across the road, got everybody on line side-by-side and combed the woods East to West, West to East, North to South for three solid days. Found nothing except a radio antenna going up a tree. At the end of the third day, they walked home. And the Duty Gunner started popping away again at anything that flew up the Bo Tuc Road.**

**There were (and had been) several ARC Light strikes down in that neighborhood. I remember one of them shortly after the crash where, instead of dropping their loads one bomb after the other in a long string, they dropped all three loads at the same time. Just one giant boom. Not the usual boom, boom, boom as when they dropped them normally.**

**I was down by Bo Tuc sometime after that and they'd made the damnedest hole in the ground that you ever saw. But the Duty Gunner was still on duty.**

**We would warn any approaching aircraft when they called in to avoid the Bo Tuc Road at all costs. Fly anywhere you want except there. I'm not sure if any of them ever passed on that word because they would continue to fly up the road on the way from Bien Hoa AFB. And they continued to get dinged.**

**When it finally came time for me to depart Katum in late November 1969 and move down to B-32 in Tay Ninh City, I made absolutely sure that the Chinook driver (MULESKINNER somebody) knew for sure that he was not to fly down the Bo Tuc Road.**

**\*NOTE:**

**The following information on the aircraft in this incident was furnished by Jim Hoogerwerf.**

**"The aircraft in the 23 June 1969 shootdown was 61-0965, a C-130B. It was Lockheed number 3652. It was delivered to the 314 TCW at Stewart AFB, TN. They flew it from '61 - '64. It then went to the 313 TCW at Forbes AFB, KS. They flew it from '65 - '67. Then it went to the 463 TAW at Clark AFB, PI. It was assigned to the 773 TAS with a "QG" tail code. On the day it was shot down, it was being flown by a crew from the 772 TAS also from Clark. It was reported shot down by a Quad .50."**

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***(additional info from Hoogerwerf)***

***The aircraft was shot down on a resupply mission on 23 June 1969. It was very interesting to me as the story was told from the perspective of a person on the ground. Some of the details differ from what little I had heard: that the plane was seen climbing steeply into a cloud deck, and fell out in a spin, and I did not know of the attempt to jettison their cargo load, but it makes sense.***

***At the end of the story there was additional information from you on the aircraft and the crew. The purpose of my note today is to correct your information about the crew. They were not from the 772 TAS, but the 773 TAS, also at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. I was assigned to the 773 TAS from May 1968 to May 1970 and flew eighteen rotations (of***

sixteen days each) "in country". Thirteen of them were as a copilot and five were flown as an Aircraft Commander. All together I flew 1190 sorties for a total of 959 combat hours. Thus, interestingly each flight averaged only about :48 minutes. Looking back, I can't believe that I was only 24-26 years old. That was a very demanding flying environment!

I've included the information above to make a point: the personnel makeup of the squadrons in the 463 TAW was in transition. The old pilots (Lt Cols. Majors or senior Captains) first assigned to Vietnam duty were completing their tours and rotating out. The new pilots were guys like me just out of flight school. We flew as copilots for the most experienced pilots still around. But it was clear that the wing would have to rely on us to upgrade to Aircraft Commanders as soon as possible to replace the old group. I think the criteria was a total of 1000 flight hours. Captain (newly promoted) Gary Brunner was one of the young pilots. A graduate of the Air Force Academy, he was on a fast track to the left seat. While I knew Gary, we didn't socialize much. I was a bachelor and he was married. And, I wasn't on the fast track.

1st Lt. Terry Reed was tapped as one of the best copilots in the squadron and probably soon to upgrade himself.

Lt. Col. Jean A Kearby was, in my mind, one of the kindest friendliest senior officers in the squadron. For some reason he took a liking to me. He was an instructor navigator in the unit, one of the best we had.

Major Bill Condit was a new navigator in the squadron. Every new arrival in the squadron had to get an in-country checkout even though they were combat ready from training in the CONUS.

To round out a crew you needed a flight engineer and loadmaster. SSgt Billy McDonald and SSgt George C. Peters were among the best our squadron had.

That was the crew of the aircraft shot down at Katum on that fateful day. Gary was on his very first Aircraft Commander rotation to Vietnam. He had one of the best crews the squadron could put together to support him.

Despite the loss, the wing had to continue upgrading junior officers to the left seat, and did so with remarkable success. I attribute that success to two factors: 1. supervision 2. standardization.

One change did result from the shoot down, new Aircraft Commanders on their initial in-country rotations were not scheduled into forward airfields.

By the way, the 463 TAW flying C-130 B models was dedicated to in-country airlift. All our aircraft and crews flew only in direct support of the in-country airlift needs of the military effort there (we did other flying too, but not on a regular basis). The A's and E's also flew in-country, but they had other tasks as well such as BLINDBAT and

**ABCCC.**

*Personally I flew into Katum five times. One time a Cobra gunship, providing cover for us, was shot down while we were on the ground offloading. That was on 7 November 1969. He got out OK, but I'd like to find out who he was.*

*In two years I only took one hit, and that was a bullet in a main tire. It was flat when we landed! One day we ran off the end of the runway at Dong Xoai, but that's another story....*

*Hope this helps round out your information file.*

**Regards,**

**Jim Hxxxxxx**

*PS I flew a Functional Check Flight on ship 61-0965 out of TSN 1 May 1969. Guess it checked out OK as I didn't make any other notes.*