

Maine Sunday Telegram, December 13, 1970

**Two Views of Vietnam....
War...
'Last Light' Shootup**

By Bill Caldwell

Duc Ton, Vietnam – The time is 5:15 on a warm Sunday afternoon here in Sa Dec province, some 100 kilometers southwest of Saigon.

Here this time of day is called “last light.”

At home, in Maine, we'd call it 'sunset.' And maybe we'd be fixing a drink for friends and standing out on the porch, or inside by the big windows if the air outside were too chilly, and we'd watch the sunset over the Damariscotta River.

The same sun is setting now, but over the two great rivers of the Mekong Delta, the muddy Mekong itself and its twin, the Bassac.

But instead of standing on a peaceful porch, I am strapped into a command and control helicopter. No friend or drink in hand. Instead I am flanked by two helmeted, flak-vested gunners, with machine guns in their arms and belts of .50 caliber bullets between their legs.

Two other 23-year-olds are in the pilot and copilot seats. There is a small-boned five-foot Vietnamese officer in jungle camouflage on the cramped flight deck too. He has a small telephone held ear to mouth. He is the “talker,” who relays targets. He is the command ship's link to two Cobra gunships flying 1,000 feet above us and two low observation choppers flying at treetop level. The Army refers to the choppers as Loches.

The key man, the “brain,” aboard this U.S. Army helicopter is a young civilian, 29-year-old Kenneth M. Quinn, State Department Foreign Service officer. He decides where to search and what to shoot.

We are crowded but there is no lack of air. This helicopter is wide open on both sides. The muddied combat boots dangle out in the open. We sit huddled at each 15-foot-long, 5-foot-high aperture, maps on lap, headsets and mikes turned on. The chopper rises up from the tiny platform of concrete built at the side of a dusty road. We seemed to be skyborne out from a wet rice paddy.

This is the “last light” roundup, shootup. And there are five choppers in this ‘package.’

The five consist of the two little Loches, the two Cobra gunships and our command and control ship.

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Our "last light" job is to comb this delta countryside to root out and shoot up any Viet Cong guerrillas who might be hiding for a night attack.

Real risk-takers are the two tiny Loches, piloted by 19-year-old American sergeants or warrant officers. These one-man fireflies buzz over rice paddies and the thick clumps of trees which line small klongs or canals. They fly low and slow enough so their blades create wind to bend back the stalks of rice, where VC may be hidden.

If their keen eyes can spot such tell-tale signs, the pilot may lob out a grenade. But the Loches also act as live bait. Part of their dangerous mission is to entice the VC to open fire upon them, thereby revealing their position. To be a Loche pilot is to have the most dangerous job in this war. Casualties are extremely high.

Quinn, dressed in casual yellow sports shirt and slacks, seems strangely out of place. The popular image back home of a Foreign Service officer is a polished Ivy-Leaguer dealing with diplomatic nuances at embassy receptions.

Quinn's job is to spot where weeds have been unnaturally cleared from a stream so that a tiny sampan might have been poled through; to spot a hump in a paddy where VC may have built a protective bunker for themselves and their weapons. And then, through his "talker" to direct the Loches down to probe. If he has hit "pay dirt," Quinn calls down the Cobra gunships.

These gunships, hovering 1,000 feet overhead, peel steeply downward, gathering speed. They open fire with blazing cannons. Tracers pump into the target at 20,000 rounds a minutes. They fire in bursts of a few short, horrid seconds. Then swoop further down, letting loose a bevy of high explosion bombs.

Smoke, fire and earth erupt like small volcanoes from the silence of the paddies. Then, if the suspected VC bunker turns out to be a reality, a violent secondary explosion rips the countryside. VC stores of bombs and mortars and grenades are blown to smithereens.

Inside our command helicopter, we nod or smile or grin at the success. Grease pencils mark the grid maps on our laps, showing the strike area.

Quinn orders the search into a new sector. Again the Loches make their risky low passes.

On this pass they draw enemy fire, stagger up from it, one plane wobbling unsteadily toward home.

Quinn's lips move. He is talking into his mike, calling to the Cobras, giving precise sector location from the blowup maps.

First one Cobra, then the next arches in its flight, drops down a wing tip and begins its deadly swoop. Tracers and rockets blaze red across the skyline, pumping fiercely into the green wet paddies. Out from a blazing bunker, nine black-clad figures dart.

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Bent double to the ground, the tiny figures zig-zag frantically toward the little klong, where they hope to dive and submerge. The tracer bullets tailor an explosive line of pursuit behind them, catching up, catching up.

Suddenly three figures drop, writhe and the others run faster, tracers and rockets exploding about them. Three more drop. One makes a splash into the klong. Two vanish.

“Nine VC flushed. Six killed,” reports our command ship.

We wheel again to another sector. The ground is brown here, uncultivated, arid by contrast to the rich green paddies so close by.

“The VC were strong here” says Quinn. “Mostly they’ve left. But they left mines and booby traps behind. The villagers are afraid to plow.”

Quinn orders the Cobras to flush out the area. He gives them permission for a “free-fire” zone. The gunships zoom down again, firing machine guns and rockets at random.

Now the time is 6:30 p.m. We have flown 75 minutes. The night is coming down fast. Red tail lights blink on the helicopter Cobras. We turn and come in, dropping, hovering down to our pad by the lonely road. Some Hondas go by. A water buffalo ambles past. We climb out.

The helicopter leaves, back to its base. Sport-shirted Quinn goes over the sector map, explaining his grease pencil marks to Lt. Bill Lewis. Tonight Lewis will lead a flush and ambush foot patrol out there.

“That’s what we do at ‘last night,’” says Quinn. “It’s our Happy Hour.” We go into a sandbagged bunker, and open a can of Coke.