

The Choctaw Indian Angel in Vietnam

As told by Col. Frank S. Plummer to his sister, Patricia Straiton

This strange story of “coincidences” began with the pilot’s voice saying through my headphones, “sir! We have only ten minutes of fuel remaining and we are lost!”

I snapped fully alert as these words crackled through the headphones. Looking out of the doors of the “Huey” helicopter, I could see only a white blanket of fog and blue skies.

This 3rd day of January, 1965 had started off in such grand style! We had landed an air mobile force, unopposed in an area a few miles east of the Cambodian border in Vietnam. The Huey Landing Force had been released. I had kept the Command Ship and stopped at the Province Operation Center for an update and was now returning to my home base in Bien Hoa.

The chopper Command Ship had just been outfitted with an experimental stylus-type machine that would plot its location in relationship to the ground. It used speed, winds and magnetic direction.

We had just received a weather summary. It consisted of a ground fog buildup. This was a normal forecast. In the distance we could see it beginning to build. Usually, landmarks can be found in open areas of the fog mass. The pilots assured me that the fog would be no problem for the machine would mark our position.

Relying upon this assurance I had made the decision to return to our home base.

Flying conditions had begun to grow worse, but I was somewhat secure in the knowledge that the stylus with its latest technology would lead us through the fog to the base.

I was dozing when the message came over the headphones . . .

“Sir! We have only ten minutes of fuel remaining and we are lost!”

Before I could reply, the pilot again spoke . . .

“The machine has gone bonkers! Strong head and cross winds have made the stylus jump all over the graph chart . . . land we don’t know where we are, now.”

In disbelief, I sputtered, “What? You are lost?”

In a subdued voice, the pilot continued, “We had hoped to see breaks in the fog, but there have been none.”

I drew a deep breath.

Here we were flying over 80 square miles of enemy controlled jungle and I was being told that the machine was “bonkers” and we were lost!

I wanted to shout at the pilots and at the machine, but I did not do it. My mind raced to find a solution.

With 8 minutes of fuel remaining, I instructed the pilots to let down through the fog. We had to find landmarks quickly or find a place to set the helicopter down.

As we slowly descended through the fog, we made out a small clearing.

“What luck!”

Clearings in the jungle were rare and were often protected by enemy forces. So, the door gunners had already opened the doors, charged their machine guns and moved the safeties to the “off” position. As we neared the ground we fully expected to be fired upon as soon as we cleared the fog. The gunners were ready.

I grabbed my rifle, felt for the extra ammo pouches, checked my survival pack and grasped my compass in my left hand. I had been unable to get an accurate compass bearing inside the chopper because of metal. (It threw the needle off).

As the skids of the helicopter bumped down, I jumped out into the tall grass. My right boot scraped against a piece of old barbed wire hidden in the grass. Probably, it had been left behind years before by the French forces fighting the Vietnamese. The new scratch was about an inch from an old scratch on my boot that I had received about three weeks previously during an air assault into a clearing similar to this one.

Although my adrenalin and heart were already pumping full blast they jumped into an even higher gear as I realized in that split second I scratched the boot, this could be the same clearing as that of the air assault three weeks ago.

My eyes immediately darted to the fog shrouded shadows across the clearing. Instinctively, I flipped off my weapon's safety, spun the weapon to bear on the shadows across the clearing and began to squeeze the trigger.

During the previous air assault of three weeks ago, we had received fire from the shadows across the clearing where I was aiming. The accompanying gunships had knocked out the gun fire with machine guns and rockets.

I stopped squeezing the trigger, as I realized that the door gunners, who were already highly nervous, would instantly start firing. Because of my location, they could possibly hit me.

I ran at full speed to a spot a few feet from the helicopter blades. I tried to keep focused on obtaining a compass bearing as my eyes sought the shadows across the clearing. I expected any second to see gun fire erupt from the dark shadows.

Had there been fire, I knew I would have to make an instant decision. I could fall flat and crawl to the woods, hide, and find my way back to the base, or I could run as fast as possible to the chopper and hope the door gunner's fire didn't hit me. I would hope they could silence the enemy fire long enough for me to get to the helicopter. Regardless of what action I took it would have to be instantaneous as the chopper had to lift out or it could be destroyed by enemy fire.

I took a quick bearing with my compass as part of my mind tried to determine if this was "that" assault landing zone. Something in my mind said "YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE".

My mind went blank.

I turned and ran to the helicopter. I threw myself through the doors as the helicopter shot upwards into the security of the fog, blocking it from enemy observation.

Still breathing hard, I reached for the headphones, and in a split second I knew for sure that the clearing we had just left was the same clearing we had used in the previous air assault. I knew this clearing! In that instant the air assault plan in its entirety including distances, speed, and directions, popped into my mind.

I knew that I were correct, I could reverse the flight plan and we might reach safety.

Still breathing hard and without missing a beat, I snapped on the headphones and began speaking in a raspy voice, hoping to project confidence. I told the pilot the direction of flight. Taking another deep breath, I said, "Let down in three minutes and ten seconds."

The pilot did not question the order and answered, "Yes sir, and we have approximately six minutes of fuel."

The longest adrenalin-pumping period of my life soared through the next three minutes and ten seconds.

A sequence of self-doubts plagued me. I tried to focus on the problem and how I had arrived at the command I had given the pilot. The “what if’s” began to stack up in my mind. What if the river landmarks were not there when we let down? What if it were the wrong clearing and we were now flying in the wrong direction. How did I arrive at the time of three minutes and ten seconds? Maybe we should have remained in the clearing, destroyed the helicopter and traveled out on foot? If the river landmarks weren’t seen, where could we find a place to land in three minutes? If a clearing were not found, we would be forced to land in trees and evenly so as not to catch fire . . . possibly all or some of us could be killed.

The voice of the pilot broke my concentration.

“We are at three minutes. Do you want to let down?”

I answered, “Go!”

I broke into a cold sweat as we descended through the fog. Then, the Don Nhay River peeked up at us through the mist. What a beautiful sight! I breathed again. It was a turning landmark.

Exuding confidence, I said in a quiet voice, “Please proceed directly through the fog on this heading and set down just before you run out of fuel.”

We were now fully committed. If I were wrong we could all be killed. There would be no time to correct my orders.

Once again, I was plagued with doubt. Maybe we should have sat down in or near the river? However, we did not control that area. As my mind fought the “what ifs” the helicopter settled to the ground in a clearing.

The engine sputtered and the fuel was gone. When the blades ceased rotating no one moved or said anything. There was stillness and complete silence within the helicopter.

The click of the door gunner snapping on his weapon’s safety broke the spell of the silence. He said, “Look!”

The gunner pointed to the edge of the clearing. We had reached our goal as the III Corps Operations Center was in sight. We all started laughing and cheered the gunner. As we gathered outside the helicopter the crew began to question me.

“How did you get us here? How did you get the precise directions for getting us here? We were lost and this is a miracle! Tell us!”

Laughing and breathing a deep sigh of relief, I jokingly answered, “You know, I am an American Choctaw Indian. In moments of great stress my Choctaw ancestors come to me with support and precise solutions. I really can’t explain how it happens to me . . . it just happens!”

Just as I finished this explanation, security troops arrived to see this chopper that had just dropped through the fog.

About two weeks later, a pilot asked me about this seemingly impossible miracle. He told me what he had heard about that flight. His version of what had happened was hardly recognizable and had been greatly expanded and enhanced from the original story.

About this time, I had noticed that I had an abundance of volunteers for my air assault missions. Now, I knew why . . . my volunteers believed they were flying under the guidance and protection of my Choctaw Indian Angel!

Wisely, I never corrected the story. Maybe they wanted to believe the seemingly impossible version of a miracle. Amazingly, no one ever questioned the veracity of my explanation.

Those wonderful, brave and daring American helicopter pilots risked their lives on a daily basis in combat and on my orders.

Let me tell the rest of the story. It was the scratch on the boot that guided and saved us that day. I was the skill, dedication and daring of all those brave pilots in Vietnam that kept us alive during those days of combat.

Postscript:

A few years later I relived that incident and was startled to find myself thinking that maybe there was more truth than fiction in my explanation to the crew.

- a. We had been flying over a fog-shrouded jungle controlled by enemy forces. We were lost. The jungle had few cleared areas.
- b. The pilot had informed me at a specific time so that I ordered the exact moment to let down through the fog. We were precisely over a clearing and landed at the exact point of the previous assault landing.
- c. Scratching the same side of the same boot one inch from the previous cut, triggered the thought process on similarities of landing zones.
- d. Despite not being able to see the outline of the landing zone and not recognizing it, an inner voice or a strong feeling guided me.

The “Choctaw Indian Angel in Vietnam” was a story told by Colonel Frank S. Plummer, a 32 year veteran of the US Army, who spent two years in Vietnam. In 1964-65, he was the G-3 (Plans and Operation) of the III Vietnamese Corps. His principal duty was conducting Air Mobile Operations.

During his second tour in 1971-72, he was the Senior Advisor to the 18th Infantry Division (Vietnamese) in the same III Corps.

~~Colonel Plummer and members of his family have all experienced telepathic episodes. He felt this same warm feeling or inner voice, during that period of stress that he experienced during other telepathic episodes. During the even told in this story he had the feeling something was guiding him.~~

Col. Frank S. Plummer served in WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Japan, Germany, Alaska, Italy and Norway. He retired after 32 years of service. Commendations include the Silver Star, Purple Heart, Bronze Star with Valor, Vietnam Army Distinguished Service Order 2nd Class, seven Crosses of Gallantry, seven Air Medals, three Legion of Merit Medals, two National Service Medals, Vietnam Service Medal with Silver clasp, Philippine Liberation and Independence device, Vietnamese Jump Wings, US Master Parachutist, Glider Wings, Presidential Unit Citations and many others. He was born in Coalgate, Oklahoma.

He is the catalyst of the McAllen, Texas War Memorial, a memorial on 3.5 acres to honor the 1.2 million Americans killed in all wars and conflicts.