



Another Day At The Office For The 171st



Robert Machen, James Parker, Raymond Todorovich, and Jerome Majchrazak

October 15, 1967 started as an unusual maintenance day for the 171st Maintenance Detachment assigned to the 147th Assault Support Helicopter Company (ASHC) located at Vung Tau, South Vietnam. Around 9:30 AM Major Robert B. Machen, the Detachment Commander, received word that Hillclimber 033, a Chinook assigned to the 147th, had made a forced landing deep in the heart of the delta about seventy miles west of the city of Can Tho. After further checking with the 147th OPS (Operations), it was learned that 033 was sitting nose down in a canal in about 8 to 10 feet of water.

The Detachment First Sergeant was called and advised that a ten-man crew would be required to go out for a day or two on a recovery mission. When Machen arrived at the flight line every man in the unit had volunteered. First Sergeant Earl Foster quickly selected and assembled the ten-man crew along with their tools and equipment. Included in the equipment list were two compressors and two deflated 10,000 gallon fuel bladders requested by Machen. The bladders were to be used as a flotation device. Machen believed he could use this equipment to break the aircraft loose from the bottom of the canal. The recovery team and equipment were loaded aboard the CH47 assigned to the 171st.



Machen, Chief Warrant Officer (CWO) James Parker (the Executive Officer), along with the crew of Raymond Todorovich, the flight engineer; Jerome A. Majchrazak, the crew chief; and Douglas G. Burger, the door gunner, and the ten-man maintenance crew made up the recovery team. The 171st team arrived at the scene and was barely able to land in a small clearing next to the downed aircraft. Soon after the arrival of the recovery crew, the 222nd Battalion Commander came to the scene of the accident, flew over the crash site a few times, took pictures, and determined that the half-sunken helicopter miles from any hard surface road was not recoverable. He advised that the aircraft be stripped and burned.



Undaunted by the suggestion of the Battalion Commander, the 171st team began the task of recovery. Parker and his volunteer group undertook the task of diving into the canal and working to pull ropes through the canal muck under the downed helicopter. Four pull ropes were required to ensure that the deflated fuel bladders could be inserted under the belly of the helicopter between the wheels. After more than an hour of diving and pushing the rods attached to the ropes which were in turn attached to the fuel bladders, the fuel bladders were finally inserted and inflated by the compressors. The bladders were marginally effective but did raise the aircraft high enough to give the 171st confidence that they could actually recover the aircraft.

Sergeant Foster gained the service of two small boats which were used to transport the recovery team from shore to 033 sitting in the canal. The maintenance crew first removed the rotor blades and dragged them ashore. All cowling and fairings were next removed and along with the rotor blades stashed in the recovery CH47. The en-



gines were then rigged to be sling loaded off the downed aircraft. Machen and Parker then took the recovery aircraft and hovered over the downed aircraft. With precise guidance from Ray Todorovich, each of the engines were removed, loaded into a waiting boat and later, without damage to the engines, loaded aboard the recovery aircraft. Before nightfall, all the equipment above the water level inside the downed aircraft was removed.

Following the loading of all the removed equipment onto the recovery aircraft, a return trip to

Vung Tau was begun as darkness settled over the area. Within a few minutes after taking off, heavy torrential rains and thunderstorms were encountered. Deviations around the thunderstorms were attempted but became impossible due to lack of fuel; penetration of the thunderstorms and a straight line flight to Can Tho became the only option. At about 50 miles out, the Can Tho tower was called for a weather report. The reply was 300 feet overcast, 1/4 of a mile visibility and numerous thunderstorms to the north and west of the airfield. The tower was advised that we were in the process of penetrating those thunderstorms and wanted an immediate landing upon our crossing over the Aircraft Direction Finder (ADF) beacon. The rain was coming down in buckets and the crew chief and gunner wanted to pull the guns and shut the left front window and upper right door to keep the rain, which was now turning the inside of the aircraft into a lake, out. Raymond Todorovich, the flight engineer, later said he heard that we were flying at 300 feet with only a quarter of a mile visibility and with that knowledge, he refused to permit the crew chief and the door gunner to remove their machine guns and close up the aircraft even though both were complaining that the water flowing through the aircraft was cold and ankle deep.

Jim Parker had not flown with Machen (an instrument flight examiner) in night weather. Jim had his hands full just trying to maintain heading and altitude as several thunderstorms were penetrated during the last half hour of the flight to Can Tho. His situation was made worse because lightning flashed all around the aircraft. The lightning flashes caused the ADF in the aircraft to home in on the numerous thunderstorms in the area when massive flashes occurred in different cells that were present in the area.

Machen, trying to stay calm and speaking with all the confidence he could muster, would remind Parker to ease the nose up or down and turn easily to the right or left in an attempt to stay on track to Can Tho. Not only did Machen have to decipher which was the true heading from all the false readings that showed on the ADF, he was also worried that the rain was so hard it would cause a flameout. The blinding flashes, combined with the thrashing of the aircraft made the task of developing a classic teardrop ADF approach into the Can Tho Airport much more difficult. Machen knew that a teardrop approach would permit an overflight of the homing beacon which was almost on the airport and also allow us to miss a three hundred foot plus tower less than two miles from the northeast corner of the airfield. The weather, the tower, an unstable ADF, turbulence, water through the aircraft, and a fuel warning light all required a positive, no errors, approach. This flight, coupled with the instrument approach down to near zero with very low visibility, caused a number of the men on board the aircraft to kiss the ground after we landed.

The next morning this same group of maintenance volunteers who had been scared half to death the night before was waiting by the aircraft ready to go back. That same morning the Can Tho area commander, curious as to what helicopter was flying in such bad weather, paid us a visit while we refueled. When he found we had not posted a security detail from our maintenance crew at the sight of the downed helicopter, he was livid. Machen made it absolutely clear that he was not about to sacrifice one or any of his men in an attempt to protect a helicopter that was stuck in ten feet of muck and water some seventy feet from any dry land. With that, the refueling was finished

and the area commander was left standing as the aircraft, with the recovery crew, taxied out and took off.

Once the 222nd Battalion Commander learned that it was possible to recover the downed helicopter, a CH54 Flying Crane was dispatched and stood by at Can Tho. During the morning of the second day of the recovery operation, the crane was called in and the downed helicopter was drugged by the CH54 to a small sandbar located at the edge of the canal. The successful movement of 033 allowed the remaining internal equipment, such

as radios, seats, and armor plating to be removed. The stripping was done with urgency after the 171st recovery team was advised by the Special Forces team leader in that area that if we did not recover the aircraft before nightfall, they would be forced to blow it up. The Special Forces team had learned that the Viet Cong were moving south in strength and would arrive before nightfall.



The "Flying Crane" (CH54) was again called after 033 had been further stripped and prepared as a sling load for the Crane. The recovery 171st CH47 was required to leave the small landing area to hover and watch as the Crane attempted to lift 033 for its trip back to Vung Tau. The attempt by the Crane to raise 033 was stopped due to the overheating of the transmission, which was caused by the 033 being overweight due to the fact that she was full of water.

Machen, always willing to try something new and different, flew the recovery CH47 into a position approximately a hundred feet above and to the front of the Flying Crane. Careful not to blow the ground cushion out from under the CH54, now overloaded with 033, Machen moved forward and down over the loaded CH54. His rotorwash blew through and over the rotors of the Crane. The Chinook rotorwash, at approximately 120 miles per hour, blowing through the Crane's blades below gave them the extra lift they needed. Just as surely as if they had practiced the maneuver a hundred times, as Machen's Chinook got closer, the Crane began to lift 033 out of the canal. When maximum lift was realized, 033 was raised completely out of the water. Both the CH47 and CH54 maintained their rather unique hover positions until 033 drained itself. Finally, both the CH47 and the CH54 with the 033 attached, rose above the tree-lined canal. The Machen/Parker CH47 Chinook stayed above and in front of the Crane by flying backwards. Once the crane picked up speed and gained full translational lift, Machen pulled up and away to permit the crane to climb and turn toward the northeast in the direction of Vung Tau.

The Viet Cong opened fire just as the break off occurred. Neither Machen nor the Crane was hit but 033 received a few hits.

After flying for about a half hour, the Crane crew advised Machen and Parker that due to the loss of weight in 033, they would be able to proceed directly to Vung Tau with one fuel stop at Dong Tam, which would save approximately an hour of flight time over the original plan. The Crane came under fire for a second time as it began its approach for the refueling stop. The Crane was equipped with a device that showed that one of the rotor blades had been penetrated by the ground fire. The 171st Maintenance Detachment recovery team flew on to Vung Tau, picked up a CH54 rotor blade and flew it back to the Dong Tam. A field replacement of the damaged Crane blade was made by the 171st Maintenance crew.

The Crane, 033, and the 171st Chinook with crew and all ten 171st Maintenance volunteers was back in Vung Tau by 5:30 PM. The impossible took only 32 hours from the time of the initial call to the 171st Commander to rolling 033 safely into the maintenance hanger.

The 171st Maintenance Detachment repaired 033 and in a few days it was returned to full flight status for operational missions.



It took the crew standing here thirty-four years to tell their side of the story. We hope you have enjoyed reading about it as much as we enjoyed reliving that 32-hour mission at the recent 2002 Reunion of the 147th Assault Support Helicopter Company in Williamsburg Virginia.

Editors' Note: The caption above refers to the fact that these four people had to wait thirty-four years to get their story told. Actually it is more like forty-four years. I had forgotten where I put this until I discovered just a few weeks ago packed away in a storage box.

I have created this PDF as a first step to get this onto the Hillclimber site. I will actually put it up as its' own page with the PDF as a printable option. There is also a short video taken of this operation. It is not very clear, but it will also be on the site shortly.

Rodney R. Brown