

# Senior Officer Present Afloat

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In early 1970 US and South Vietnamese forces invaded Cambodia with the aim of wiping out the North Vietnamese sanctuaries, hitherto untouched by ground action, along the Cambodian border. An uproar ensued in the US; a few weeks later President Nixon ordered that by 30 June all US forces—including advisors with the Vietnamese—would be withdrawn from Cambodia. After that date all surface operations against the Khmer Rouge and North Vietnamese would be either Cambodian or Cambodian-South Vietnamese combined. The US would provide air support only.

In those days I was a brigadier general, deputy commander of the Delta Regional Assistance Command (DRAC) and deputy senior advisor to the commanding general of the Republic of Vietnam Army (ARVN) IV Corps and Military Region 4, headquarters at Can Tho.

As war in Cambodia continued, the *Forces Armee Nationale Khmer* (FANK) lost control of Highway 4, which was the main road between Phnom Penh and the port of Kompong Som (Sihanoukville) on the Gulf of Thailand. About halfway to the sea Highway 4 ran through a hilly region, a key feature of which was the Pich Nil Pass, controlled by the Khmer Rouge.

The FANK, the South Vietnamese, and the US Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) in Saigon agreed that a Cambodian-Vietnamese ground operation, supported by American air, would be undertaken to open up the Pich Nil Pass and clear Highway 4. The Cambodians very much wanted this air support to include US Army Cobra gunships, with their rockets, 40 mm grenades, and machine guns. However, from the nearest Vietnam territory the Cobra's operating radius did not quite reach the Pich Nil Pass. MACV decided to use a floating base, to be positioned closer to the target area in Kompong Som Bay, for the Army gunships; USS *Iwo Jima* (LPH-2), offshore in the South China Sea, was the candidate. I drew the task of coordinating support to the combined operation; my first requirement was to visit *Iwo Jima*.

In our UH-1D Huey, my copilot and I (I was a recently qualified Army aviator) crossed the Ba Xuyen coastline, homing on *Iwo's* beacon. The weather was clear but hazy. Before long we could see neither land nor our destination. Over the water for longer than I for one cared to be, we finally saw the distant *Iwo* dead ahead. Upon radio contact we learned the approach

procedure, that the ship was making 20 knots into a 20 knot wind, and that she was pitching. I made the approach, came to a hover at 40 knots true airspeed, dropped the collective, met the falling deck as devoutly hoped, and was most relieved when the deck crew chained down our skids.



Bemused indeed that their ship would harbor US Army helicopters, the ship's and its Marine contingent's officers received my briefing on the planned operation. I answered a few questions and we lifted off for home. Word soon came from Saigon that the Navy considered Kompong Som Bay too confined for *Iwo Jima*; we would use instead USS *Cleveland* (LPD-7), Capt. Jack DeWinter, USN, commanding.

*CLEVELAND* would be both helicopter base and command ship. *Iwo Jima's* CH-46's would lift Cobra ammunition to *CLEVELAND* from ashore. The Army's Delta Aviation Group would furnish the gunships and command and control (C2) Hueys and set up the mainland support base. The Seventh Air Force would provide forward air controllers (FACs) in OV-10s; MACV's rules of engagement were that only after a Seventh Air Force FAC marked the target with rocket-delivered white smoke could any target in Cambodia be attacked by US air. The ARVN 4th Ranger Group would attack from Kompong Som eastward on Highway 4; FANK forces would attack from Phnom Penh westward; the two, responsive to separate command chains but cooperating, would converge on the Pich Nil Pass. Our gunships would

support both ARVN and FANK units on call. With option of none of the above, I was to make the support operation work. Unity of command rested nowhere.

Two days before the operation kicked off, we choppered a small detachment of the DRAC advisory team to *CLEVELAND*, off Rach Gia in the Gulf of Thailand. I came in first; seas calm, radio instructions clear and simple, deck spotters easy to follow, ample room for two Hueys, no sweat. Capt. DeWinter welcomed us, saw us to our working spaces and cabins (for me the flag suite, very nice!). He then explained the Navy way: I would tell him the result desired; he would get it done. I suspect that Jack was not being entirely regulation, but he told me that in Navy lingo I was Senior Officer Present Afloat—SOPA.

This began a highly satisfactory and successful ten-day working relationship. Before first light, at general quarters, we would enter Kompong Som Bay. On schedule, we would take aboard the first C2 Huey, top off its fuel, and launch it with our *CLEVELAND*-based backseater teams. Backseaters were three: one DRAC advisor as "airborne coordinator" and one FANK and one ARVN English-speaking liaison officer. The Huey's endurance permitted only some 45 minutes over the target area, so shortly after each C2 Huey launched, the first pair of Cobra gunships which it was to control came aboard to top off fuel and load rockets and 40mm grenades and depart for the target area. Right after that came the second gunship pair. The Cobra's endurance was barely twenty minutes over target so everyone had to work swiftly and well. Meanwhile a second C2 Huey could be getting ready to come aboard.

*CLEVELAND's* amphibious command communications and SOCC (support operations coordination center) were invaluable. Each night we put together and sent out the next day's gunship support scheme and schedule; during the day we executed and adapted. En route to the target area in the C2 Huey, the FANK (or ARVN) backseater would call the command post of the FANK (or ARVN) unit on the ground, get the ground situation and target description, arrange for a colored smoke grenade to be popped, and convey this information to the US backseater, who in the meantime was in touch with the Seventh Air Force FAC. At the appropriate time the unit on the ground would pop its colored smoke; the FANK/ARVN back-



seater would acknowledge; the US backseater would brief both FAC and inbound Cobras on the target's location from the smoke; the FAC would put in his white smoke rocket at that spot; Cobra lead would tally-ho; and the Cobras would deliver their firepower. Gratiated and motivated, the FANK and ARVN troops on the ground would then attack the Khmer Rouge.

Taking their instructions from CLEVELAND's tower and deck crew, Army aviators adapted rather well, I thought, to ship-based operations. Kompongson Bay was usually calm; that simplified matters. However, limited running space made difficult the lifting of a full Cobra load of fuel and ordnance; heavily loaded helicopters prefer to gain airspeed close to the ground as they leave behind their air cushion, and then to climb. When we lost one Cobra over the side on lift-off—its crew popping their canopy and recovering to CLEVELAND's quickly lowered boat—we decided it was time to see if the maximum possible load from a land runway might not give us time over target equal to that achievable with a lesser load off CLEVELAND. By this time, we had mastered the techniques of fuel conservation: lower speed en route and returning giving maximum distance per gallon, with higher fuel consumption only over the target. We found that Cobra operations were safer, and gave equal or more time over target, when mounted from the shore. Thence, only the C2 Hueys staged from CLEVELAND. Indeed, when the CLEVELAND operation terminated we transferred the entire operation ashore, to "SOCC Cambodia" next to the Cambodian border in Chau Doc province, where it stayed.

Early in the operation, I learned an unforgettable lesson in command. On D-1, we lacked the essential FANK backseater. The nearest available English-speaking Cambodian officer was well inside Cambodia, too far by vehicle from a pickup point in Vietnam. President Nixon's order stood: no Americans on the ground inside Cambodia. That seemed to preclude a helicopter pickup. But I told my people to wait a minute; the MACV operation order permitted use of US helicopters in Cambodia for "emergency logistics." Surely the FANK needed that day an "emergency" supply of smoke grenades; we would deliver them by C2 Huey to any FANK command post at which there was an eligible liaison officer and pick that officer up just as the chopper dropped off the boxes of smoke grenades. This was duly arranged; the Huey made its trip, arriving back on CLEVELAND 90 minutes later with an English-speaking Cambodian major aboard. Well done.

About 36 hours later, after the first day's operations, a rocket came over the teletype: "Where is Black Widow 41?" I said "Who is Black Widow 41?" It turned out (1) that Black Widow 41 was the very C2 Huey that had picked up our Cambodian friend, (2) that an

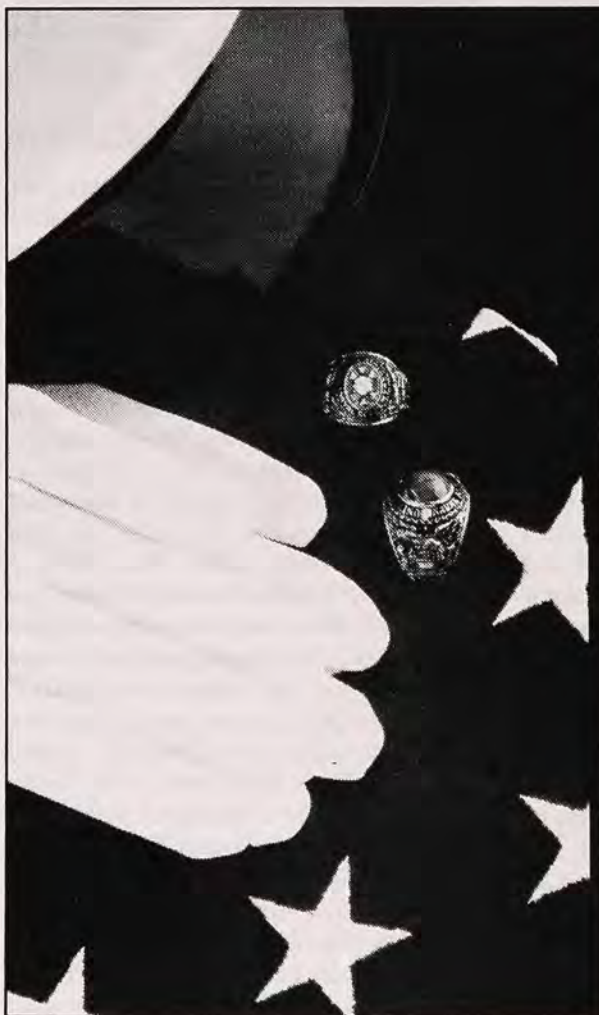
Associated Press photographer had purely by chance been at the FANK command post, and (3) that his front view photo of the chopper, Black Widow 41 emblem big as life, and of the US advisor on the ground, aviator helmet on and wired, and pulling the Cambodian officer onto the Huey, had appeared in newspapers Stateside, leading the President (I understood) to ask, what goes on here with troops on Cambodian soil?—a question transmitted verbatim to the SOPAH, (Senior Officer Present and Handy) by the Commander, MACV, Gen. Abrams himself. Ready for early career termination I told the story, adding that it had seemed like a good idea at the time.

And, bless his fighting heart, Gen. Abrams said "I can understand your reasoning" and took the White House heat himself.

Did the operation accomplish anything? Well, the FANK and the ARVN did clear Highway 4, including the section through the Pich Nil Pass. By that I mean they cleared the road and that traffic flowed for a while. But the Khmer Rouge still held the hills. With Tet approaching, the 4th Ranger Group returned to Vietnam, the Cambodians went about their business on their own, our support operation for Cambodia moved ashore, and I said goodbye to Jack DeWinter and LPD-7, permission granted to leave the ship.

I think this was a unique operation. Commander, Seventh Fleet, the redoubtable then-VAdm. "Mickey" Weisner, certainly seemed to find it so when, on his visit, I took him through the SOCC and, after touring the flag bridge, invited him to coffee in my flag cabin. I remember opining then that Marines might want to consider the ship-based Cobra. The twin-engined AH-1W is in the USMC today; we may have had something to do with that.

On Navy transports, on two LST moves in the Pacific war, in two months aboard USS CURTISS for the 1948 Eniwetok atomic weapons tests, and with the brown water Navy around Hue and in the Delta, I had seen something of the US Navy. But this was a special experience. We were tackling an intricate joint/combined operation and doing it well. I confess that I enjoyed my spacious flag cabin, the flag bridge, and flag treatment ("ding-ding, Deputy Commander Delta Regional Assistance Command arriving!"). Jack DeWinter arranged for me to make his ship's 5,000th landing—certificate, cake cutting and all. We soldiers were able to watch the Navy work, up close. From the "air boss" and his team, to the bridge, to the deck watch, to the engine room, CLEVELAND was a professional ship and ship's company fondly remembered by me.



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