

KIA 5 Mar 1971

**SP4 Michael King
SP4 Joel Hatley
W01 Ralph Moreira
CPT David Nelson**

The Mission

On 5 March 1971 Capt. David L. Nelson (Call sign Phoenix 16), aircraft commander; Warrant Officer Ralph Moreira, pilot; SP4 Joel Hatley, crewchief; and SP4 Michael E. King, door gunner, comprised the crew of the lead helicopter (tail # 67-17341), call sign (for this mission) "Auction 01." Auction flight consisted of the second group of ten aircraft on a combat assault mission in an overall air armada of 40 Huey helicopters inserting ARVN troops into Landing Zone (LZ) Sophia in conjunction with Lam Son 719. The Hueys' were to insert the ARVNs, then return to Khe Sanh to refuel, rearm, and load the next wave of troops to be inserted. The combat assault into LZ Sophia was the final stepping-stone toward the ultimate objective of Tchepone, Laos, a village roughly 20 miles from the border that was known to serve as a major hub for the NVA supply activities on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Dolphin 16 of the 174 AHC (Dolphins and Sharks) made a tape on Mar 5 1971, which had one of Dave Nelson's last radio transmissions on it. Dave was being asked by Red Dragon 09 the status of his approach to LZ Sophia. Dave calmly responds, on the tape, that he broke off his approach, his aircraft was hit and had been leaking fuel but wasn't now, there were wounded on board, the gunner was hit in the head, and he was going to try to make it back to Kilo Sierra (Khe Sahn). Other Phoenix remember a similar call on the internal Phoenix frequency, but that Dave was going to try to get to much closer Aloui. UH-1H #67-17341 exploded at altitude east of LZ Liz.

Over the years there has been some controversy surrounding CPT Nelson. But for the men who knew him, who flew with him, and those that witnessed the explosion there is little doubt he perished in a ball of fire over Laos, Mar 5 1971.

David Nelson Controversy:

Below is an excerpt explaining the basis for the POW claim followed by email posts between Patty Hopper (POW researcher) and eyewitness accounts by Phoenix pilots. Anyone wanting further info should contact the Phoenix list at <http://www.phoenix158.org/mailcall>.

The Controversy Provided by:

Patty Hopper, Task Force Omega, Inc., www.taskforceomegainc.org

In 1988 a former Royal Lao Army Officer who received some of his training in the United States, Somdee Phommachanh, reported to the US

government, then later to the American public on national television, that prior to his escape from captivity, he was held captive by the Communist Pathet Lao along with two Americans at a prison camp in northern Laos. He reported the identity of those two men as being Army Capt. David Nelson and Navy Lt. Stanley Smiley. That identification was later confirmed by US officials through the positive identification of both men's pre-capture photos. According to Somdee, he nursed the very ill David Nelson as best he could until the day he died. The guards allowed Somdee to bury his friend with all the care he would a cherished loved one, given his limited ability as a Prisoner of War. The last time he saw Lt. Stanley Smiley was shortly after David Nelson's death. Lt. Smiley was sitting with his back against a tree a short distance from their hut with a stick in his hand randomly writing, then erasing, his name in the dirt before him. Somdee was unable to talk with Lt. Smiley because of the nearby guards.

From: "Ken Mayberry" <phoenix50@neb.rr.com>
To: "Patty Hopper (Task Force Omega, Inc.)" <tfoinc@inficad.com>
Date sent: Sat, 18 Nov 2000 14:44:15 -0600
Subject: Re: Fw: David Nelson's loss
Send reply to: phoenix50@neb.rr.com

I apologize for sitting on this but this subject is difficult to approach without going ballistic because it never seems to end for many people, when for the persons who care the most, this was over Mar 5, 1971. Nelson & crew were in my unit-C/158 "Phoenix" 101ABN.

Go to this link: <http://www.phoenix158.org/hootches/mayberry.cfm>

Read Final Flight of the PHOENIX.

I have 3 points.

1: David Nelson Status

David Nelson & Crew perished in a ball of fire over Laos. I was not there but many of my friends were & they witnessed what happened. ALL said the explosion was NOT survivable. One of my friends said the aircrews speculated a grenade pin may have accidentally been pulled. I tell you this only to give you an idea of the magnitude & violence of the explosion.

2: Somdee Story

Mr Somdee is either lying or has misidentified Nelson as his POW friend.

Misidentification

The mind & memory is fickle. 2 men flying the same mission can have a very different recall of details. I know because I speak from experience when comparing stories of past events with men I've served with. Somdee may very well believe Nelson was the POW but he is wrong.

3: Casket Contents

I (quite frankly) don't care what the casket contained. I've been told that the personnel that excavate these sites are very dedicated and thorough so I know that they have recovered all there is to find from that site. I'm surprised there was anything left from the fire then 20 years exposure to the climate. For me, the funeral at Arlington was very symbolic not just for Nelson & Crew but all the crewmen who we lost.

I only hope that when you publish the Nelson saga you balance it with the Phoenix witness accounts so that the public can have the complete story of what really happened. I welcome all Q's or comments & standby for assistance.

Ken Mayberry Phoenix 50 VN 70-71

1st Question posed by Hopper:

From: Patty Hopper (Task Force Omega, Inc.) <tfoinc@inficad.com>
Date: Sunday, December 03, 2000 4:47 PM
Subject: Lam Som 719

My name is Patty Hopper and I am a POW/MIA researcher. Over the last month or so I've been in touch with several members of Phoenix who flew in Lam Son 719 in regard to the loss of Auction 01, David Nelson's Huey. Both Ken Mayberry and Ted Olson suggested I write you both since you were eyewitnesses to the loss.

I've attaching to this e-mail a copy of the master bio for this loss for your review. I know there is great controversy over Somdee's sighting report of David Nelson being one of two Americans he was imprisoned with after the end of the war. As I've told other members of Phoenix, if Somdee was in error about it being David Nelson, then the man was another American mother's son, and she has a right to know what happened to him. Our intent in not to cause you pain or to publish incorrect information about this loss incident. We are trying to make sense of all the information we are aware of in this case.

Following this message is one I received from Ted Olson. Anything you could add about what you saw would be greatly appreciated.

Faith,

Date sent: Tue, 28 Nov 2000 19:24:02 -0800
To: "Patty Hopper (Task Force Omega, Inc.)" <tfoinc@inficad.com>
From: Ted Olson <tolson@oacys.com>
Subject: Re: David Nelson

At 01:28 PM 11/28/2000 -0700, you wrote:

Ted, thank you for the input that I have the basic bio in order. In your e-mail that was forwarded to me by Ken, you said that in his last frantic transmission, David Nelson radioed there was blood all over the windshield. This is a brand new bit of information unknown outside of those of you who heard it or were aware of it. I understand the dynamics of that call. A question it raises is what do you think he would have done under those conditions to keep his bird in the air and heading toward Khe Sanh? A second question I have is what was his estimated altitude at the time of the first explosion? A third question, did those who saw the first explosion mention approximately how long it was between the first and second explosions? I understand there may not be answers available to these questions, but if there are, I am very interested in them.

Patty, in response to your questions:

ALTITUDE. The best I can recall is that we were typically flying enroute legs during LS 719 at 5,000 feet MSL over Hwy 9 (others can confirm or correct). I can still picture the rising terrain around Sophia, and after a brief look at an old map I think the LZ was probably at around 1,000 feet, maybe a bit less. Our tactic was to pull as much pitch as possible to climb for altitude rapidly upon departing any LZ, especially the hot ones.

Given where I recall this happened, I think that Capt Nelson's radio call was no more than one-two minutes after departing Sophia, which would equate to something between 3,000-5,000 feet AGL when hit, depending on the rate of climb he was able to achieve with the load he had. This sounds right to me in all dimensions - and I might add to my previous note that his final radio call was not only brief and frantic, but my recollection is that it also ended very abruptly.

There is also the account we have from a book describing this mission ("*Price of Exit*" by Tom Marshall) which might explain why Capt Nelson still had pax on board as well as where he was when hit. Both Mike Cataldo and Rick Scrugham are quoted, who were further forward in the flight than I was. (An excerpt is on our website at www.phoenix158.org/sophia.cfm.) As I wrote previously to Ken Mayberry (which he forwarded to you), I could not remember why this was so, since the mission was an insertion and not an extraction. In any case, the book's description places Nelson in the same approximate dimensions of time, position, heading, and altitude that I recall - whether he had actually been into or over the LZ or not.

OPTIONS. You ask what he might have done, had he been able to remain airborne? Well, an obscured windshield by itself would not render the ship unflyable, and he would have tried to wipe a clear spot for forward vision while scanning out the open side windows for peripheral bearing. Others on board might have seen what was happening and helped to block the spray onto the windshield. Capt Nelson could certainly have continued back to Khe Sanh under those circumstances if there was nothing else to deal with - that is, with likely wounded on board but little or no serious damage to the aircraft.

If power was lost entirely but the main rotor system still intact, he would have bottomed pitch and tried to find a clearing into which to autorotate (how a helicopter lands without power). He would have had his hands full in that case, managing the emergency while trying to clear some forward vision through the windshield. There would almost certainly have been further radio traffic, from Nelson if he was able but in any case from others following his progress and descent with covering fire and a pickup (rescue) effort.

However, a catastrophic explosion which, as I understand it (supported by the observations of Cataldo and Scrugham), may have blown off the main rotor (and in that case probably much more), at that kind of altitude - would have left him with no control options whatsoever even if still alive. The hulk of the ship would have fallen like a rock for at least two thousand feet, perhaps and probably in pieces.

CONCLUSION. I can't say how much further help any of us might be able to provide, if any at all. As you say very correctly, we've all considered this a closed case for nearly thirty years, and anyone at the time would have flown day and night in a recovery effort if any hope had existed. And even now, the collection of materials and memoirs for our unit's website has been a slow process, very few are retired (yet) and time is always at a premium. However, if you would like to send a copy of what materials you may have we might go over them at our next Phoenix reunion and try to jog memories collectively to dislodge any remaining details. I agree that we owe that much to Capt Nelson and Ralph Moreira and their crew. But there's no hurry, these occasions are irregular, it might be

months or could be years - that's the best I can suggest.

I hope this helps a little. I think I can (probably) speak for all in that we understand, appreciate, and support the sincerity of your efforts. There is no question that those we lost deserve their due accounting, as well as their due rest.

Regards,

Ted Olson (then WO1)
Phoenix 65, C/158 101 ABN
RVN 70-71

*From: "Patty Hopper (Task Force Omega, Inc.)" <tfoinc@inficad.com>
To: "Rick Scrugham" <scrugham@ntown.com>
Subject: Re: Lam Som 719
Date sent: Mon, 4 Dec 2000 17:46:29 -0700*

Rick,

Thanks for your rapid reply. According to the various accounts I've read, Auction 01 was at altitude when it exploded twice in the air, then again on the ground. Could you estimate what the Huey's altitude was when it first exploded and how long it was between the first and second explosion?

Also, there has been speculation in the various reports that the aircraft was possibly struck by an SA-2 or that a grenade inside the slick went off. Based on what you saw, can you provide any insight into these possibilities?

Rick, one last question. Did the Huey disintegrate in the air or did it remain somewhat in tact during the descent? I know it lost its main rotor almost immediately, but what about the fuselage?

You mentioned the Challenger explosion - I know what you mean. I expect most of us remember exactly where we were when it exploded. The ironic thing about the Challenger, though, was the first word from the experts was the crew all died instantly. Yet in spite of what we saw and what the officials told us, we learned years later that not only had they survived that horrific explosion, but they were turning on each others airpicks on the way down. There's no comparasin between the two other than the impact both had on all who care about the crews.

Thanks again, Rick, I do appreciate your insights.

Faith,

Patty

From: Rick Scrugham <scrugham@ntown.com>
To: Patty Hopper (Task Force Omega, Inc.) <tfoinc@inficad.com>
Date: Sunday, December 03, 2000 9:21 PM
Subject: Re: Lam Som 719

Ms Hopper -

I can only reiterate what I have told my fellow Phoenix comrades and the relatives of the four crewmembers of whom you speak - and that is that I was the aircraft commander of the Huey directly behind CPT Nelson's. I remember him aborting his attempt to land and advising that he had been hit and was attempting to return to Khe Sahn. I then remember, albeit vaguely, concentrating my efforts on

depositing my load (troops) in the LZ and exiting the area as soon as possible. During that time I would have concentrated on the business at hand (inserting the troops), and diverted my attention from Nelson's aircraft, but only for the 2-3 minutes it probably took. What I most vividly recall was looking up at Nelson's ship and marveling at how high he had climbed in such a short period of time. It was at this moment that I saw the ship explode in a huge ball of black and orange smoke and flame. As Ted has speculated, he appeared to be at about 5,000 ft, and I remember trying to look for "big pieces" falling which might mean he had some control of the aircraft but saw none. I will never forget the sight because I've never seen anything like it, before or since. As I told the relatives at the funeral, it was exactly like the Challenger explosion, and as far as I was concerned, there was no reason (at the time) to attempt recovery because no one could have survived that crash.

Hope this helps,

Rick Scrugham

From: "Rick Scrugham" <scrugham@ntown.com>
To: "Patty Hopper (Task Force Omega, Inc.)" <tfoinc@inficad.com>
Subject: Re: Lam Som 719
Date sent: Mon, 4 Dec 2000 22:10:43 -0500

Ms Hopper -

(1) As I told you in my previous correspondence, I estimate the altitude of Nelson's aircraft to be approximately 5,000 ft MSL (probably 4,000 - 4,500 AGL). I did not remember seeing a second explosion, but, then again, I was not in as good a position as others to witness another explosion because, being closest to him, it could have occurred directly beneath me, blocked from my view.

(2) As to speculation of a SA-2 or a grenade on board, I remember speculating at the time that it might be an SA-2 except that Nelson had indicated that he had been hit in/near one of his fuel cells, and the most likely scenario, in my opinion, is that the damage caused by the initial hits ruptured the fuel cells and that the explosion/explosions resulted several minutes later.

(3) I again refer you to my email of last night in which I stated that I did not remember any "big pieces" remaining after the initial explosion. As explained in (1) above, the wreckage disappeared from my view rather quickly because of my proximity to the incident aircraft, so others might have been in a better position to determine "how much was left". All I remember for sure was thinking that, based on the devastation caused by the initial explosion, there couldn't have been much left.

Rick Scrugham

From: "Rick Kincaid" <Islice@aol.com>
Date sent: Mon, 15 May 2000 23:20:03 EDT
Subject: Re: The continued lies about Vietnam missing in action on your website.
To: phoenix50@alltel.net

I really don't know what it is about Nelson. I was right behind him going into LZ Sophia. The helicopter exploded before my eyes. God rest them. They were dead before they hit the ground.

Phoenix 43 Forever

Ricky