

GCA at Pleiku Viet Nam

By John Towler – U S Army, Retired

During October 1965 I was assigned a SLAR mission near the border of South Viet Nam and Cambodia and checked in with Air Force radar for flight vectoring. At 6,000 feet I was flying a racetrack pattern, 10 minutes north then 10 minutes south.

It was 2:00 am, dark, raining, with extremely poor visibility. I requested GCA controllers on the ground at Pleiku to keep me informed on the weather. Around 3:30, requesting radar vectors for landing, I was informed that they were below minimums.

Responding that I had understood GCA would keep me posted about the weather, he said “sir, with respect, no one told us about you.” “Sir” I replied, “I do not have enough fuel to make it on to Quinon. I am at 4,000 feet and have no choice but to attempt a landing. If the runway is not in sight at 500 feet, we will eject, hopefully we will be near the airfield.”

An obviously senior airman with a lot of experience took over radar duties. “Turn right heading 180, descend to 2,000 feet. Understand you are low on fuel. Also understand you do not have enough fuel to make a missed approach. I will call out everything for you to do, do not acknowledge me, and just do as I say. We are going to bust min tonight.”

From that point, I heard “on course” and “on glide path.” The weather was solid cloud, rain. The controller gave me missed approach procedures, and then said “you will not need them tonight.” There was no chatter: “100 feet, ¼ mile from runway” then “50 feet on course” followed by “10 feet, pull throttles back all the way, raise nose 2 degrees.”

I felt the main gear touch, then saw runway lights: I was on the center of the runway. Reversing the engines until we stopped, the tower informed me “due to reduced visibility, do not taxi. Stop on the runway – we will send a tug for you.”

The TO and I got out of the Mohawk and looked at the nose wheel: it was about a foot left of the center line and we had about 10 gallons of fuel remaining.

I never had an opportunity to meet and thank that controller. He said he was too busy.

Several years ago, I was asked by the Air Force, Air traffic Controllers Association to send them this story. They did verify that a similar story did occur in October 1965.

My TO that night was Sgt Herman Manley who now lives in Norfolk, VA. In a recent conversation with him, he reminded me of another incident together.

We were on a SLAR Mission into Cambodia. Our OV1-B required a good, working autopilot. In dodging dangerous weather, we became trapped in hostile territory, behind a series of towering thunderstorms. We needed to get through this weather back to the safety of Viet Nam. When we requested radar vectors, Air Force Controllers told us that there were no holes or spots to come through, that the storms were above 60,000 feet. I told Sgt Manley “this is it.” In our recent conversation, Sgt Manley reminded me that I slowed the Mohawk to 150 knots so that he could use SLAR to keep us away from the mountains. The storm raged on with lighting flashes so intense it was almost like daylight. We were being slammed to the top of the cockpit, and then it felt like through the floor. This situation lasted about 2 minutes and suddenly we popped into almost clear air.

With our windshield shattered from hail, we made an emergency landing back at Pleiku. As Sgt Manley and I surveyed the damage, we noted that in addition to the windshield, the nose and tips of each tank were bent.

Just another completed mission in an OV-1B Mohawk.