

## PROLOGUE

### Better Lucky Than Good

The Western Highland's plateau swept to the horizon in a rolling expanse of green and brown. Through its center cut the thin line of Provincial Route 5, a single-lane dirt track that connected this remote corner of Pleiku Province with Highway 14 to the east. To the west, the enigmatic, mist-shrouded peaks of the Annamite Range could just be discerned. In quieter times, the view from Warrant Officer (WO) Dean Christensen's orbiting UH-1B helicopter gunship would likely have been pleasant, even serene. But these were not quiet times. In fact, all hell was raging below. The communists had besieged the Special Forces camp at Plei Me some twenty kilometers to the southwest, and II Corps had dispatched a relief force to save it. But this narrow dirt road was the only way to reach the camp. And the communists knew it. So they'd sprung the ambush that everybody knew was coming. Now, the rescuers needed a little rescuing themselves. Bright orange fireballs exploded skyward, as the communists unleashed 75mm recoilless rifle, B-40 rocket, and 82mm mortar fire along the length of the relief column. Still, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) armored task force was holding its own, pummeling enemy positions on both sides of the road with 76mm cannon shot and .50 caliber machine gun fire. All along the dirt track, red and green tracer rounds from friend and foe alike intermingled in a beautiful, deadly display.<sup>1</sup>

Tac-air had arrived to tip the scales in favor of the armored task force (ATF). Close-air support (CAS) strike aircraft roared overhead, laying into communist emplacements with a fusillade of rockets, 20mm cannon fire, and thunderous 500- and 750-pound bombs. Indeed, the airspace above Route 5 was crowded with a motley array of aircraft from the four corners of South Vietnam. There were World War II-era prop planes buzzing alongside

supersonic F-105s, while helicopter gunships like Christensen's—call sign "Crocodile 3"—shared airspace with the tiny, Cessna-like O-1 Bird Dogs piloted by the forward air controllers (FACs). It was the FAC's job to marshal all the controlled chaos that is close air support. And today, he had his hands full.<sup>2</sup>

Christensen's headset crackled. It was the FAC circling overhead. The young warrant officer's two-ship flight of "Hog" gunships was cleared to start its gun run. Christensen felt the rush of an adrenaline surge. He'd already been in-country for almost a year now. In fact, his DEROS, or estimated date of return from overseas, was just two weeks away. This was nothing new to him. And yet the thrill was there every time. Christensen dipped the nose of his gunship and plunged to earth, wingman hot on his tail. Fast and low was the order of the day. Skimming nap-of-the-earth at better than one hundred knots made it that much harder for enemy gunners to draw a bead on him. The gunships flattened out at tree-top level, the forest on both sides nothing more than a blur through the Huey's Plexiglas. The trees crackled with bright orange flashes, as enemy gunners sought to drown the choppers in a tidal wave of antiaircraft fire.<sup>3</sup>

Suddenly, Christensen's headset came alive. "Break right! Break right!" his wingman screamed.

Christensen banked hard to starboard. No indecision. No second-guessing. Every bit of the gunship pilot's hard-won experience had taught him a simple maxim: He who hesitates . . . dies. A split-second later, a booming shockwave slapped the chopper like a sledgehammer, showering its underbelly with dirt, smoke, and fire. Below, high-explosive munitions gouged a flaming crater in the earth. Above, the silver visage of a B-57 Canberra thundered toward the horizon. The twin-jet tactical bomber had nearly plunked a 500-pounder right on top of Christensen's head. His wingman had saved him. But there was no time for thanks—or curses for the Canberra pilot. The enemy was still down there. As if on cue, arcing green tracers laced skyward along his flight path. As pilot, Christensen had the MK 4 "Mighty Mouse" rockets on his Hog's weapon system. His copilot controlled the 40mm grenade launcher mounted in the Huey's nose. The chopper shuddered as the 2.75-inch rockets, two at a time, screamed from the side-mounted pods, their 10-pound warheads exploding in cascading showers of dirt and fire all along the tree line. Below, he could see the tell-tale flashes of small-arms fire as communist gunners targeted his ship from inside a small house just off the road. Christensen rolled over and pumped two pairs of rockets through its front door. The side walls blew out in a geyser of flame and detritus as its thatched roof crashed down. The pilot swung around and hit it again for good measure.<sup>4</sup>

Just then, Christensen's door gunner howled. "What happened?" Christensen yelled. "Got hit in the foot," came the gunner's reply. "Ruined my new boot!" In one of those freak accidents of war, a small-arms antiaircraft round had struck one of the rockets just as it was leaving the pod. The bullet had somehow missed the rocket's warhead and struck the motor tube instead. But the ricochet had sent the round careening into the gunner's foot. Every man aboard—door gunner included—would take that outcome over the alternative any day of the week. A hit to the warhead would've blown the chopper from the sky. In war, it was always better to be lucky than good.<sup>5</sup>

They'd need a bit more of that luck before this day was done. Just as Christensen was about to peel off for Camp Holloway with his wounded man, the pilot felt a problem with the tail rotor. Something was off with the pitch change. Whether they'd been hit, he didn't know. The only thing for certain was that it had to be fixed—and right now. Christensen radioed an update to his wingman, then scanned the area for a suitable place to land. Most of the ground in this part of the Western Highlands was covered in low forest and sprawling patches of elephant grass, a ubiquitous regional species that could grow more than twelve feet tall. During more peaceful times, the big game hunters who came to stalk tigers in Vietnam would need to be wary of what lay hidden within that tall, thick grass. These days, it was very adept at concealing enemy troops, too. Just then, Christensen spotted a clearing nearby. The pilot radioed the FAC and told him he was going to set down. Was there anyone available to provide close air support while they got the tail rotor fixed? The FAC said he would see what he could do. Christensen muscled the chopper toward the opening, straining to keep the craft stable enough for a landing. No helicopter pilot relishes the idea of setting down with enemy lurking about. Indeed, if being blasted apart by one of his own rockets was Christensen's least favorite thing in the world, landing unprotected in the middle of Indian Country had to be second on that list.<sup>6</sup>

The warrant officer settled the chopper onto its landing skids and reluctantly cut the engine. It would make it that much harder to get the engine revved up in case they needed to get out fast, but there was no other choice. Dense vegetation bounded the little clearing on all sides. Christensen couldn't see more than a yard or two into the undergrowth. In his year in-country, he'd never felt more exposed than at this moment. The door gunner, heedless of the blood filling his boot where the ricochet had torn through, racked his M-60 and peered into the jungle, swiveling the medium machine gun back and forth on its bungee strap. Above,

Christensen's wingman orbited farther out, trying not to draw unwanted attention to his friends on the ground.<sup>7</sup>

Then, the FAC's disembodied voice over the radio. He'd spotted enemy troops moving toward the chopper. "Get your heads down," the voice warned. "I'm gonna bring 'em close." Moments later the jungle simply erupted in a wall of flame, as CAS strike aircraft roared in to deliver their ordnance at three hundred meters. Beyond the clearing, great billowing clouds of earth, fire, and smoke blasted skyward. Instinctively, the door gunner opened up with his M-60, the 7.62mm rounds sweeping the jungle like a scythe. After several tac-air passes, the crew chief leapt to the ground and scrambled up on to the chopper's tail boom to get at the rotor. There wasn't much time. If they couldn't resolve the problem with the tail rotor fast, the gunship crew would likely have to take their chances in the jungle until they could be extracted—a fate no one relished. "Come on, come on!" Christensen bellowed. "Get it fixed so we can get the hell out of here!"<sup>8</sup>

Anxious minutes ticked by. At any moment, thought Christensen, heart pounding, the communists would come swarming from that tree line in a human wave. Time slowed to a crawl. And just when he was sure he could stand no more, Christensen heard the crew chief throw himself through the side door. "Go! Go! Go!" the chief screamed. Christensen quickly ran through the Huey's startup procedure, winding up the chopper's Lycoming T53 turboshaft engine as fast as physics would allow. The pilot then pulled pitch and clawed for altitude, the door gunner spraying the tree line with wild abandon as the ship groaned skyward. Once they'd cleared small-arms range, Christensen banked the chopper northeast and thundered toward Camp Holloway. For the third time today, the men of Croc 3 had gotten lucky. Below, the fight on Route 5 raged on.<sup>9</sup>