

Pacific Stars & Stripes
7 Saturday, July 1, 1972

Sergeant Stranded at Outpost

5 Days in Hill Village Weren't Dull

PLEIKU, Vietnam — The village of Mang Buk is in the middle of “no-man’s land,” 40 miles north of Kontum in the Central Highlands. It is not the place to be stuck for five days, as U.S. Air Force Sgt. Bill Lacer learned when he did it.

Lacer, 22, from Brandon, Fla., is a Combat Controller for aircraft operations in combat zones. He and SM. Sgt. Robert Chavez were sent to Mang Buk to work on some navigational equipment one morning.

Their chopper had hardly touched down when the landing zone came under intense small arms and mortar fire. Chavez got back aboard the chopper, but it had to lift off before Lacer could scramble back to it. Lacer ran to the nearby Montagnard outpost.

Chavez bundled all of Lacer’s gear inside a flak jacket, and when the chopper made a low pass over the compound he kicked it out the door. The chopper flew south 27 miles to Pleiku.

Lacer was the first American at Mang Buk in a long time, and quickly became a VIP. He went on several patrols with the soldiers there because “I didn’t have anything better to do.”

At each of five friendly villages in the area that he entered, the headman gave Lacer a Montagnard bracelet. He was also given three crossbows by the tribesmen.

During the time Lacer was at Mang Buk there were continuous gun battles.

“The compound catches steady incoming mortar rounds from all around the area,” he said, “and snipers shoot at you when you move between the bunkers.”

“But those little guys,” he said, “like to get out there and mop up. You should see the collection of weapons they’ve captured. The Communists are all

over the place, but the little dudes get out and patrol and ambush — they really fight. One day they located the observation post that was directing the mortars, so they went out and cut the phone lines. Brought a big roll of that telephone wire back, too.”

Mang Buk sits astride one of the Communists’ main infiltration routes. In May U.S. officers in Kontum reported that Communist soldiers using loudspeakers surrounded the village. They

broadcast messages such as, “Why are you firing our artillery and our rifles at us? They will be ours very soon.”

The Communists announced that if the women and children filed out of the village in an orderly manner, they would not be killed. Only the men would die. They also said that when the Red commanding officer entered the town after it was overrun, he would arrive not in a jeep, but in a lawn chair. The Communists promised to slaughter every male in the village if they offered resistance.

But the Reds never captured Mang Buk because of tenacious fighting by the Montagnards.

Lacer used an ARVN radio at Mang Buk and made contact with Chavez at Pleiku. Bad weather prohibited a rescue try for four days, but on the fifth day a chopper went in and got Lacer out. During his de-briefing at Pleiku the airfield came under Communist rocket attack.

“I seem to draw that stuff like a magnet,” Lacer said.

“You were with me at Kontum,” Chavez said, “and we took incoming. You were with me at Song Be and we got hit . . . When we get back to Tan Son Nhut (their base), you’re going to be assigned to someone else’s unit. We’re bad for each other.”

Lacer laughed, and changed the subject. “Hey, sarge,” he said, “I hope somebody remembered that I was supposed to start my leave the day before yesterday.”

Sent by Patrick Aguilar