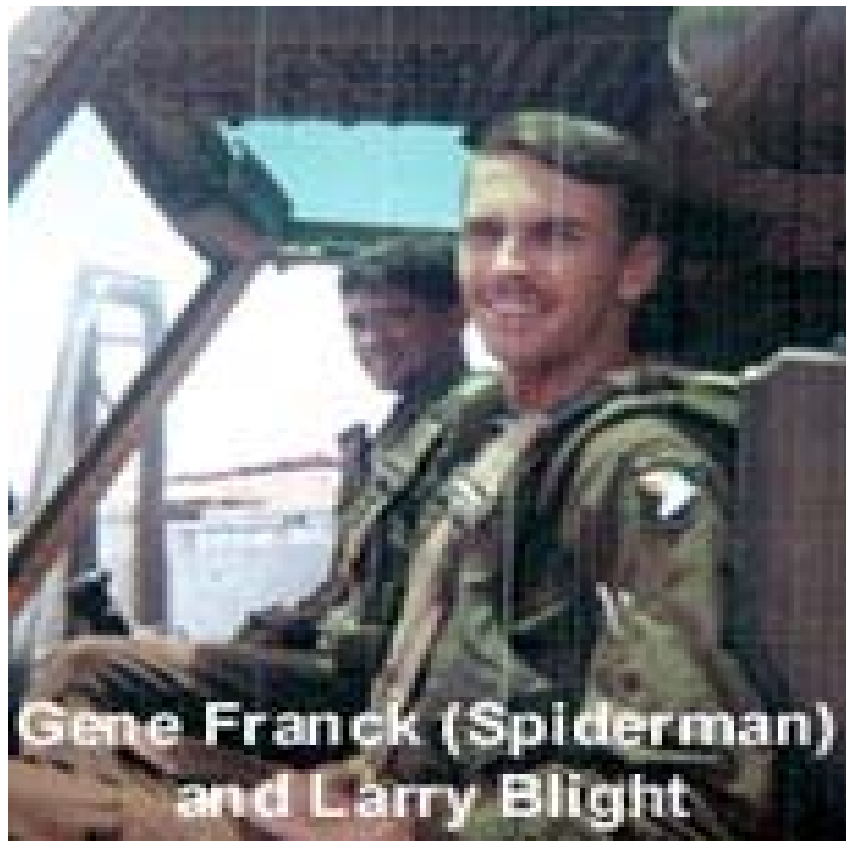


SPIDERMAN TO THE RESCUE

A bit of background on this story. We had been searching for more information regarding the November 17, 1969 battle at Dong Ha Mountain aka FSB Fuller. The 6/33rd reunion was held at Branson last November and we happened to schedule lunch at College of the Ozarks. The Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association was meeting there at precisely the same time and when I struck up a conversation with some of the pilots there, I asked if there would be a way to find the pilot with call sign "Spiderman" and someone suggested that we place a note in the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association publication. Yesterday we received a message from Gene Franck "Spider Man" who was that pilot.

We have attempted a number of phone calls in our search for Lt. Ferguson with no concrete results. Although the guys called him "Mike" I suspect that his name was probably James M. Ferguson.



Take care, and thanks for the input from everyone.

Clyde

17-Nov-69 2135 C Battery, located at FSB Fuller is hit by intermittent ground probes. Approximately 40 to 50 RPGs are received injuring 2 officers. One EM suffers a non-fatal heart attack. The enemy force is repelled by firing ICM, HE and Beehive direct defensive targets and organic small arms weapons to reinforce the indirect artillery fire on defensive targets. The wire is never breached.

Lt. Dennis Butte was in charge of the Fire Direction Center during the evening shift on FSB Fuller. In the chain of command he was right after Lt. Mike Ferguson who was the Executive Officer. On the night of the attack the other FDO took over the FDC while Butte went out into the battery with a PRC75 and adjusted the defensive fire missions. The steep slopes of Fuller made it difficult to bring the rounds close enough to do any good and extremely nerve wracking because of the difficulty of being close without putting a round on top of the hill or the unit. There had been reports of dinks in the wire although Butte personally saw none and had illumination going constantly. The unit was taking RPG rounds and Ferguson was out in the open and moving around the battery a lot of the time like Butte was.

When the enemy attack began, FDC contacted the battery guns along the perimeter for a fire mission. All except gun 5 reported "ready to fire". Without all guns reporting, FDC could not order a fire mission, so Lt. Ferguson immediately ran over to gun 5 to check on the situation. He realized that the crew on gun 5 was not ready to fire and quickly bent down to reach the land line phone, then contacted FDC and told them that gun 5 was out of commission. As he bent down, his steel pot fell off and when he popped back up again without his helmet, he was hit in the head by a piece of shrapnel that caused massive bleeding. Sp4 Henry Vest, the 6/33 medic, was having a difficult time controlling the bleeding so Leo Militello, the battery recorder, ran over to the infantry company and called one of their medics, who was able to stop the bleeding. Vest stayed with Ferguson through the night. The mountain top was fogged in the next morning but finally Lt. Butte was able to direct a medevac pilot in thru the fog to pick up the wounded and take them to the hospital ship Repose. Militello

Fuller had been socked in by fog for several days including the morning after the battle. The medevac ships would not attempt to come in to get the wounded, but "Spiderman", a pilot from a transportation unit, put his life on the line that day to pick up the wounded while Butte stood on the side of the cloud covered hill and provided directions to put him on the pad as the cloud cover prevented him from seeing where he was going. Butte would tell him to come up and what direction over; a process that was repeated many times until he touched down. After loading the wounded, "Spiderman" blindly left in the reverse manner he had used to get to the pad. Lt. Dennis Butte

I was an aircraft commander flying aircraft 67-17678 with A Co. 158th AHB, Ghost Riders, in November 1969. My company call sign was Spider Man and as far as I know the only Huey pilot in Northern I Corp using that call sign at that time. My unit was stationed at Camp Evans, but if I remember correctly I was on temporary assignment flying out of Quang Tri in November 1969. I remember picking up a wounded soldier with a head wound along with two other wounded and taking them out to the Naval Hospital ship that was off the coast. It was SOP to always take head wounds out to the hospital ship because they would receive the best care there. I knew this to be true because my best friend was taken there in August 1969 after being shot down and receiving a head wound. I was one of the most experienced pilots in our unit and had the most experience flying in bad weather and landing on the hospital ship, so it was logical that I would have been picked for the flight. The firebase was fogged over. This forced us to begin the mission at the ocean fly just off the ground under the clouds until we reached the firebase, then, with the nose of the aircraft facing the mountain side so we had a visual reference point, we slowly crept up the side of the mountain as the Lieutenant on the ground talked us to the landing pad. The best route leaving the pad was to head towards the North Northwest. Toward the DMZ. But it worked for us that night. Landing on the ship was difficult because it was dark, a very rough ocean with 15 foot rolling seas, and the ship was pitching side to side while rising up and down. This all led to one of my most challenging landings on the ship. The skids on the Huey are stationary with no shock absorbers. If you happen to hit the deck of a ship in rough water while it is on the upward track, the force will drive the skids up to the belly of the aircraft. The trick, then, was to time your landing and set the aircraft down just as the ship reaches its crest. To my relief, I was able to land on my second attempt and got the soldier safely on board. It was landing on the ship that I remember the most. I checked my flight records and I flew 10.3 hours on November 17 and 1.3 hours while under weather conditions, flying under instrument conditions, it was a long day. The 1.3 hour segment would have been the evacuation mission to Fuller.

*I'm not sure if all of this is consistent with your information, but I hope this fills in my side of the story. Our job was to support the troops on the ground and I was just doing my job. Gene, Spider Man, Franck, Ghost Rider
678*

Gene,

I am in shock to find that one of my long time wishes is about to be fulfilled. For 44 years I have wanted to be able to thank you for your heroic actions that day. I can't begin to tell you what a relief it was, to hear you say that you would take the risk, come to our landing pad and medevac my friend, Lt. Mike Ferguson.

Here is my side of the story. As the FDO on duty when it happened I had put out the call for the medevac but FB Fuller was in the low lying clouds and completely socked in. As the hours went by, several medevacs came out to the mountain, took one look and turned around for home. We were trying to keep Mike comfortable and awake as we were advised by HQ until he was in the care of medical personnel. It had been hours, but seemed like days that we had been waiting for someone to come get him off the hill. I was in the FDC when you first contacted us on the radio and I explained to you how desperate we were to get him out, but unlike the others, you said you would do it. You asked me to guide you up the hill, so I grabbed a PRC25 and went to the south side of the hill and listened for your approach. When I could hear you, we started the process of my telling you, "You are below us and directly to our south", and you would then adjust accordingly. After more than a dozen such movements, I told you that you were directly over our pad. I remember your shock at touching down on the pad when you said, "I didn't think I was that close yet." Mike was carried up and loaded onto your Huey. While the loading was taking place, you asked me for a safe heading off the hill and I gave you NNW. When you were ready to leave, you picked the helicopter up about 6 -8', turned to NNW, and slowly edged off the hill, picking up speed and then dropping out of sight. We were told that he was taken to a hospital ship off the coast but I never heard any more after that as to his condition.

In the late 90's one of the portable "Vietnam Walls" came to my home town in NE Colorado for one week. I finally went on the last day with one dreaded thought and that was to see his name on the wall. When I had looked for a while and had not been able to find it I asked one of the people there where it might be. They looked through their list and told me there was no such name on the wall, I lost it. All of the fears and thoughts left me as I collapsed in tears.

It wasn't until just a couple of years ago when I was able to make contact with the battery commander, Truman Arnett, that I was able to get an update on Mike. He had been stationed at Fort Sill where Truman saw him. He told him that they had put a steel plate in his head and he was OK. From Fort Sill the trail went dark. Despite my efforts I have not been able to locate him.

As for your efforts, I cannot say enough. What you did was "off the charts" and was probably the only reason he lived. It is men like you who have made this country great and I will never be able to thank you enough. Deeply thankful, Dennis Butte "Swords 70"

LT James Ferguson was the best Battery XO I have ever known. Jim and I were wounded at the same time during the attack on LZ Fuller. I only had a minor injury but Jim suffered a serious head wound. Because of the weather we were not able to evacuate him until late the next day. LTC Everett Hopper (Bn Co) and I visited him on the Navy hospital ship (don't remember the name) after his surgery. He was in good spirits and they were evacuating him to the States. That's the last time I saw him,

I received a letter from him a month or so later saying they had put a plate in his head and he was doing fine (no mental impairment). Later, I heard from someone that he was stationed at Ft. Sill after his discharge from the hospital. That would have been 70-71 timeframe and believe that he was from Texas. Cpt. Truman Arnett Battery CO

18-Nov-69 XO briefs A/158 AVN about the need to evacuate casualties from FSB Fuller. Lt. Ferguson, PFC Merrifield and an infantryman are flown to USS Repose. Asst S-1 tells section that C 6/33 was attacked last night by sappers with 2 WIA and 1 heart attack.

An Eerie Sucking Sound – November 18, 1969

By mid November 1969, atop Dong Ha Mountain there in the Republic of Vietnam, things had changed greatly from just a few weeks earlier. As time moved on, the weather became cooler, and there was beau coup (a lot) more cloud cover. I had mixed emotions about the whole situation. I loved being there and especially working DF. Yet, on an immediate and local level it seemed that the wind quit making the usual wooing sounds, but rather, it seemed to make an uncanny sucking sound as it blew down across Mutter's Ridge and the DMZ from the communist north or from Leatherneck Square to the east. All of a sudden we were the only Marines there on the mountain. The army had arrived in the next step of our president's plan of Vietnamization. My mixed emotions, or ambivalence was that I loved my job, but at the same time the situation sucked. It was kinda like playing sports such as football, and motocross. I loved the sports, both in high school and later years. I played hard too but you gotta pay the price. For instance, I've managed to have sixteen broken bones in thirteen separate incidents. I love the activities, but sometimes the situation sucked. And, that's how it was in Vietnam.

It really was an important job; after all, we were fighting to keep the aggressor communists of the north from taking over the country. Looking back upon it now from a different perspective, or point of view I can also see that America's expenditure of blood and bucks ended up helping to stop the advance of communism on a world-wide level. We drained them and even the giant Soviet Union was defunct in twenty years.

During the day of November 17th, our own 1st Radio Battalion's SigInt efforts produced an incident very reminiscent of the one that greatly influenced the American victory at the Battle of Midway in WWII. In this particular event we found that a NVA regiment (my memory seems to tell me it was the 246th of the 304th Division) was in comms with an NVA arty unit. A combination that always spelled t-r-o-u-b-l-e for someone. Whenever any part of the 304th was on the move, somebody was going to die. And, amazingly it was them that always got hit way harder than us, but they'd just didi mau back across the DMZ, or into Laos. There they just regrouped, resupplied, rebuilt, and retrained with immunity their devastated elements, while awaiting for another time to create hate and discontent. We couldn't touch them there thanks to our all wise congress, who were greatly influenced by maggots like Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda, and their blind and self centered followers. People like that were responsible for much American blood.

So the big question was, who would that lucky somebody be? Well, we had a tri-nome indicator that signaled who the somebody was that would have the honors. It's just that we weren't exactly sure who the three number indicator indicated. Possibly the tri-nome was C2, a fire support base that was just a little to our east, or possibly the Khe Gio bridge near the southern base of our mountain. It could also be Camp Elliot at the Rockpile, but then again, it could be us as well. Not knowing who caused us all to spin the dials on our radios more intently and I was purposed to locate them with my Pig (PRD-1 direction finder) atop our bunker in the Pig Pen.

Every American unit in the whole northern "I" Corps area was alerted that something was up. Everyone was on standby to assist the "chosen somebodies." Every arty unit that could push out a round far enough with maximum charge was ready to participate. Every air unit was standing by to render assistance even though the cloud cover was heavy and no aircraft could drop bombs without possibly hitting the good guys.

Early in the evening, up in my Pig Pen, the speaker crackled, "All Stations, All Stations this is Florida Vacation Alpha with a message on Bravo Zulu; standby to receive traffic." Net control at Dong Ha had a target for us. In just a short minute's time, I was sending my own traffic back which was a really good shot/bearing on the enemy transmission whom I believe was the 81st Artillery Battalion. It seems that they were to provide artillery support for the 246th as that infantry regiment made its assault on the chosen somebody. But, who was chosen? We'd all find out soon enough.

I recall hearing the bru ha ha from the big boys (155mm and 175mm howitzers) at Dong Ha, Alpha 4, Charlie 2, and Camp Carroll as their big guns were firing on the enemy's 81st arty, at least on their radio operator. Seems like everybody was getting in on the action. So we thought we knew where their arty support was coming from, but we still had no location on the 246th, nor did we know who they were about to play "Patty Cake" with. For some reason I recall going back down into our operations bunker. Possibly because those big guns were impacting not too far from us, (danger close) and the rounds, especially the 175s from Camp Carroll were doing their "freight train impressions" as they passed just over our heads; just a slight mis-calc. or a short round would create beau coup "hate and discontent" right in our own perimeter. Some days I'd hear our 1st RagBag

DF guy at Camp Carroll talking on our net radio frequency when the 175's, right near him, would start shooting in our direction, then he'd say something like "hey, Foxtrot (that's us at Fuller) you've got some 'Big Boys' heading your way," and sure enough, those 175 rounds would go roaring by. On this occasion, I recall being told across the radio that they were firing some kind of pattern to saturate the suspected target area with steel. Not being an artilleryman, was the term "shooting Iron Crosses" or something like that?

Regardless, for whatever reason, we were all in the bunker as Camp Carroll's 175's were doing their fly-by. Those of us who were not actually on the radio (seems like our Dancers were the ones spinning the dials) were playing Back Alley. I distinctly remember that at 2130 hours we were all actively discussing who was going to get hit. All of a sudden I remembered that all my "deuce gear" was in our sleeping bunker next door. That required my leaving the entrance to our bunker, traversing the ledge and going into the other bunker to retrieve my flak jacket and junk. I recall standing at the entrance and saying "who's it gonna be." "Not us" came the consensus, though the Dancers weren't saying much, but seemed rather shook up. One step along towards the other bunker, just one step and all of a sudden a great big KA-WAAAM . A B-41 (RPG) impacted right on the other side of the bunker entrance where I was headed. I felt the concussion, but continued into the other bunker, after just a slight pause, during which time I yelled back into the Ops. bunker, "It's Us! As if they hadn't already figured that out. Those RPGs were not accurate at all past fifty to a hundred yards, but they could be used as an indirect fire weapon for distances out to nine hundred yards or so. After the retrieval of my combat gear, to include my M-79, I went back to the Operations bunker where my rifle was, and all the other guys. Then NVA 82 mm mortars started dropping in on us, but kind of spread out, not nearly as heavy as I expected.

My memory is sketchy here, because I remember at sometime being along our sandbagged wall awaiting an enemy assault, as well as being in the Operations bunker. I also remember that we could hear the wonderful sound of the flares as they'd pop overhead, but we just couldn't tell exactly where they were at because of the thick cloud cover. We were definitely "socked-in." In the bunker with our radios we could tune in to any frequency, one of which I recall was the "basketball ship." It was a large aircraft that kept orbiting overhead and dropping those large drum sized flares. He stayed there for hours always keeping a flare in the air, and when one would leave another would take his place. Sometimes when a flare would be dropped a little too far away, or it'd drift too far, one of our 81mm mortars would pop a flare and there would be more light. It was always really eerie though as the parachutes would float down through the clouds. Sometimes they'd be real close and we'd hear the sizzle, feel the heat, and smell the fumes as it'd float by, then sputter and extinguish, sometimes just right there. I remember getting the call to return to my Pig Pen to get some RDF shots. The Pig was the very highest point on the mountain, and I could see a full 360 degrees all around - for a few feet that is - because of the clouds, that's really eerie you know, people trying to kill you and not being able to see anything.

It was just a little after the NVA mortars started coming in on us that we got the word from Dong Ha that the enemy 246th regiment would no longer be supported in their assault by the assigned artillery unit. Seems that they had been decimated by American Artillery. Ha! That means that we had saved our own butts! Our own Radio Direction Finding had located and caused our own big guns and howitzers to deliver steel on the enemy so that they could not support the ground assault. Evidently the 82's that were falling on us were indigenous to the NVA 246th regiment, because the artillery unit that we had destroyed probably would have used rockets and howitzers.

Although the mortars fell throughout the night, and an occasional RPG came slamming into something, the expected ground assault never materialized into anything that caused major concern, because as soon as we realized that we were the lucky somebodies, every arty unit within range started pumping steel in patterns all around our perimeter. The crescendo was intense at first but abated after awhile. I was told that there were more than a hundred dud 82mm NVA mortar rounds with their fins sticking up the next day, that had been dropped into our perimeter by the enemy. Possibly they were defective, maybe they just weren't detonating in the rain, and moisture softened earth. I know there a lot that weren't duds.

The next morning, the 18th of November 1969 as the light stabbed through the heavy clouds, all enemy activity had been completely non-existent for a few hours. There were no KIAs of ours and the WIAs were staged by the LZ to be medevaced as soon as a bird could get in. We could hear them overhead, above the cloud cover just watching for a hole. There were several of them, just orbiting around.

Ah, a hole appeared and zoom, in no time at all a bird appeared and set down right on that little LZ. It was unlike any bird that I had seen yet in Vietnam.

There were still several birds up above us but out of sight as it was a very fleeting hole. The pilot disembarked as well as the one, possibly two passengers. Ha! I couldn't believe my eyes. It was some civilian pilot and a Donut Dollie in her pretty blue dress. Must have come up from Quang Tri, where the nearest Red Cross folks were. Now possibly there were two of them, but it doesn't seem like that "whirlybird" was big enough to carry a pilot and two people. Regardless, they were there for a very short time before an army officer ran up screaming "get out of here, get out of here!" We had WIAs staged by the LZ awaiting a medevac to find a hole in the clouds. One of the WIAs was a lieutenant with a piece of steel shrapnel in his forehead; we needed BBs and stuff as well. Finally a hole broke and that's what we got, a sightseeing Donut Dollie? My memory mainly sees the blue dress and the soldier running up with his arms waving; if she'd a stuck around, probably she would have seen several Harvest Moons. Chuck Truitt USMC 1st Radio Battalion