

Long Night at Mo Duc

With little help available because of weather, two captains in an OV-10 took on an enemy regiment and won.

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THE night of the sixteenth/seventeenth of September 1972 was not the kind pilots dream about when sleeping peacefully. It was the monsoon season, and some of the aircraft at Danang, where the 20th Tac Air Support Squadron was based, had been evacuated because of a typhoon warning. Only one flight of tac fighters was scheduled for Vietnam that night. Weather or not, the ground war went on. An Army detachment of 120 men at Mo Duc, near the coast about ninety miles south of Danang, was under attack by some 2,000 enemy infantry.

Early that evening, the 20th TASS FAC team of Capts. Richard Poling and Joseph Personnett was alerted for a Quick Reaction Force launch to support the Mo Duc garrison, which had declared a tactical emergency. Since the Army troops could provide their own illumination, Poling and Personnett had their normal OV-10 load of flares replaced with marking, high-explosive, and flechette rockets.

By 2150 hours, the weather had improved enough for launch. Captain Personnett in the front seat was on his forty-fifth combat mission, Captain Poling on his 105th. But neither pilot had worked the recently assigned Mo Duc area. They were informed that there was no safe bailout area in the vicinity.

The situation at Mo Duc turned out to be even worse than the two

FACs had anticipated. Its defenders had been forced to abandon a 105-mm howitzer that had been taken over by the enemy, who was shelling the compound with it and with rockets and mortars. Poling and Personnett immediately silenced the 105 with flechettes, then continued to strafe and rocket other targets until the tac fighters they had requested arrived.

Intense antiaircraft fire could not be silenced since most of it came from a refugee center where the enemy had sited his guns. The FACs remained on station until their ordnance was expended. At about 0200 hours, they were forced to return to Danang to refuel and rearm.

While on the ground, they requested Naval and ARVN artillery support, gunships, and whatever tac air could be rounded up. At 0300, they launched again with Captain Poling now in the front seat. Enemy troops had completely surrounded the compound. With no USAF fighters on hand, they requested A-7s from an aircraft carrier, but were told that the Navy planes could not be there until 0630 hours. An ARVN relief force had been ambushed and stopped by enemy forces, with little prospect of reaching Mo Duc in time. It was up to Poling and Personnett to save the 120 Army men with their own ordnance and whatever other fire arrived.

The situation became so desperate that the ground commander requested friendly artillery to fire on his position. Throughout the remainder of the night, Poling and Personnett strafed and rocketed muzzle flashes, directed Navy and ARVN artillery, and marked targets for the Navy A-7s that arrived on schedule at 0630. The FACs' OV-10 was under heavy AA fire on each pass, with one of many hits passing through the canopy, showering both pilots with splinters.

As dawn broke, Captain Personnett in the back seat was directing Naval and ARVN artillery while Captain Poling was working two sets of Navy A-7s, another OV-10 with cluster bombs, and a fast FAC. The hostiles were now attacking in waves.

Shortly after 0700, the ground commander called in desperation for immediate strikes on enemy troops who had broken through the perimeter fence and were within twenty-five feet of his bunker—too close for the faster aircraft to attack. Poling immediately rolled in with a volley of flechettes as all the ground fire focused on the OV-10. He and Captain Personnett made eight passes, taking many hits, but they stopped the enemy assault.

On the final run, with the enemy withdrawing, the OV-10's rudders and right engine were shot out. Both pilots ejected from 2,000 feet as their aircraft rolled into an uncontrollable dive. Both were fired at as they parachuted into a rice paddy that was surrounded by enemy forces. After a tense ninety minutes, they were picked up by Army helicopters. The first chopper that reached Poling was shot down as it lifted off, but a second succeeded under heavy fire.

The ground commander later counted 265 enemy bodies on the perimeter fences and credited Captains Poling and Personnett with saving his troops from annihilation. In seven hours of sustained combat, two gallant captains flying a lightly armed recce plane were primarily responsible for defeating a reinforced enemy regiment. For that extraordinary feat, both men were awarded the Air Force Cross. ■

Thanks to Maj. Jeffrey B. Floyd, author of For Extraordinary Heroism: The Air Force Cross (privately published), for opening his files to this writer.—J.L.F.