

27 Mar 1962, Combat Jump on Nam Tha Airfield, Laos

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FTT 21 returned to Seno, the six of us. Headquarters said, "Only three of you should go to Nam Tha." Our team leader, First Lieutenant Robin Luketina, indicated that he would take the medic, SFC Merland Frances, and me as I was the radio operator. This would be the first combat parachute jump made by the US Forces since the Korean War. Since there were going to be just three of us, I knew I would have to travel light. My plan was to jump with an M-1 rifle, with two bandoliers of ammunition. Team Sergeant Floyd O'Conner, WW2 Veteran with 3 combat jumps, gave me his .45 caliber pistol and one magazine of ammunition. I also had a small demolition bag containing one-time pads, SOI (Signal Operating Instructions), two fragmentation grenades, one thermite grenade, poncho, and three cans of food. We flew to Vientiane, the capital of Laos and then to Luang Prabang, the royal capital of Laos to assemble the unit and prepare for the combat jump. Our unit, the 55th BP (Bataillon de Parachutistes) was reduced to just three hundred men, many of the troops deserted. Our heavy weapons consisted of one .30 caliber machine gun without a tripod, one 81mm mortar without a sight. Only fifty of the troops had boots; the rest jumped barefoot or were wearing flip-flops. Colonel Keravuori, our Commander, said, "You know you don't have to go on this operation. We are in Laos as advisors, and this could be some heavy combat you are going into." Being young and stupid, we replied, "We have been training these soldiers for a long time and would like to see if they have learned anything." We were going to find out if they learned anything for sure. They brought a case of beer out to the airfield, and we had a few cool ones before we boarded the aircraft. We were told that we are going to jump at 500 feet, so don't bother putting on any reserve parachutes. Our Lieutenant was an interesting character. I think he thought he was a little bit of John Wayne; he was jumping with a submachine gun. Rather than putting it by his side and strapping down as we were taught, he decided he was going to put the submachine gun across his chest. We boarded the Air America C-47s, one of the crew members said our aircraft had dropped paratroopers in Normandy on D-day, and we started flying north, the hills are saw-tooth, very rugged, and we experienced a lot of turbulence. I had to go to the bathroom really badly after drinking beer on the runway. After a while we move into the vicinity of where we are going to jump and the plane starts losing altitude. The green light came on, and the Battalion commander went out first. Lieutenant Luketina is second. I go out third, and everybody else follows us. We are jumping into an area outside of Nam Tha with dry rice paddies. I hit the ground as enemy mortar rounds begin impacting the drop zone. The first thing I do is to relieve myself after drinking all that beer combined with fear. While getting out of my parachute and I hear somebody yelling, "Corporal Haralson, Corporal Haralson, I am hit, help me." I removed my

parachute, grabbed my bag and rifle, and ran over to Lt. Luketina. By the time I got to him his face was bloody. I thought that shrapnel from the mortar rounds had hit him, and I took a closer look at him. What happened was that his submachine gun, when he hit the prop blast while exiting the aircraft, flew up and hit him in the face and broke his nose. We stopped the bleeding, assembled everyone, took a few casualties from the mortars, and moved off the drop zone.

The plan was to move into the hills outside of town and clear the ridgeline from enemy weapons so that aircraft could start landing in the area again. We moved with the command group of the Battalion. You must understand one thing about northern Laos; it is lacking water in the mountains. When you are on top of a ridge or mountain, there is no water up there. We cut large bamboo stalks into six-foot sections and drove a hole in the connecting and them with water. We ate rice that was pre-cooked, packed and carried in the bamboo. I didn't have to carry my own radio and used the Laotian's radio to make contact back to headquarters. We had been on the move for a couple of days when we began taking mortar fire, and enemy probing of our We expected a major attack against us at any time. I made radio contact with headquarters and received a message asking if we wanted to return to Okinawa with the rest of the Forces elements. That was strange; I am hunkering down in a foxhole being mortared, and they are asking me if I am going to join them, as though there was some way I could. We replied, "Yes, we would like to do that." They said, "We would like you to try to get back to Luang Prabang in a couple of days. After your unit has cleared that ridgeline, we will fly in to get you in an Otter, a small aircraft that carries four people. We will fly it into the airstrip in Nam Tha, and it will be there on such a date." I said, "Fine." I told the Lieutenant and the other American that we needed to be heading back if we were going to meet that plane. About two hours after I did that, here come the bugles. Bugles for anybody that has fought in Korea knows that this is the way the Chinese signal they were starting to attack. Preceded by heavy mortar fire, the attacking force, a combined force of Chinese, North Vietnamese, and Pathet Lao troops hit our lines. I was in a bunker when we were overrun, and they started rolling hand grenades in on us. I was blown out of the bunker. Several of our Laotian troops were captured or killed. We were pushed out of our positions and several of us headed back towards Nam Tha. I became sick and the medic gave me something that was a narcotic of some type. I had diarrhea very badly and thought I was going to die. He gave me a narcotic, because for a day and a half when I was walking or running towards the airfield, I would look down and see that I was not even touching the ground; I was walking about a foot Off the ground. Nevertheless, we made our way out of the mountains, made it to Nam Tha and were waiting at the airfield when the aircraft landed. As it was taking off, the mortar rounds were dropping on the airstrip behind us. We went back to Luang Prabang, met up with the rest of the teams and returned back to Okinawa.