

Going against Squadron Policy

During my tour at Nha Be, my friendship with the SEALs continued to grow. The team leader and his second in command were both young JG's, full of life and totally unpredictable. I think we had a lot in common. I had duty one day when the SEALs came over to brief me on an operation they had that night. They were going into a village near the area where the river forces were attacked and wanted to make sure they had Seawolf cover. I told them that one of the helicopters was hard down and the squadron policy was not to fly any missions' single ship. The SEALs told me they had to go in that night, the weather (no moon) and the tides were right. I understood and told them that I would be on standby if they got into trouble. They showed me the location and I told them I could be overhead in 10 minutes, but I would only have the fire power of one gunship to provide cover.

Later that afternoon I called the OIC and told him the situation. The OIC told me that he wasn't going against squadron policy, and I would not be launching single ship. I acknowledged and hung up the phone. I think he knew if anything happened I was going and didn't want to know.

I waited until later that afternoon when everyone but my crew was out of the ready room. I called them all together and told them about the SEAL team's request and about squadron single ship policy. I was going to support the SEALs and if they got in trouble I would need three volunteers to go with me. Within seconds the entire crew volunteered to go. There was a code in the Seawolves that if someone needed help we would do everything we could to support them, in spite of any politics. I didn't want them to mention it to anyone until the following day. I left the discussion with the OIC to myself; nobody else needed to take the heat if anything went wrong.

At about 0230 that night, the SEAL team called into the command center for our support. They were pinned down by heavy fire with three wounded. The ready crew slept in their flight suits and boots, the longest part of the launch was getting to the helicopter in the dark. I loved this kind of shit! It was almost better than sex. Everything was multiplied tenfold. Your hearing, your sense of touch, your smell, everything was heightened. It was like you were on a high. I guess it was what they call an adrenalin rush. It was almost addictive. Anyway, I knew I never felt as alive as when I was scrambled in support of someone in trouble, on a moonless night where you couldn't see your hand in front of your face.

Approaching the SEAL team's position I got an update on the situation. The team was receiving heavy fire from the tree line and the Viet Cong were trying to flank them to the north. I was trying to coordinate getting some Army slicks with the command center back in Nha Be. I didn't want to run out of ordinance and fuel before they arrived. The SEALs were cut off and couldn't make it back to their boats. The command center was trying to get a couple of Army slicks out to pick up the team, but they didn't have any estimated time of arrival (ETA) yet. After getting the enemy positions from the SEALs, they let me know their position with red lights. I turned off all my running lights and rolled in for the first attack. We opened up on the enemy positions in the tree line and started receiving fire from several of the hooch's on the edge of the small village.

I wasn't concerned. It was a dark moonless night. With our running lights off, all Charlie had to shoot at was the muzzle flashes and the sounds of the helicopter. We were maneuvering at 85-95 knots and 1,000 feet above the ground. All Charlie did when he fired at us was give away his positions to the door gunners. I smiled to myself when I heard the SEAL leader come up over the radio in an excited voice, telling us we were receiving heavy fire from a tree line again. It was typical of them. Pinned down with three wounded and after everything they had just gone through, they were concerned about the Seawolves. It said a lot about the caliber of people they were.

Charlie quickly realized he was in a no win situation. Every time they opened up on the gunship our response was lethal. The door gunners were deadly shots. After putting in a couple of rocket runs we would be circling at 1,000 feet at 85 to 95 knots in the dark of night and they would put the first round on target. The 50 CAL was even deadlier. It was remarkable to see what these young guys could do with these weapons. Although there wasn't much difference in our ages I felt much older than my years, and it was my job to bring them back safely.

When we stopped receiving fire from the tree line we turned our attention to the hooch's in the village. Fortunately I had not used many of the rockets because of the close proximity of the SEALs. This time there was plenty of separation so I rolled in and descended down to 500 feet and headed right down the main road to the village. I knew as soon as I opened up Charlie would get a fix on our position, so I told the crew to hold off until the first rocket was fired, then let everything go to keep their heads down. As I headed in, I lined up on the first hooch on the right and fired off two rockets, direct hit. Once that happened, everything opened up; tracers were coming up at us from several of the hooch's. I kicked the rudder peddle with a slight bank to the left and fired off two more rockets, hitting the hooch on the left. At that altitude they were hard to miss. By this time I guess we were silhouetted by the explosions and ensuing fires because the tracers seemed to be getting much closer. I broke off to the right and tried to put some distance between us and the village.

As we pulled off the run, the door gunners kept giving me updates on where the fire was coming from. The door gunners kept laying down cover fire standing on the skids and shooting under the aircraft. They knew instinctively what to do without being asked. We had flown together so much it was like one person flying the aircraft. There were tracers coming from small pockets all over the village. I had a clearance on the whole village, if needed, but I wanted to make sure of the targets. When I turned back in for another run I could see the first couple of hooch's were in flames. I decided to reverse the direction from the first run, knowing they would only be keying on the sound of the helicopter and betting that they wouldn't know it was a rocket run until I opened fire again. I took the gunship right down the center of town and dumped off the remaining rockets. That seemed to stop all the firing from the village.

I climbed up to a 1,000 feet and orbited over the SEALs' position. You could hear the relief in the voice of the SEAL on the ground. I told the door gunners to conserve their ammo, pick their targets and not to make a continuous stream of fire. I didn't want Charlie to walk his fire in on our tracers. We continued this mode of operation hoping the Army slicks would arrive before we got low on ammo and fuel. About fifteen minutes went by while we continued to pick our targets as we circled looking for any movement. With no sign of the Army slicks I told the

SEAL team leader that we were running low on ordinance and fuel and wanted to take this time to rearm before they could regroup. The SEAL team leader agreed.

I called into the command center and told them to have my crew ready for a quick turnaround; I needed a full load of ordinance and fuel, ETA 10 minutes. I also wanted to know if they were able to reach the Army slicks. The command center told me the Army slicks were about 30 minutes out. That gave me enough time to rearm and return. When we arrived back in Nha Be my wing ship crew had everything ready to go. I didn't even pull into the revetment. I slid right in next to where the fuel truck was and everyone jumped out and grabbed the ordinance.

If a safety officer would have seen us in those days he would have shut us down. I brought the throttle back to flight idle and everyone including me got out to arm the helicopter. We fueled and armed the helicopter as it sat there wobbling on its skids while the rotor blades turned and I chewed on my traditional cigar. We couldn't have been on the deck more than a few minutes before we were airborne again and heading back to the T-Ten area. The longest part was the fueling. We didn't quite get a full bag, but I felt it was more important that we get back to the SEALs.

I called the SEAL team to let them know we were inbound and got an update on their status. Things were surprisingly quiet; they had not seen any movement since the last rocket run. Just about that time the Army slicks reported in. I briefed them on the situation and where the extraction point would be. When the Army slicks started their approach to the landing zone (LZ), they started receiving heavy fire from the tree line and waived off. Charlie must have been waiting for us to try to get the SEALs out. When the pilots waived off I came in right behind them and opened up with everything we had. When I pulled off the strike I called the Army helos and told them I would lead them in with another strike. They seemed to like that idea and rolled in behind me as they made their approach. I lead the slicks in and as soon as Charlie fired his first round I dumped several more rockets into their position. When I pulled off the target I immediately swung around to keep the 50 Cal on the area until the slicks took off. I had time to come around and lay down a few more rockets as the slicks picked up out of the LZ and departed. They were able to get out of the LZ without taking any hits. The night was really in our favor. It was so dark Charlie had a difficult time getting a good shot at us.

We emptied the rest of our ordinance into the area and then departed. On the way back to Nha Be, I was preparing myself for the wrath of the OIC. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the OIC was not there. I asked my wing ship pilot if the OIC had heard what went down. My wingman told me that he had not seen the OIC all night. I was sure I would have to deal with it in the morning. To my surprise I didn't hear a word from the OIC for two days. On the third day he received a call from the squadron CO. It seems the skipper got a call from the SEAL commander thanking him for the support. The OIC told me that he had briefed the CO on the incident and what had happened. He looked at me with disapproval and said, "The CO seems to think I should put you in for a medal. I told him you were a good pilot but you were a damn maverick and you should be reprimanded instead."

I commented by saying, "I'm sure you'll do what's right," and turned and walked away. I was going to the airlines what did I care.

We were too much alike, and every time we got together, it was like two roosters clawing in the dirt looking for a fight. I was proud of myself for not saying something inflammatory. Maybe I was maturing. I had seen too much and decided that I would probably not stay in the Navy. At times I didn't bother to watch what I said, which was my problem. He was right about one thing; I was a damn good pilot. If going against squadron policy to cover for some of our buddies was arrogant, then I guess I was. To this day I don't know why I got away with some of the stunts I pulled.

They made a sweep of the area the next day and gave me credit for 27 KIA. It was a little bittersweet after the way the war finally ended. I was not proud of what I had to do, and I justified the action by helping to save the SEAL team. I was beginning to wonder if I was becoming too cynical at the ripe old age of 24. When I first got my commission I thought everyone above the rank of ensign had their act together. I even addressed most of the JG's as sir, instead of their first names. Now, I wouldn't give a rat's ass for some of them. Maybe it was a character flaw, but when I saw chicken shit things going on, I had a very low tolerance for it and usually spoke out. We were there to save lives if we could. I quickly learned it wasn't the rank that made the person; it was what they had inside. In the end, I was awarded the following citation.



COMMANDER IN CHIEF
UNITED STATES PACIFIC FLEET

The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the
Distinguished Flying Cross to

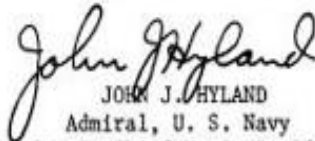
Lieutenant (junior grade) Alan James BILLINGS
United States Naval Reserve

for service as set forth in the following:

CITATION

"For heroism and extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight in support of a U. S. Navy SEAL Unit on 11 October 1968. With one aircraft of his two plane light helicopter fire team in a down status, Lieutenant (junior grade) BILLINGS launched single ship into the moonless, overcast night to aid a SEAL Unit that was pinned down by heavy enemy automatic weapons fire. Once in the area, he located the friendly position by radio and a blinking red light and commenced his attack on three houses from which the SEALs were receiving fire. After two passes with rockets and machine guns, all three houses were destroyed. However, both the SEALs and the gunship then came under fire from a nearby wood line. Again, Lieutenant (junior grade) BILLINGS' precision attacks silenced the enemy. He continued the heavy suppressive fire long enough for a "Slick" helicopter to arrive on scene and evacuate the SEAL Unit. Lieutenant (junior grade) BILLINGS' selfless devotion to duty, courage under fire and outstanding professionalism were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service."

For the President


JOHN J. HYLAND

Admiral, U. S. Navy
Commander in Chief U. S. Pacific Fleet