**The Flight to save an Officer Down**

I was First Up, Pilot-in Command assigned to the 57th Medical Detachment, Fort Bragg, NC when we received a call in the early morning hours of October 17, 1975 in our Ready Room at Simmons Army Airfield, for a MAST (Military Assistance To Safety and Traffic) mission to pick up a women and her premature baby in a small hospital north of Asheville and fly them to CMC in Charlotte, NC. The mission went smooth and after dropping them off, we were on our return flight to Fort Bragg in the clouds IFR (Instrument Flight Rules).  When we were in the area over Pinehurst  we heard a call on our Police Band Radio that an officer was down in the Laurinburg, NC area.

The Medical Evacuation Pilot’s Motto is: “Anyone, Anywhere, Anytime” and we always tried to live by our Motto to honor the memory of ones who had fallen. After I reviewed the situation, not doing this mission due to weather or any other reason was not an option! We’re going!

I realized there was not an Airport in the Laurinburg area that I could shoot an instrument approach to and we only had 30 minutes of fuel remaining without going into our emergency fuel load. After several radio calls and planning, I formulated a plan on how to do this mission. I requested an abbreviated GCA (Ground Controlled Approach) approach into Simmons Airfield and to save time requested hot refueling through my Base Operations Center. We never shut down or got out of our aircraft. I filed a flight plan and checked weather over the radio with Base Ops and was reminded that the weather at the airfield and most of North Carolina was below VFR (Visual Flight Rules) flight weather minimums. Within 10 minutes of landing I took off and as I was passing through 50 feet and outside the airfield Control Zone I acknowledged the radio call regarding the weather and changed frequencies. I radioed ATC (Air Traffic Control) requesting flight following and traffic advisories to Laurinburg and was told that due to my altitude they were not able to get radar contact with my aircraft. Using a NC road map I found Laurinburg by following roads and we found our pickup site about 45 minutes later in a field near a school.  The field was lined with people, many in uniforms and police cars with lights flashing and I saw the ambulance just as we landed.

At this point all we knew was that we were picking up a NC Highway Patrol Trooper who had been shot, and we were not going to let him die on our watch. As he was being loaded onto our UH-1 Huey another man approached my Crew Chief and informed him he was coming along too. I could tell from the look on his face that despite anything any of us said or did, or the fact that we were not allowed to transport civilians, that man was getting onto my aircraft. So I told my Crew Chief to let him board unless he thought he could kick his ass. He quickly let the man board our aircraft behind the cabin area. (He was Sgt JR Blalock) As our patient was being loaded, someone came to by door and handed me an envelope and told me it was the patient information. On the outside of the large envelope was his name; Trooper Harry Stegall. We got Trooper Stegall and his Sgt. loaded and took off quickly, as my crew closed the doors, heading north.

The weather continued to decay with heavy rain and a few minutes after takeoff I declared an emergency with ATC, and climbed to an IFR (Instrument Flight Rules) altitude requested priority IFR clearance directly to Raleigh-Durham airport. A few minutes after take-off my medic was reviewing Trooper Stegall’s medical information in the envelope and gasped as he said, “This guy has been shot 7 times. We need to get him to Chapel Hill as soon as possible.” At this point I pushed our UH-1 air speed as fast as I could. During the flight to the Raleigh Durham airport I made several radio calls to ensure an ambulance was waiting for us with all the needed medical equipment, and informing UNC Hospital of our time of arrival to ensure a trauma team was on standby. After a fast instrument approach into Raleigh Durham we started looking for our ambulance as soon as we broke out. I landed on a runway, calling Tower and Ground Control to ask about our ambulance. They could not tell me where our ambulance was or give me an ETA. The only thing they could tell me was that they were sure the ambulance delay was due to the severe weather in the area. If we waited much longer fuel would become an issue and we would have had to shut down to refuel at a civilian airport which was time we could not afford. Moments later my Medic told me we were running low on O2 and he did not think Trooper Stegall would live if he was not on a OR table in 30 minutes. With no ambulance, and running low on O2, I decided we had to try and make it to the UNC Hospital to save Trooper Stegall and take off now!

I called the tower and requested Take Off clearance. They warned me about the weather again and asked if I was sure I did not want to wait for the ambulance or try and make it to Duke instead. I thanked them for the warning and advice about trying for Duke but told them we had to try for the UNC Hospital. They gave me take off clearance as I was clearing the runway heading southwest to UNC.

Again using a NC road map, we found Interstates and roads that led us to Chapel Hill but the weather kept us at no more than 100 feet AGL (Above Ground Level). In route we had a bird’s eye view of many of the taller buildings that were higher than our altitude in and around Raleigh Durham. Rain was heavy at times requiring us to fly about the speed of a fast walk not loose visual contact with the ground. We flew past several construction cranes that we were not able to see the top sections. As we got in the Chapel Hill area the weather went zero, zero and were forced to land in a parking lot next to a shopping center. I had my Crew Chief go ask a man (shocked that we had just landed next to his car) if he could give us directions to the UNC Hospital. He told my Crew Chief to follow the road we were on and turn right at the light in 6 blocks. As we took off my Co-pilot and Crew Chief was looking out the windows looking for obstacles in our flight path and helping me navigate around them. I saw a cross appear out of the clouds and realized it was on the top of a church as I flew around it. At one point we saw a red light thinking it was a light on top of a tall building, suddenly realized it was the traffic light at the intersection where we needed to turn right to UNC. After a few minutes I spotted the Bell Tower on the UNC Campus and knew exactly where we were and setup for approach to the parking lot behind the Emergency Room.

After we landed, I unplugged and helped unload Trooper Stegall and all the medical equipment. I followed the trauma team and Trooper Stegall into the ER entrance. Once inside I handed Dr. Herb Proctor (Chief of Trauma Department) all the paperwork and information we were given in Laurinburg and I returned to my aircraft. We took off and returned to Simmons Army Airfield.

This mission was a pivotal moment in my life, learning the true meaning of “Risk vs. Reward”, and what could be done if you set your mind to it and refuse to give up! This lesson served me well over the next 20 years as a UH-60 Blackhawk, Instructor Pilot flying many other rescue and special operation missions in peace time and in war.

It was not my actions that taught me this…it was Trooper Harry Stegall’s.

More than forty years later on February 13, 2016 we found each other and talked for the first time on the phone. It was one of the most wonderful phone calls I have had in my life. Of the hundreds of missions that I have flown over the years he was the only patient that I had ever talked with. I think talking to Harry that day was a validation that all of the bad that I have seen, all of the deployments, all of the deaths, all of the hardships that I put my family through during my 23 year Army career, maybe it was worth it. Thanks Harry!

This is Trooper Stegall’s story; I was just a small part of it!!!!!!

Richard G. Seifried, CW4, AVN, US Army (Retired)

Warm Regards,