



220th Aviation Company

(Surveillance Airplane Light)

(Reconnaissance Airplane)

(Utility Airplane)

"Catkillers" and Family, and all Friends and brothers in Arms, in memory of those who have served.



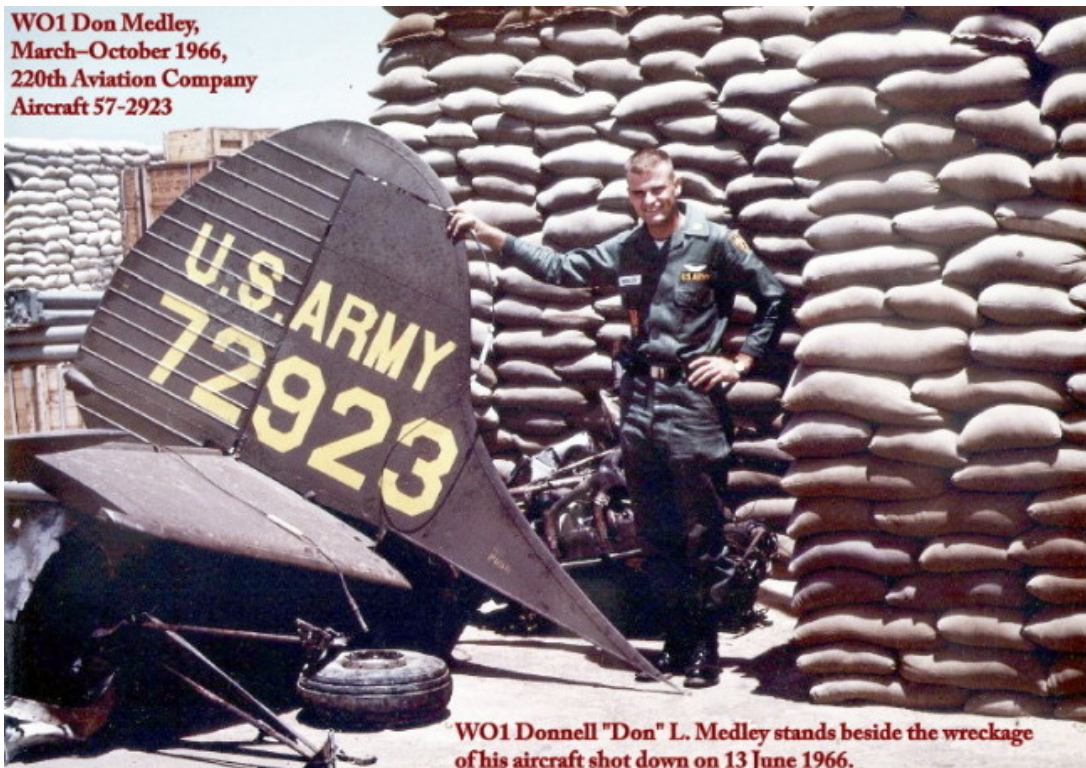
A FLIGHT OF COURAGE

for

WO1 Donnell "Don" L. Medley



WO1 Don Medley,
March–October 1966,
220th Aviation Company
Aircraft 57-2923



WO1 Donnell "Don" L. Medley stands beside the wreckage
of his aircraft shot down on 13 June 1966.

Prelude:

Operation Liberty, June 1966

A Spring political crisis caused a serious disruption of Marine offensive operations at Da Nang. With the sudden arrival of Vietnamese Marine battalions at the Da Nang Airbase in April, the U.S. Marine regiments in Quang Nam Province suddenly found themselves with a new mission. They not only had to fight a war against the Communist, but also to prevent one between government troops and the Struggle Forces. Colonel Simmons compared the role of his regiment to that of the "ham in the sandwich," the filler to absorb the shock of the confrontation between the two opposing sides.

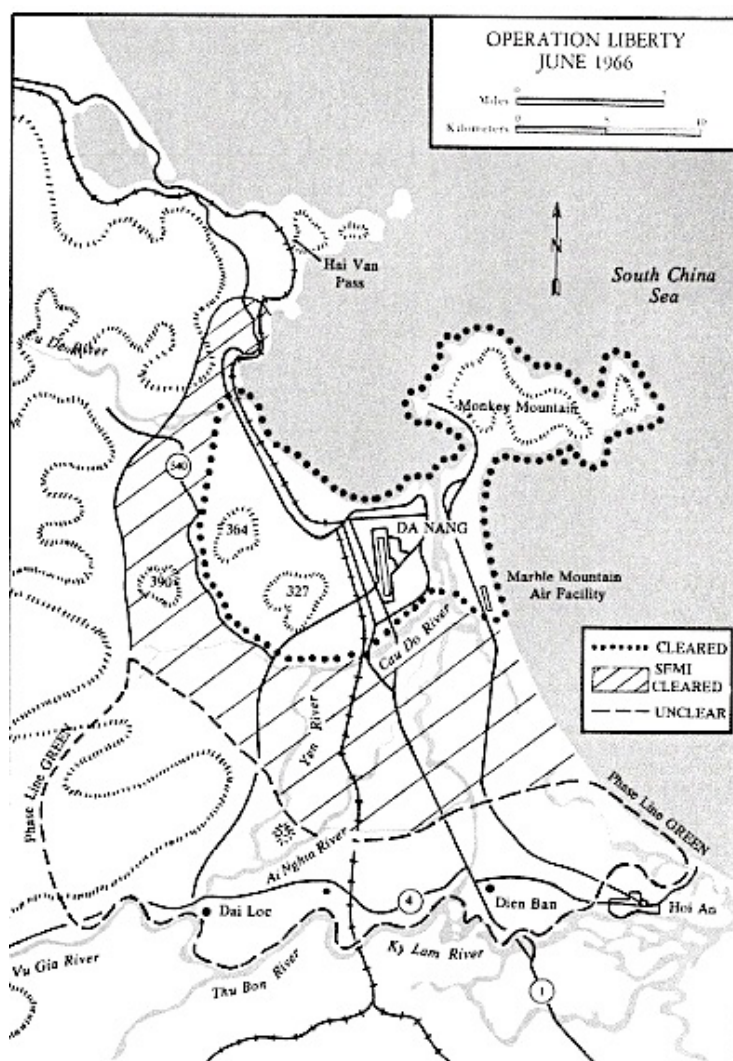
This situation could only benefit the Communist. The 9th Marines had to revert to the defensive because of the threat to the security of Da Nang created by the polarization of the ARVN forces into hostile factions. With the abandonment of several government outposts along Route 4 and vast amounts of ammunition, the VC not only rearmed at GVN expense, but also reentered the area the Marines had just cleared during Operation Kings.

With the surrender of the struggle Forces at Da Nang and the restoration of some stability there, the 9th Marines once more renewed its offensive, coordinated with the South Vietnamese. On 2 June, Colonel Lap, who had replaced Colonel Yeu as the Quang Da Special commander, visited Colonel Simmons at his CP. The South Vietnamese commander wanted the 9th Marines to resume Country Fair operations in the five-village pacification area. He assured Simmons that at least one battalion from the 51st ARVN Regiment would be committed to the pacification campaign. Following Lap's visit, Colonel Simmons then revised portions of his previous orders. On 5 June, he ordered his battalions to renew County Fair operations with the Vietnamese and extended the deadline for the attainment of Phase Line Brown from 31 May to 20 June.

At this juncture, General Kyle decided to transform the 9th Marines Ky Lam Campaign into a division-size offensive, involving "a conventional linear type attack of all forward units to push the front lines forward in a deliberate search of every hamlet in the zone." He divided the Da Nang TAOR into three sectors: the cleared, the semi cleared, and the un-cleared. The cleared, area formed an irregular arc around Da Nang Air Base, delineated by the South China Sea to the east, the Cau Do to the south, the foothills to the west, and the Cu De River to the north. Extending the arc outward from the cleared area boundary, the semi cleared sector reached the Thanh Quit River to the south, three to five kilometers into the high ground to the west and the Hai Van Pass to the north. The un-cleared region consisted of the area between the La Tho-Thanh Quit Rivers and the banks of the Ky Lam-Thu Bon Rivers. Phase Line Green, the final phase line, paralleled the latter two rivers. The 3d Marine Division commander ordered that only minimum forces be held in the rear and set 30 June as the target date for reaching Phase Line Green. Phase Line Green formed its boundary along the northern limits of the city of Hoi An.

Editor: An original copy of the source document presents a better graphic of Phase Line Green:

<http://www.catkillers.org/Op-liberty.pdf>



On 7 June Operation Liberty began with heavy preparatory artillery fires. Marine artillery neutralized 35 objective areas in front of the advancing infantry. Initially, the enemy countered the Marine offensive with only small arms fire and mines. The mines were the more deadly of the two. The most significant mine incident occurred on 11 June in the 9th Marines central sector. Captain Carl A. Reckewell's Company F, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, walked into a large minefield in a grassy plot just south of the La Tho River. Two detonations killed three Marines and wounded 21. While the wounded were being evacuated, four to five additional explosions occurred and the grass caught fire, but fortunately there were no further Marine casualties. The following day, the artillery fired a destruction mission, which caused seven secondary explosions in that same field.

On 15 June, the division completed its planned realignment of regiments in the TAOR. Colonel Mitchell assumed operational control of his two 1st Marines battalion and took over responsibility for the division's eastern flank from the 9th Marines. With a corresponding reduction in the western sector, the 9th Marines' TOAR now consisted of only 134 square miles, the regiment having given away nearly 100 square miles in the exchange. With the adjustment of forces and sectors, the 3d Marine Division continued its "scrubbing" actions in Operation Liberty. The only serious enemy opposition occurred in the 9th Marines zone of action. On 18 June, Company C, 9th Marines, operating 2,000 meters south of Dai Loc, came under heavy mortar and small arms fire, suffering eight wounded. The company asked for supporting air and artillery, which ended the enemy resistance. Lieutenant Colonel Donahue's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines, underwent a similar attack on 22 June in the hamlet of La Hoa, immediately east of the railroad and 4,000 meters north of the Ky

Lam. Marines once more called upon supporting arms, including naval gunfire from the destroyer USS Marton (DD 948), to silence the enemy:



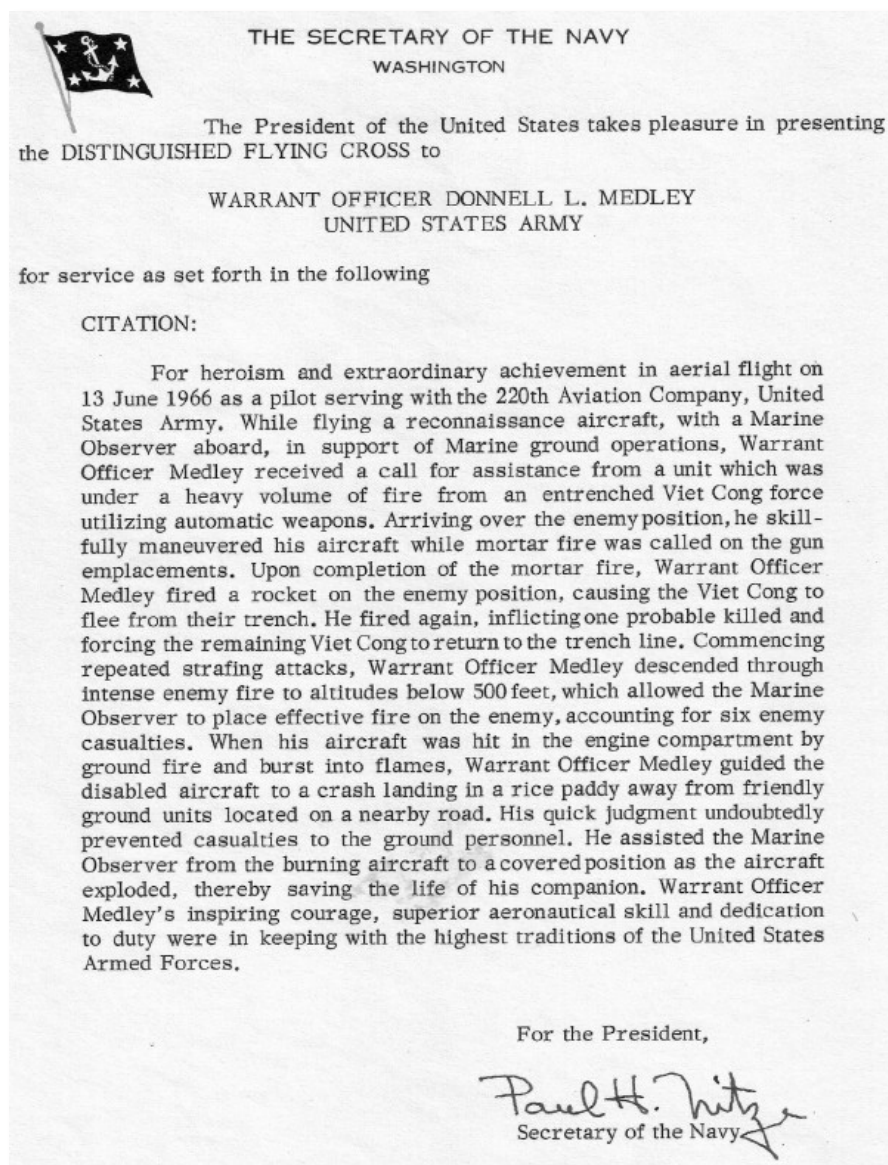
By the end of the month, all three Marine regiments reached Phase Line Green and the operation ended. VC resistance to the Marines advance had been scattered and ineffective. The 9th Marines observed that the lack of major enemy resistance gave plausibility to the thesis that the momentum of Operation Liberty prevented them from gaining any degree of initiative and uprooted them "from what had been a relatively secure operating area." That regiment alone claimed to have recovered 40 square miles from the VC. The Marines were once more optimistic about pacifying the extensive Da Nang enclave.

Epilogue:

So it was the advent of Operations Liberty that defined the threat that existed in Quang Nam Province in June of 1966, as WO Don Medley and his AO, MAJ Charley Hammel, the 3rd Marine Division Senior AO, embarked on their mission. The City of Hoi An, just south of Phase Line Green, fell and was in the direct path of the fleeing enemy as they regrouped to form another offensive. In the pursuit of chronicling history, we often look to the awards and recognition of individuals in their moments of courage and heroism to tell their story. In the confusion of battle, clarity is often replaced by misperception and misdirection. In the end we rely on the first-hand accounts of those who were witness to those event details and draw an historical accounting of those actions. In this case, Don's maneuvering the burning aircraft to a successful forced landing, assisting his AO to exit the aircraft before it exploded and then having to E&E through a minefield to friendly force positions made this award much more than the ordinary. MAJ Hammel almost certainly must have submitted the recommendation for award directly through Marine channels because of Don's heads-up lifesaving action for all concerned that day - thus the approved award and Citation from the Secretary of the Navy. Also see Norm MacPhee's comments near the end of the "Our Flimsy Aircraft" in the Catkiller History Index - 9, in response to a question in regard to this event: "Don Medley was not shot down by friendly fire, (in reference to Don Johnson's earlier shoot-down in May), but rather by enemy fire down near Hoi An. They ran to a Marine outpost, through a minefield, to escape and Don got the DFC. His aircraft is the pile of scrap."

NOTE: *This entry honoring Don Medley's award was a joint effort by Dennis Currie, Assistant Editor, and Gene Wilson, Historian Emeritus.*

Sources: *U.S. MARINES IN VIETNAM AN EXPANDING WAR 1966*, by Jack Shulimson, HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS WASHINGTON, D.C. 1982



Don Medley, 2015: "That was a day I'll definitely never forget. I always wondered how the Marines knew the area was mined. After being hit my intent was to land on the road that the Marines were spread out on. On short final I realized the Marines weren't going to move off the road. I then veered off to the rice paddies and yelled at Major Charles F. Hammel that we were going to hit hard as my intent was to shear the gear and prevent us from flipping upside down when hit the rice paddy dike, it worked. We'd only been airborne for approximately 30 minutes and still had almost a full load of fuel. Had we flipped upside down on fire I doubt that we would have been able to get out of the aircraft. After we got to the Marines I asked the CO, a 2nd Lt, why he and his men hadn't got off of the road so I could land, he said both sides of the road were mined. He also had filmed the whole episode on a movie camera. I would love to see that. Thank you again for the nice piece, it means a lot. Don Medley"