

2 U.S. Pilots Dispute Hanoi On Downing

By George McArthur
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SAIGON, April 15 (Sunday)—Two American pilots who survived when two unarmed truce commission helicopters were downed a week ago by Communist gunners vehemently contradicted Saturday Hanoi's claim that the helicopters were deviating from the flight plan that had been dictated by the Communists.

The two pilots also implied that as one price of their safe return from Communist-held territory, they had been required to sign false statements.

Nine persons were killed in the incident—two American pilots, a Filipino crew chief, two Vietcong liaison officers, one Canadian, one Indonesian and two Hungarian truce commission members—all on the lead helicopter, which was downed by a missile.

Although the two American pilots "thanked God" for the presence of the two Canadians on their helicopter, and credited them with their safe return, their statement that the Canadians and Indonesians had recommended signing the false statements—and had themselves signed without apparent protest—is certain to cause embarrassment within the already-sensitive Canadian and Indonesian truce delegations.

The two pilots work for Air America, the Central Intelligence Agency-operated airline that is flying civilian charter flights for the four-power truce commission. The interview with the pilots was arranged by the U.S. embassy. It was evident that American officials wished to get the story on the record to counter Hanoi's claims and, simultaneously, to exert pressure on the International Commission for Control and Supervision.

The two pilots—Hank De Voll, 23, of the Panama Canal Zone, and Mark Hotchkiss, 24, of Butte, Mont.—returned to Vietnam within the past month as civilian pilots for Air America after earlier combat tours as U.S. Army Helicopter pilots. De Voll was the commander of the second heli-

dent, and Hotchkiss was his copilot.

The two black-and-silver aircraft, with large ICCS markings on their sides, were on a mission to install a truce team at Loabao, a site on the Laos border just below the 17th parallel Demilitarized Zone.

Having picked up the truce commission members at Hue, the two aircraft stopped at Giolinh, in Communist-held territory, to pick up three Vietcong liaison officers. The planes then took off for Laobao, following Highway 9 westward toward the border.

One Communist liaison officer was in the second helicopter while two others, including one designated as the navi-

gator because he knew the area, were in the lead copter.

"We were told to go down Route 9 at 3,000 feet. We were to fly slow, 80 to 85 knots. That was because the PRG [Provisional Revolutionary Government] man was not used to navigating from an aircraft," De Voll said.

"We followed that flight plan so close it wasn't even funny," added Hotchkiss.

The two helicopters routinely checked in via radio on three occasions during the flight. At 11:47, 30 minutes after takeoff, the lead helicopter messaged back to De Voll's craft, which was handling radio contact with the base at Quangtri, that it should radio Quangtri that the flight was only 10 minutes from Laobao.

According to the two comrades in De Voll's helicopter, they were flying almost due west.

Within a few seconds of that last radio contact, De Voll said, "I heard a loud, rapid pop-pop-pop. I immediately identified the noise as heavy caliber anti-aircraft fire." He radioed the lead helicopter

that he was taking fire and he banked into a sharp descent.

"I again called Quangtri," De Voll said. "I told them we were receiving fire. I remember saying something like 'I hope you can do something about it.' The guy back there said, 'There is not much we can do.'"

Then De Voll caught a glimpse of a "dark object" streaking for the lead copter and then a "yellowish orange explosion and burst of flame." De Voll looked back and saw "a corkscrew smoke trail which I immediately identified as a SA-7, a Strella missile."

De Voll brought his aircraft down right on what he believes was Highway 9, about six miles west of Khesanh. The PRG claims that the "regrettable accident" happened 16 miles southeast of Khesanh—or about 22 miles from where DeVoll thinks he went down.

De Voll said there was "no way" he could have been that far off course (180 degrees) and that far away from Khesanh within the time frame defined by his own messages to

Quangtri, which were logged.

After taking a great deal of ground fire on landing, the Vietcong liaison officer aboard De Voll's craft was made to get up and shout for the firing to stop. The men on the helicopter were taken to a nearby construction camp, where they were held for 36 hours.

There the Communist officers announced, "We will now discuss the record we agreed upon," and stated that the papers would be signed by all.

The document identified the site of the incident as being on Highway 14. American, French and South Vietnamese maps list no such road in the 1st Corps area; it may be an old trail the Communists are working on.

The truce commission officers signed the paper and advised the American pilots to sign also. De Voll said later: "I would have signed my own death warrant if it would have gotten me out of there."

Both he and Hotchkiss added, however, that they were not mistreated in any way by the Communist troops once they were on the ground.

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