# Vietnam:
## A TALE OF TWO TOURS



The Vietnam War at its height and at the end.
A helicopter pilot's recollection of actual life
and events on the ground and in the air.

By: James C. Mooney, Jr

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**A memoir by**
**James C. Mooney, Jr**

**Vietnam: A Tale of Two Tours**

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This book is a work of non-fiction. Given the march of time, the locations, dates, place names, and events are as best remembered by the author. All names associated with the pictures in this book are meant to be correct;. However, to preclude embarrassing anyone, no name mentioned in any narrative is true except for the author and his cousin.

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# FORWARD

It has been my intent to provide the perspective of my time in Vietnam as I experienced it as a U.S. Army Warrant Officer helicopter pilot flying both the UH-IH (Huey) and the OH-6A Light Observation helicopter (LOH) in three U.S. Army units and two distinctly different geographical areas and timeframes of the Vietnam War. I do not want to make my reflections political nor do I want to embellish fact or write about things I did not personally experience – however, some memories have been lost, tempered, or dulled with time. Very simply, this has been written as I remember it happening to me and how I felt at the time without the stories, hearsay, or experiences of anyone else.

I believe my overall experience was unique due to the units and missions I was assigned to during the timeframe of 1969-1970 at the height of U.S. troop strength and in 1972-1973 at the very end of the war to include the ceasefire events. Everyone who served in Vietnam has a different story based on the type of unit they were assigned, their duties, the location, and timeframe they were there; however, I would assume all who served in Vietnam can identify with some of the common events, places, and things which I experienced.

For the record, like all of my fellow Warrant Officer pilots, I was a volunteer for the U.S. Army, flight school, and Vietnam. I feel very proud of my service and to have associated with so many great Americans who served honorably, proudly, and with exceptional courage under extremely tough conditions on the ground and in the air -- many in spite of their reservations or feelings about the Vietnam War.

# THANKS

To Mr. Stephen Mulvey (Lt Col USAF, Ret.), who suggested I write down my stories and experiences from my time in Vietnam. After reading my initial 80 pages, he then encouraged me to expand the material into a book and then reviewed and made suggestions to the drafts.

To Mr. Michael Talton (CW4, USA, Ret.), a former Vietnam gunship pilot for his offer to review my initial draft and, as a peer whose judgment I respect, recommended I publish it. I also thank him for providing excellent technical corrections, comments, questions, and suggestions for me to address.

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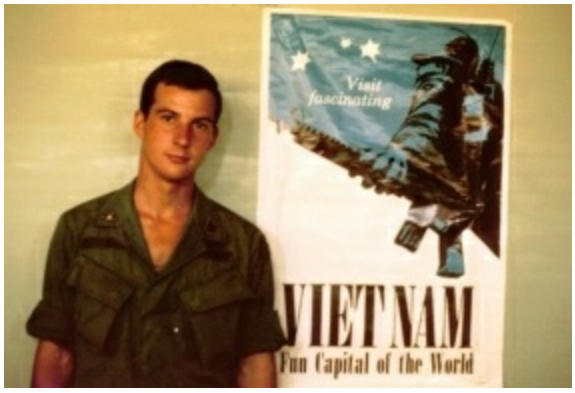
instructing me on how to copyright and publish this book.

To my wife Carol and daughters, Ms. Jennifer DesRoches and Ms. Katherine (Kate) Petek, for taking the time to do a final proof and edit before this was published.

# DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to all the helicopter pilots, crews, and maintenance personnel who served honorably in Vietnam and to those in the Combat Arms - especially those who bore the greatest burden and I believe to be the salt of the earth and an honor to have supported – the Combat Infantrymen, and those who wore the ruck sack and served in the field with them.

# PROLOGUE




**Poster from the Vietnam Era**
**Sarcastically reads "Visit fascinating Vietnam**
**Fun Capital of the World"**

# HELICOPTER 101

To understand the Vietnam War and the helicopter pilot's perspective, a little knowledge of helicopters is required. While fixed wing (airplane) flight requires a relatively easy explanation of an airfoil and the four forces of flight (thrust versus drag and weight versus lift) and limitations such as Velocity Not to Exceed (Vne), stall speed, etc, -- a helicopter has all of those plus the following and more to explain successful flight: effective translational lift, transverse flow effect, dissymmetry of lift, advancing and retreating blade speed, retreating blade stall, translating tendency, gyroscopic precession, counter-torque effect, rotor speed, in ground effect hover, and out of ground effect hover. In essence, the helicopter is a marvelous piece of equipment; but, like a bumblebee, aerodynamically it should not fly. We used to joke that with all the opposing forces it creates, the helicopter really does not fly, it simply beats the air into submission.

On February 16, 1971**,** Harry Reasoner published a comical piece about the difference between airplane and helicopter pilots which, in reality, had more truth than fiction. He very succinctly and accurately wrote:

"*The thing is, helicopters are different from planes. An airplane by its very nature wants to fly and, if not interfered with too strongly by unusual events or by a deliberately incompetent pilot, it will fly. A helicopter does not want to fly. It is maintained in the air by a variety of forces and controls working in opposition to each other and, if there is any disturbance in this delicate balance, the helicopter stops flying; immediately and disastrously. There is no such thing as a gliding helicopter. This is why being a helicopter pilot is so different from being an airplane pilot, and why in generality, airplane pilots are open, clear-eyed, buoyant extroverts, and helicopter pilots are brooding introspective anticipators of trouble. They know if something bad has not happened it is about to.*"

The worst conditions for helicopter performance are high humidity, high temperatures, heavy loads, and high altitudes. Operations in Vietnam almost always involved at least three of these four conditions. Further complicating performance (outside of Monsoon weather and being hit by enemy ground fire) was vertical flight into and out of hover holes in sometimes triple canopy forest, mountain/ridgeline landings, out-of-ground-effect hovering with and without loads, and other must-do flight mission support profiles which stretched the limits of pilot skill, safety, and aircraft performance on a

daily basis.

Considering all the moving parts in a helicopter are twisting, turning, and flexing it is amazing it does fly so well and with such great flight reliability. Fixed wing pilot training had an emphasis on flight skills and to learn emergency procedures – as there is normally time to react to most emergencies. Helicopter pilot flight training also focused on skills; but, had a much greater emphasis on emergency procedures. Helicopter emergency procedures were practiced on every flight and covered in every facet of training. With helicopters, aircraft flight limitations and the possibility of something failing is always in the back of a pilot's mind. Some failures are minor, some others must be reacted to instantly, and many are simply non-recoverable. For instance, there were so many non-recoverable failures we just jokingly made up our own emergency procedure of: "Step 1, Bend over; Step 2, Grab an ankle with each hand; Step 3, Kiss your ass goodbye".

To the outside observer, helicopters seemed to be able to do anything easily due to their unique operating capabilities. The reality was that flying the helicopter was a full-time job which required two hands and two feet to operate the aircraft at all times. Very simply, the right hand controlled the cyclic stick between your legs and provided directional flight (forward, back, left, and right), the left hand operated two flight controls -- the throttle for power and collective lever for lift (up and down), and the feet controlled the pedals which let you turn while hovering or trim (stream line) the aircraft in flight. The only flight control you could really take your hand off of in flight for a short period of time (seconds) was the collective – but only if you twisted a sleeve to friction it down to stay in place.

Helicopters during the Vietnam timeframe were very rudimentary and had very little electronic sophistication. There were no computers, fly-by-wire systems, electronic navigation systems, night vision systems, or flight management systems. Most helicopters had nothing more than simple gauges, metal chip detectors (to detect potentially failing engines, transmissions, gearboxes, etc), and warning lights that had to be monitored. Mechanically, the aircraft were primitive with push-pull tubes, levers, wires, and bell-cranks to control the aircraft. The only real sophistication was the engine fuel control/governor and hydraulics in most aircraft to make moving the flight controls easier – that was about it.

In helicopters with two pilots, the duties and stick time were shared. In a one pilot aircraft it was like being in a one man band – all your limbs were

being used at the same time doing different things while your eyes and brain had to divide their attention between crosschecking gauges inside the cockpit, keeping aware of the situation outside the cockpit regarding the weather, enemy and other aircraft, making radio calls, navigating, tactical planning, etc.

We had a popular axiom flying helicopters that went "*Takeoffs are optional; landings are mandatory*". A takeoff decision was relatively easy – if a helicopter can be brought to a hover, it normally has the power to take off successfully. However, landings were quite the opposite. Every landing at a field or non-airport location could be problematic and required additional consideration to avoid deadly consequences. In many situations, reaction time before crashing or death was sometimes just a couple of seconds -- such as: too high and slow would put you in the "dead-mans curve" (engine failure – no survival), too fast and too steep a vertical descent and you could encounter "settling with power" (the more power you pull the faster you go straight down!!), too heavy for the altitude could result in "bleeding with power" (rotor blades slowing and losing lift) or during landing a transmission over-torque or engine overtemp could easily happen at high weight or altitude causing the transmission to seize or the engine to fail. Additionally, "dynamic rollover" could result during takeoff from the ground with a skid stuck or caught on something, or during a slope landing causing the aircraft to simply roll on its side and thrash to death.

Landings at field locations also encountered other hazards such as dust so thick you could not see, flying debris or tree branches that could ruin the rotor system, stumps hidden in grass that could punch holes in your underbelly and fuel tank, and the always challenging updrafts, down drafts and shifting winds on a hilltop, cliff, or mountainside.

Each aircraft type had its own problems or limitations. For the OH-6A (LOH) it had a weak transmission, a problematic electrical system, loss of tail rotor control in some flight maneuvers (it would spin out of control), and "ground resonance" on a simple landing that could shake and destroy an aircraft within three seconds.

With regard to the UH-1H (Huey), it was a great and reliable workhorse; but, too abrupt a flight maneuver or too steep a slope during landing to the ground could cause "mast bumping", resulting in the main rotor head severing from the aircraft.

AH-1G Cobras could encounter negative-G loading in flight if they

terminated a cyclic climb with a rapid, forward push of the cyclic. That rapid "push over" would unload the main rotor system so that it was no longer controlling the helicopter's attitude. Any cyclic input during that low-G environment could cause the rotor hub to contact the mast. One bump might be survivable. Twice was fatal.

One model of CH-47 (Chinook) aircraft not only had engine fire problems, but all models had five transmission gearboxes, a thirty five foot long drive shaft connecting the main transmissions, and a synchro-mesh which interlaced the rotor blades. Any of these components failing could cause the aircraft to disintegrate in flight and sometimes they did. All pilots just accepted these and other problems, as well as flight limitations for their particular aircraft, as a cost of doing business.

Our helicopters were all well built but required constant, detailed, and costly maintenance. We achieved what we did because we felt confident in their reliability -- primarily because these labor intensive aircraft were maintained in an exceptional manner by our crew chiefs and other ground maintenance personnel. In addition to the normal maintenance based on accumulated flight time, helicopters performing combat and combat support flights were always being patched and having parts replaced due to unavoidable tree strikes, stump damage on landings, bullet holes, dust and debris damage, and dozens of other reasons.

The odd thing about helicopters was combat damage. All helicopters are primarily thin skinned aluminum. Only the engine and the two pilots had any armor protection – and that was only minimal. Bullets would enter one side of the aircraft and unless they hit a critical component (or person) would simply fly out through the skin on the other side. A helicopter could be hit a dozen or more times from ground fire and continue to fly without a problem -- and then be repaired with simple patches. On the other hand, it could be hit with one round in any one of hundreds of critical places or critical components and cease flying immediately – and probably catastrophically.

A primary consideration for all helicopter operations is fuel. Helicopters use a lot of fuel and a full fuel tank for most Army helicopters provided only 1 ½ hours of flying time (about 200 gallons of fuel for a Huey). Therefore, every pilot had fuel status in the back of his mind, the flying time until empty, and the closest place to refuel at all times. Running out of fuel or an engine failure over dense forest or in hostile territory (almost anywhere) was obviously not a viable option.

One good aspect of Army helicopters was that every combat helicopter had a crashworthy fuel system consisting of self sealing fuel bladders and frangible/breakaway fuel line fittings. These advancements kept the helicopter from turning into an airborne fireball from small arms hits and worked well for most survivable crashes. Helicopters early in the war did not have these systems in place resulting in the deaths and burn injuries to many crew members and passengers. In typical U.S. Government fashion, it was only after the U.S. Army showed the Congress the cost of training replacement pilots for those who died or were grounded from burns was more than the cost of installing crashworthy fuel systems did the Congress approve the purchase of crashworthy systems.

One other major issue was that most (especially from the late 1960s through the end of the war) U.S. Army helicopters were single engine. An engine failure in a single engine helicopter requires immediate action to execute autorotation and the glide ratio is almost non-existent – like that of a highly polished rock. Therefore, the landing spot for any engine failure will be what you see on the ground through the Plexiglas chin bubble between your feet (almost straight down) – regardless of the altitude you were flying. Fortunately, the engines in U.S. military helicopters were extremely reliable and we put our full faith in them – but a single bullet can and will stop the most reliable engine.

The helicopters which the Army used primarily in Vietnam during my time were:



**AH-1G Attack Helicopter called the Cobra or Snake**



**OH-6A (Cayuse) Light Observation Helicopter (LOH) called the LOACH**



**CH-54 (Tarhe) aka the Skycrane but commonly called the CRANE**



**CH-47 (Chinook) aka the HOOK**



**UH-1H (Iroquois) Utility Helicopter - called the Huey or SLICK for general airlift and Medical Evacuation (MEDEVAC) when specially equipped for casualties**

# THE ARMY HELICOPTER PILOT

A second aspect of understanding Vietnam and helicopters is to have a background on the pilots. Most people are surprised to learn that almost all the Huey (Airlift), Cobra (Attack) and LOH (Scout) pilots flying each day were Warrant Officers, college drop-outs, right out of flight school, on their first and only tour in Vietnam, and most were only 19 or 20 years old.

Prior to Vietnam, Army Aviation was a very small entity in the U.S. Army and consisted primarily of fixed wing aircraft and a small fleet of helicopters used mostly for aerial observation and medical evacuation. Because the terrain and a lack of ground mobility in Vietnam were identified as major factors for the French military failure in Vietnam, the U.S. Army looked for troop and supply movement other than only on the ground. Paratroopers were available; however, they were too small a force and air dropping to support operations was not suited to meet the requirement for larger operations.

In response to this tactical mobility requirement, the Army turned to the helicopter - but this required a massive influx of money for new units, personnel, equipment, and the development of tactics that would work. In an attempt to win this war, the Army established a whole new aviation structure based on helicopter units. The Army opened training centers and established an infrastructure that ultimately trained approximately 35,000 pilots, plus an untold number of maintenance personnel required to support this new fleet. Additionally, the Army exponentially expanded its procurement and supply system, and purchased an entirely new helicopter fleet.

U.S. Army Helicopter Pilots came in two versions – Commissioned Officers and Warrant Officers. A Warrant Officer in the Army is a specialty rank for a specific field such as supply, motor maintenance, food service, etc. These individuals are normally selected and appointed as a Warrant Officer after years of proven success as an enlisted man. In our case, the specialty was aviation and most Warrant Officer Aviators came directly from civilian life. Very simply, we were appointed as Warrant Officers after completing a nine month Warrant Officer Rotary Wing Aviator Course (WORWAC), without the previously required years of “proven” enlisted service.

While having almost all the rights and privileges of a Commissioned Officer, the primary difference is that a Commissioned Officer is appointed by Congress, is expected to have a broad experience background, and has

Command Authority while a Warrant is appointed by the Secretary of the Army to fulfill a specific and specialized duty, and had no Command Authority in a unit. Bottom line, Commissioned were in all the formal unit leadership positions.

Prior to, during and for a time after the Vietnam War era, Commissioned Officers were assigned to a Branch (i.e., Armor, Infantry, Signal, Artillery, Intelligence, etc) and were in aviation as an additional skill. In other words, most rotated in and out of aviation assignments and were promoted mostly based on performance during their Branch assignments – not aviation duty. Because of this, Warrants provided the backbone of Army aviation as they truly specialized and stayed in aviation full-time as a career choice.

Contrary to popular knowledge, Warrants were almost all of the Aircraft Commanders, Instructor Pilots, Flight Examiners, Safety Officers, Maintenance Officers, Maintenance Test Pilots, Assistant Operations Officers, Unit Training Officers, and day to day line pilots. In reality and although the Army denied it repeatedly, it was simply a much cheaper way for the Army to have pilots because each Commissioned Officer pilot cost two to three times more than a Warrant Officer pilot. Total gross pay for a new Warrant pilot in 1969 was $544.00 a month (including base pay ($379.00), flight pay ($100.00), and combat pay ($65.00)) or approximately $3,200.00 a month inflation adjusted for 2016.

Most of my contemporaries quit college to fly -- as the U.S. Army was the only service in which you could be a pilot without a college degree. We did not care about the pay, the rank (we did not even know what a Warrant Officer was), the work getting through flight school, or the assignment to Vietnam that probably followed – we could be pilots and would have lots of opportunity to fly. That was all that mattered to most of us. All of the Warrant Officer Candidates (WOC) for flight school who did not have prior Enlisted service, or who had a break in service and then enlisted for flight school first went to Basic Training at Ft Polk Louisiana for two months (total pay as an E-1 was $79.00 a month - $480.00 in 2016 dollars) followed by nine months of flight school (with pay of $250.00 a month as a temporary E-5 plus $50.00 flight pay each month - $1800.00 in 2016 dollars).

On our first day of flight school my class had just over 350 WOCs divided into six flights. My class was typical of most at that time and had the following profile: almost all 19 years old, one year of college, middle class upbringing, 96% white, about 10% married, a few former enlisted, and the

youngest being 17 and the oldest about 24. All WOCs were volunteers for flight training and virtually all were on a 2 year enlistment for flight school. This meant if you washed out of flight school you would revert to the grade of E-3 and could be reassigned as an infantryman (Grunt) for the completion of your two years --- or reenlist for four years for training in another field, but the Army would only allow you to choose from a limited number of jobs.



**Group picture of my flight (one of six flights in my class) during the third week of flight school (12 had already been eliminated from this flight and only about 20 were eventually awarded wings) Official US Army photo**

Virtually all training for Army helicopter pilots was conducted in two phases over a nine month period. The exception to this training was for two groups of Commissioned Officers. The first group was already qualified fixed wing pilots who took a short 40 hour helicopter transition course. The other group was senior ranking non-rated Officers who were given minimal flight training and awarded pilots wings simply to fill newly created higher ranking aviation command positions in the rapidly expanding number of Army Aviation units.

Flight school classes started every two weeks with a Commissioned Officer Class starting concurrently with a Warrant Officer Rotary Wing Aviators Course (WORWAC). The two classes had separate flight and academic schedules, and never intermingled. At the time I went through flight school, Warrant Officer Classes tended to start with about 350 candidates while the Officer classes tended to number around 50. Academics and flight training were the same for both classes with one big exception, the WORWAC also incorporated Officer Candidate School curriculum requirements in addition to all flight school requirements. The Commissioned had to show up for academics and flying – the rest of the time was theirs to do as they pleased. Yes, they had it much easier – but, it did not

matter as we accepted the fact that they were on a different track and in a different world from us.



**Hughes TH-55A: I flew this at Ft Wolters for training. It was comically nicknamed the "Mattel Messerschmitt". It was easy to repair and cheap to replace. Official US Army photo**

The first phase of flight training was six months at the U.S. Army Primary Helicopter Training Center located at Ft Wolters, Texas (just west of Ft Worth). This phase consisted of one month of all-day academics and then 5 months of half day flying and a half day of academics.

Three types of helicopters were used for training at Ft Wolters and we flew one type the entire time we were there. Once we graduated from Ft Wolters, half of each class went to Ft Rucker at Enterprise Alabama while the other half went to Hunter Army Airfield at Savannah, Georgia for the second phase. The second phase of flight school was three months and consisted of instrument flight training, UH-1H qualification, tactics, and finally "Charm School" before graduation.

The WORWAC schedule was extremely intense for the first six months and had two integrated facets – flight school and Officer Candidate School (OCS) combined -- as we could not be awarded wings if we were not Officers. The typical day started at 5AM and ended with lights out at10PM. Each weekday day had physical training, uniform and room inspections, study hour before lights out, midnight fire drills, harassment, and Officer Candidate School stress in addition to academic and flight training. We marched or ran as a platoon (we called it a flight) everywhere to include meals, laundry, religious services and academics. Our big treat was to take a bus to and from the flight line.

Usually there was not enough time in the day to complete our tasks so on many occasions we would clean our rooms, polish boots, and study after lights out with a flashlight under our blanket. Weekends were the same

without academics or flying but we worked the same hours with drill and ceremony practice, more PT, etc. filling in the time we would normally be in class or at the flight line. We did not get weekends "off" until after our fourth month and continued to work during weekdays late into the night to the very end.

The workload and standards were no laughing matter. Concrete floors were polished like mirrors. Beds, boots, the room, and our clothing locker all had to be perfect – or demerits and extra work details were assigned. No matter how well we did, the TAC Officer always found something wrong and we got demerits – resulting in extra work details. What we all dreaded was being cited for "Flagrant Neglect" and its "Remedial Training" consequences.

Approximately 10 guys from our class quit the first day and another 40 guys quit flight school by the end of the first week. Many were discouraged by the work load and harassment (midnight fire drills, 3AM inspections, etc) and others rattled by the reality of the danger and talent required to actually fly helicopters. For instance, our first class event was two days after arrival when we all marched to a funeral service on Sunday to fill the chapel to pay honor to two students who died in a mid-air collision the week prior.

We were not only graded by our Training and Counseling (TAC) Officers, but we submitted paperwork each week to grade each person in the flight on such things as leadership, attitude, work ethic, teamwork, integrity, etc. -- and then numbered each person from first to last. Needless to say, those at the bottom had their days numbered unless they dramatically improved. Group as well as individual punishment was the norm as a means to eliminate low performers and as a method to build teamwork and a sense of identity as a group. We joked about our only time off was Sunday mornings -- but only for those who went to religious services of their choice. Needless to say, even those who were not religious before flight school became religious for that little bit of respite on Sunday.

1968 was a different era – as there were no "safe spaces", coddling, stress counselors, sympathy, excuses, or appeals in flight school. Wimps and non-performers were neither accepted nor tolerated by TAC Officers or their fellow WOCs. As we watched, our fellow WOCs get eliminated for many reasons – both legitimate and petty - we were expected to perform the best we could at all times. We simply hoped not to be eliminated for a lack of performance, a "bad attitude", or washed out for not meeting academic or

flight standards. We were just tired and worn out on many occasions; but, somehow, we seemed to keep a sense of humor -- sometimes graveyard humor, but still humor.

When we started flying, more were eliminated or simply quit when they faced the true reality of the skill needed to fly or were overcome with fear trying to hover or even fly what seemed to be a wild animal. Worse, for some, were the emergency procedures and the split-second reaction time required practicing emergencies -- like engine failures with an autorotation to the ground. For instance, from a simulated aircraft engine loss at 500 feet it was 4-6 seconds of numerous split second actions to be successful – as the helicopter literally fell from the sky without power. After we passed four and a half months, very few were eliminated, we actually got some weekends off, and we were a solid team of survivors.

The second phase of flight school for me was at Hunter Army Airfield, Savannah, Georgia. This was the first real civility we encountered in the Army - as we were asked if we had a preference of going to Ft Rucker or Hunter Army Airfield (AAF). Based on class standing, those higher in the class got the first choice with those having no preference being assigned to whatever location was still open – normally Ft Rucker. Most wanted Hunter AAF as the lure of Savannah and a seaside resort in summer sounded better to most people than the peanut fields of southern Alabama and a beach over 2 hours away.

Upon arrival, Hunter AAF was a whole different world from Ft Wolters. Our first surprise was checking in at the unit. We all waited until the last minute and entered as a group to delay minimize the individual harassment we expected; but, to our astonishment, when we entered the orderly room, the enlisted welcomed us, referred to us as "*Sir*", and talked to us like we were Officers. The guys who were married were informed they could actually leave at the end of the work day and return early the next morning to live off base with their wives.

Life was much better but still not easy at Hunter. We still had TAC Officers as well as Officer Candidate School (OCS) educational and training requirements, uniform and room inspections in addition to flight and academic training. However, the focus now was on honing flight skills and Officer Development. We were given time off on most weekends -- as group punishment was now over and only individuals who screwed up got restricted with work/additional training -- very few did. We did have a few more

WOCs eliminated; however, even to them at this point it was not arbitrary or capricious. It was sad, but understandable. As we did at Ft Wolters, we continued to take turns in flight leadership positions as well as continuing to take leadership and management courses.

The time at Hunter AAF was still demanding with long hours -- but it was a lot more fun. On most weekends we went to the beach and resort towns which were only a 30 minute drive away. We could even wear civilian clothes off base.

At the very end and just prior to graduation, we did tactics, field, and survival training, .45 hand gun and M-16 qualification, and then what we called "Charm School". In an attempt to round us out and make us more proper gentlemen, we were introduced to golf, bowling, skeet shooting, etc. and some other things -- such as proper etiquette while dining, receiving line etiquette, and appropriate manners in social situations. It was a nice try – with marginal success.

At the end of flight school (246 flying hours, at least 300 hours of ground and air training by our Instructor Pilots, and about 1000 hours of classroom academics), our class graduated only 112 of the original 350 due to losses from flight or academic failure, medical problems, professional development deficiencies, or self-elimination. The Commissioned Officer class graduated virtually everyone who started. The difference was easy to understand. The Commissioned were already Officers, college educated, and most had their flight physical completed before starting flight school. Statistically, the Army planned on eliminating 2/3 of each WOC class due to the normal attrition expected from an OCS environment coupled with those who failed their flight physicals, academics, or flight standards. Bottom line, the Commissioned were all college graduates, better rested, better prepared, more mature, five to seven years older, and had less stress for flying and academics. More important was that the Army had no real interest in eliminating them -- as they already invested a lot of money and training in them to be Branch qualified with each of them having four or more years on active duty prior to flight school. Additionally, the Commissioned were needed mostly for leadership positions rather than actually flying and washing out a Commissioned Officer was viewed as a career ender.

At the completion of flight training, all WOCs signed the papers for our new Oath of Office to include volunteering for Vietnam. Pretty simple – if you do not sign, you will not graduate and you will be going to Vietnam

anyway as an Enlisted man – probably a Grunt. However, the other option was to decline Vietnam, reenlist for four more years, pick whatever Enlisted school or training was available -- then go to Vietnam. We all signed the paperwork and took the oath of office three days later. A day after receiving our Warrant we were awarded our wings in a separate ceremony. I, like many in my class, was only 19 years old and one of our classmates had to wait a month for his birthday to turn eighteen to be the minimum age for appointment as an Officer.

To a man, when we graduated we were not sure or really comfortable with our Officer status yet As Warrant Officer Grade 1 (WO1 or Wobbly Ones as we were jokingly called) -- but we felt well trained, focused on flying, proud of our wings, confident in our skills, and very glad to be finished. What we originally thought was mindless madness and harassment of Army flight school training had a purpose and worked – those who graduated were all Type A, highly motivated, independent thinking, and proactive individualists who now easily came together and worked as a team anytime and every time the need arose. When we were awarded our wings we were all assigned the Military Occupation Specialty (MOS) of 100B – Utility Helicopter Pilot. Our class, like all the others, was granted 30 days of leave prior to reporting to the West Coast for movement to Vietnam.

Virtually everyone went to Vietnam with a few exceptions. The first excused were those who were sole surviving sons. The second group was those who had an immediate family member already serving in Vietnam. The third group consisted of those who had a relative in high political State or Federal Government Office. The fourth group went to training to qualify to fly another aircraft (I.e.: Cobra, etc) enroute, to Vietnam. The last group was those who went to some kind of specialized training enroute to Vietnam -- such as previous service guys with a maintenance background who went to Maintenance Officer's School. Only one guy who graduated with me did not go to Vietnam. However, four were delayed getting to Vietnam due to additional training enroute.

In retrospect, it could be argued that some of our initial classmates who did not finish could have been smarter, better pilots, or more competent officers; but, it did not matter. We were the survivors who met the requirements in all areas and very happy to accept that status.

We were now off to Vietnam and not really that concerned; however, our families and close friends were definitely not thrilled with our upcoming

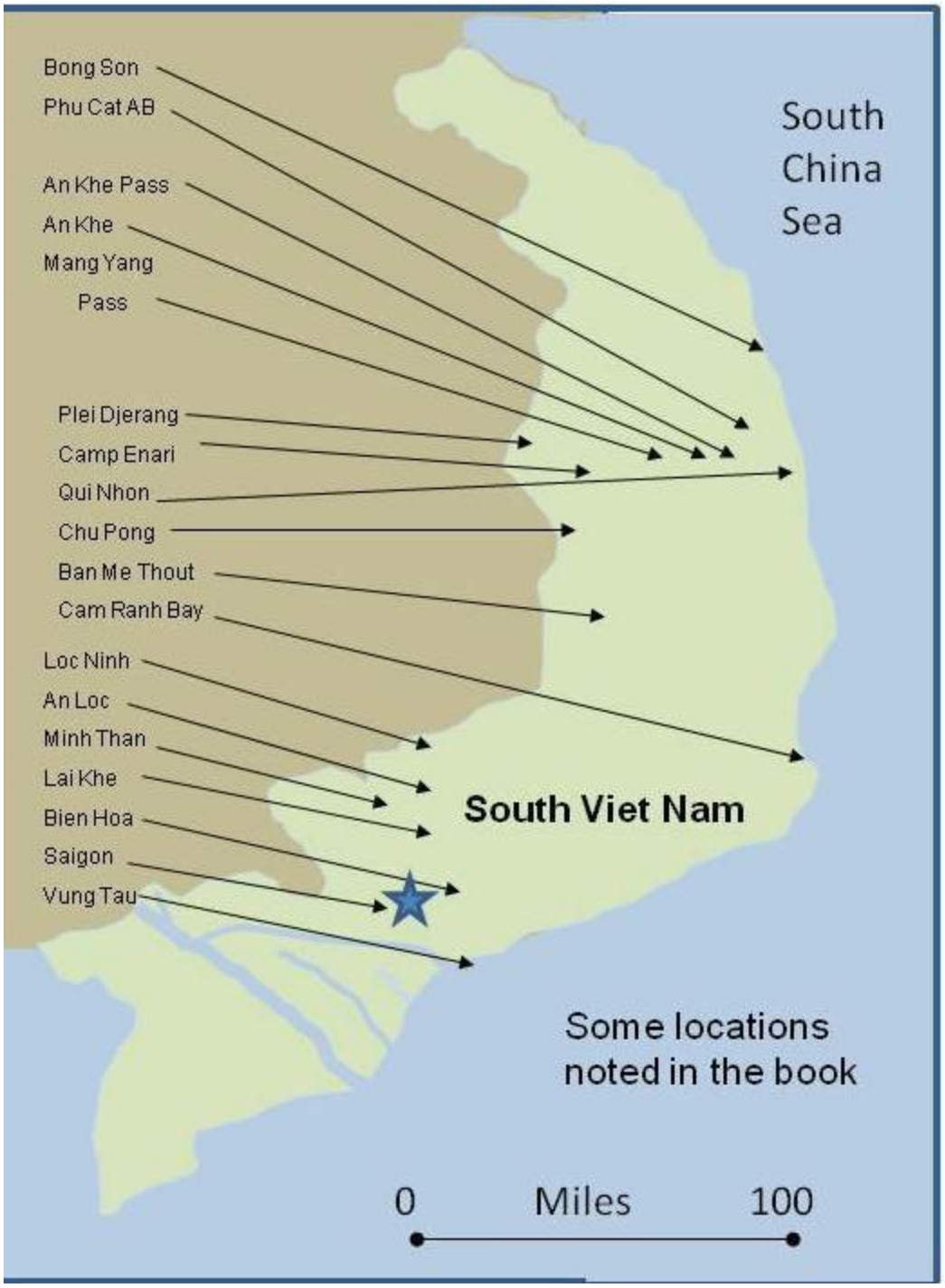
assignment – in fact, most seemed worried and scared to death for us.



**Graduation day at Hunter AAF. The other half of our class graduated the same day at Ft Rucker.**

## LOCATION REFERENCE MAP

Places mentioned in this book.




## CORP REFERENCE MAP

U.S. Military Operations Areas during the Vietnam War


Da Nang
Hue
I Corps
Laos
Pleiku
Cambodia
II Corps
III Corps
Saigon
IV Corps
US Military
Operational Areas
0
Miles
100

# PART I



**4th Infantry Division Patch**

## A Company
## 4th Aviation Battalion
## 4th Infantry Division

(Pleiku)

# CHAPTER 1:

## ARRIVAL AT PLEIKU / CAMP ENARI

In late August 1969 over a three day period, most of my flight school class reported to McChord AFB, Washington for movement to Vietnam, as individuals and not as a group. I turned 20 years old two weeks prior to departing for Vietnam - as was the age of most of my classmates at that time. We processed in, were issued our jungle fatigues, new boots, etc, and then waited for our flight assignment information which was posted each morning for the next day. Because we were now Officers and not restricted to the base like the Enlisted folks, we could go off base. So, six of us rented a car and went to Mt Rainer (picture below) for some sightseeing and then dinner in Seattle in the Space Needle to enjoy our last night together before flying out the next day on different flights.

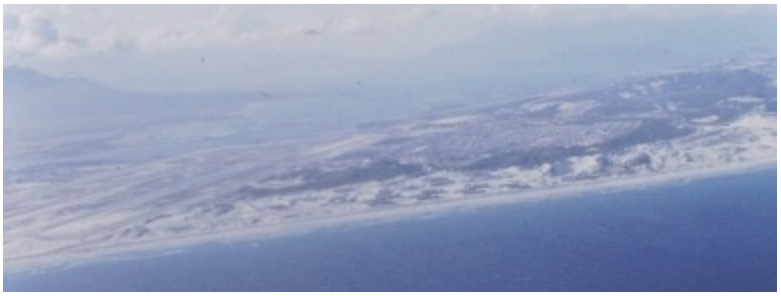


That day we had a great time and at dinner we laughed about a lot of things, especially the events and work of the past year that seemed so tough at the time. We enjoyed that night in Seattle as friends, comrades and most importantly – as pilots. We were all Type A with confidence (if not some arrogance), well trained, and as typical of those 19 and 20 years old, looking forward to flying without any concern and then returning home to finish college. In the morning we would begin what we believed to be our next adventure. Looking back from today, I realize that none of us thought 40% of our class would be casualties -- and of the six of us who spent that day and dinner together, two would be killed and one return severely wounded.

Our trip from McChord AFB to Vietnam was a total of 26 hours in a

cramped one-class Continental Airlines B-707 with about 200 other GIs of all ranks and specialties. We stopped at Honolulu, Hawaii and Clark Field, Philippines for fuel and crew changes. Each stop lasted about two hours and we ended this butt numbing odyssey in Vietnam at Cam Ranh Bay.

We stepped off the plane in late August into waiting busses and headed to the Replacement Detachment (Repo Depo) for a one night stay. Upon arrival at the Repo Depo we would receive our in-country assignment orders and time of flight out to our new unit the next day. My first impression as I walked off the plane was the searing heat, high humidity and funky smell – the reality of life in Vietnam.



**Cam Ranh Bay**

My first surprise was the Army bus driver – as he opened the door I recognized him as a neighbor who was in my Boy Scout Troop from home. Great guy and we just talked about home as we drove though the town to the Repo Depo. The streets were busy, noisy, and crowded -- full of bicycles, many motorcycles belching smoke, rickshaws pulled by men or attached to bicycles, short Asian women with straw hats or parasols wearing clothes that looked like pajamas, unusual buildings painted with somewhat garish colors, and strange smells that gave us our first inkling of a completely different culture, people and world from what we all knew. Interspersed in this sea of unusual sights were many U.S. Military vehicles; but, very few civilian cars or trucks.

At the repo depo, I was assigned to the Assault Helicopter Company of the 4th Infantry Division in the Central Highlands at Camp Enari just south of Pleiku. The next morning, approximately 60 of us replacements of all ranks and Military Occupational Specialties (MOS) boarded a USAF C-130 for the flight to Pleiku for our assignments to many different units. Obviously, this was not a first class operation, as there were no seats or frills – we just sat on

the floor and made ourselves as comfortable as possible resting on our duffle bags for the less than one hour flight enroute to the Central Highlands.



**Camp Enari**

The Central Highlands was designated as an area called II Corps by the U.S. Military and a region in South Vietnam about 50% mountainous with dense forests covering the mountains. The rest of the Central Highlands was large flatter areas of elephant grass (10-20 feet high), rice paddies, dense forest, and some small patches of low grassy plains. Cambodia was to the west and the South China Sea was to the east. I Corps was to the north and III Corps was to the south.

Upon landing, I was met at the airfield by a pilot from my new unit and was flown in a Huey to my new home in a somewhat remote location about 10 miles south of Pleiku, next to a hill called Dragon Mountain. Camp Enari was a large base and had been the headquarters of the 4th Infantry Division before most of it relocated to An Khe about 60 miles to the east.

The 4th Infantry Division was a typical Infantry Division and massive. It had approximately 18,000 men assigned and included: three Infantry Brigades, an Armor Brigade, an Artillery Regiment, a Signal Battalion, a Military Police Battalion, a Ranger Company, an Aviation Battalion, a Cavalry Squadron, an Engineer Battalion with heavy equipment, a completely staffed Field Hospital, about 3000 vehicles for supplies and transportation, maintenance units and repair facilities, medical facilities, supply units, lawyers, finance, administration, dentists, chaplains and everything else needed to function independently.



**My hootch, outhouse, and wooden walkways**

Our company area consisted of about eighteen one floor barracks (we called hootches) with concrete floors, metal roofs, and wooden half-height walls with screening above the wood. Each Officer and NCO building had about 10 two-man rooms and was surrounded by a sand bag wall (for protection against shrapnel from mortar attacks). Our hootches had corrugated metal sides on the sand bagged walls – why, who knows? Most hootches had a small community room/lounge on one end. I had a military cot (thin mattress on a metal bed) and a metal locker like everyone else. Each room varied quite a bit as they were built by previous tenants who scrounged materials to turn what was one big open bay into rooms.

In addition to all the hootches was a building which housed both Headquarters and Operations, a mess hall, a couple of supply and maintenance buildings, and a bunch of steel CONEX containers at the flight line for maintenance and storage. The unit was located right next to the heliport and runway.

Things were a bit primitive in Vietnam and at Camp Enari in Pleiku. Only larger Vietnamese towns had electricity, indoor plumbing, or paved streets. Electricity for the base was provided by a submarine diesel engine which was not always reliable in voltage or availability. However, not much was run on electricity in those days except radios and light bulbs, so a dimming light or outage was not much of a problem.

With regard to hygiene, we had what polite society calls latrines/outhouses, urinals, and gang showers. We were apparently not refined and simply called them “Shitters” or “Crappers” and “Pissers”. The outhouses were made of wood, had one to five seats and, like the showers, --

no privacy. However, the Army did provide some unbridled elegance to our lives by providing real toilet seats screwed down over the holes in most of the outhouses to keep us from getting splinters in our butts and supplied each latrine with rolls of toilet paper. However, those more knowing always carried a small package of C-Ration toilet paper in their pocket for those many times when the outhouse was not serviced properly. It was not hard to tell if the Vietnamese used the outhouse as there would be footprints on the seats (they were squatters) and they would sometimes miss and make a mess. Yes – with the heat to enhance the aroma, latrines were a delight to see, smell, and use.

Instead of urinals, there were simply spots designated to urinate. Some locations (not many) even had waist high three sided privacy walls and maybe a rock or other item to aim at for your peeing pleasure and entertainment (it is a guy thing).

As there was no running water, the showers were gravity fed from large tanks that were refilled daily by a water truck. The shower water temperature was generally a few degrees cooler than whatever the outside temperature was on a given day; thereby cold by my standards -- especially in the cloudy monsoon season. For shaving we used plastic bowls to hold the water. With regard to water, it was provided in two ways – potable and non-potable and you had better get it right, or plan on seeing the Flight Surgeon and running to the latrine -- a lot. Potable was for cooking and drinking and marked clearly on all containers. Non-potable water was for showers and also clearly marked.

The walkways around our camp area were mostly dirt and sometimes had wooden walkways. The roads were either dirt or covered with peneprime. Peneprime was thick oil sprayed to keep down the dust or reduce the mud but which stuck to shoes and everything that touched it when it during the day when it was hot. The heliport and helicopter taxi areas were all peneprime coated to keep down the dust. There was no air conditioning – anywhere.

After unpacking, I met my new platoon leader (a captain who appeared to care less) and the Warrant pilots I would be flying with who were happy to see an additional body to share the load (as they called us – Newbies or Fresh Meat). I was scheduled for an in-country check ride in three days. So my first job was to in-process -- walk around the camp to different offices to drop off my personnel file, finance file, medical records, dental records, flight records, and supply records. At supply I was issued my flight gear (a helmet,

NOMEX fire retardant flight suits, and NOMEX gloves) a ceramic bullet proof vest (nicknamed a “Chicken Plate”) to wear and some other gear. At the arms room I was issued an M-16 and a .38 side arm. Although they were standard issue in the Navy and USAF, there were no survival vests or radios issued to us in my unit during that timeframe.

The rest of the time before my check ride, I spent refreshing myself on aircraft emergency procedures, exploring my new surroundings, a quick trip to the Post Exchange (PX) for personal supplies, getting my name tags and uniform patches sewn on my jungle fatigues and flight suits, zeroing my M-16, meeting with the Flight Surgeon for clearance to fly, and settling into my new home.

1969 was an era before satellites, cell phones, computers, or any long distance phones to call home. There was a primitive phone network around the camp with technology and equipment dating back to WWII. It was simply land lines (wires) connected to field phones which you cranked to cause a ring at the other end. However, they were simply point-to-point and all were connected to the Operations building. On most days you could connect to another local location in the camp (Flight line, other hootches, Mess Hall, the Orderly Room, Motorpool, etc) through a manual switch operator working in Operations; however, many times the voice quality was not understandable or the phones did not work at all.

Calling back to the States was possible on a limed basis through the Military Affiliated Radio Station (MARS) sites which were not easily available. It was simply an HF radio that transmitted to any location in the States that could pick up the signal. Collect long distance charges would then be assessed from that point in the States to the number you were actually calling. It was not a two-way connection and it was expensive to the party in the States receiving the call. Once connected you made a statement then said “Over”. The operator would then switch to the other caller who would respond and end with “Over”. This back and forth would go on through the whole conversation until it ended with “Out”. It was cumbersome, unreliable, and was used very little. I never used it at all.

Mail is how everyone kept in touch with home and it normally took 10 days each way between us and the folks at home. Mail call was once a day when we all gathered and an Enlisted man would yell out the name on each envelope and package. If we were flying, someone would usually put our mail on our bed so we would have it when we returned.

For news we had a radio station and the Stars and Stripes newspaper with its censored news – but it was not easily available. I do not remember any TV sets at this location; however, there was AM radio reception with only two English speaking stations. One was Armed Forces Radio Network (AFRN) which provided popular music from the states (war protest and other songs were censored) as well as all news that the military wanted you to know about (in other words, highly censored). The other channel was a propaganda transmission from North Vietnam featuring a woman we called "Hanoi Hanna" telling us how we were colonial aggressors, losing the war, war criminals, etc. It was worse programming than AFRN and I only listened to it for the laughter aspect -- as the propaganda was so poorly done. There was a Vietnamese music station; but, by western standards the music was beyond horrible.

On my third day in the unit, I took my check ride in a UH-IH (Huey). It was uneventful and I was then cleared to go fly missions. However, not everyone fared as well on their arrival. I got a letter from one classmate who said on his initial check ride he was fired upon during the downwind leg and shot down. He was OK but concluded the letter by writing: "*No one has been shot at in my unit in the past month and I get shot down over our base camp on my first flight. I am beginning to think this might be long year*!"

Soon afterward, another classmate wrote and advised another one of our classmates was in a U.S. hospital in Japan – apparently a mortar round hit the repo depo the night of his arrival and he never made it to his unit. Others were killed in the attack and his injuries were so bad he had to be sent home via recuperation in Japan. It was an unexpected start to what would be a year of wondering – ok, who and what next?

# CHAPTER 2:

## THE HUEY MISSION

Most aviators in Vietnam were assigned to units in the 1st Aviation Brigade. This US Army organization was massive with both airplane and helicopter units to include: units of Air Cavalry (consisting of AH-1G Gunships (Called Cobras), UH-1H Hueys (Called Slicks), UH-1C Gunships (Called Hogs) and OH-6A Light Observation Helicopters (LOH pronounced LOACH); heavy lift battalions of CH-47 Chinooks (Called Hooks) or CH-54 Skycranes (Called Cranes); Assault Battalions of UH-1H Hueys; gunship battalions of AH-1G Gunships; reconnaissance airplane units; and small fixed wing transport aircraft.



**1st Aviation Brigade Patch**

Having so many assets, the 1st Aviation Brigade had the responsibility of providing aviation assets for whatever was needed throughout South Vietnam. Very simply, they supported whoever they were tasked on a daily basis and could move assets from one location in country to another as operations surged or waned. All other aviators were assigned to more specific entities such as Intelligence Commands, MEDEVAC units, or Infantry Divisions which had their own assets to task and use on a daily basis. If a requirement exceeded the aviation assets of a unit such as the 4th Division, the 1st Aviation Brigade was tasked to provide additional helicopter support.

Assigned to and directly supporting the 4th Infantry Division was the 4th Aviation Battalion which consisted of two aviation companies – an assault

helicopter company with UH-1H Hueys and a gunship company with AH-1G Cobras and LOHs. In addition, each Brigade and the Division Artillery had its own LOH sections assigned for support.

The final assigned aviation unit was an Air Cavalry Troop of Cobra Gunships, Hueys and LOHs of the 1/10 Cavalry. One other aviation asset the 4th Division also had use of on a daily basis for additional intelligence reconnaissance support was a Troop of the 7/17 Cavalry, which was organic to (owned by) the 1st Aviation Brigade.




An Assault Helicopter Company consisted of three platoons of UH-1H helicopters and the mission was ubiquitous. Rightfully so, the Huey became the icon of the Vietnam War due to the many roles it served, the workhorse role it fulfilled, and its reliability. Because our assault helicopter company was organic to the Infantry Division, it provided whatever support was needed and used as the Division directed. Typical missions involved Combat Assaults, routine airlift/resupply, insertion/extraction of Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols (LRRP), Medical Evacuation (MEDEVAC), night flare missions, and command and control support to the Division and Brigade Commanders. One platoon of A Company was dedicated to flying the Division Generals and Brigade Commanders and each aircraft was equipped with consoles equipped with additional radios solely dedicated to the command and control function.



**Huey landing into the smoke**

Ash and Trash missions were a daily resupply event involving most of the unit flying as single ship sorties to deliver everything Grunts needed: water, mail, ammo, hot meals, radio batteries, medical supplies, uniforms (as they would literally rot from their sweat or be cut to shreds by the elephant grass within two weeks), boots, and food to the widely dispersed ground troops. Typically, the infantry company did an excellent job of securing the actual landing site and about 50 yards around it --- but getting to it, out of it, and the actual landing could be problematic, if not down-right dangerous on most occasions. It was typical to fly exposed through valleys or enemy infested areas in the unprotected approach or departure corridor on virtually every landing at a firebase or landing zone in the field. One never knew if, when, or with what, they would crash or be shot at on any phase of the landing or departure. Flying below 500 feet and/or arriving and departing LZs was always the most dangerous part of any flight and where most aircraft were shot down or hit by enemy fire.



**Grunts in a stump filled LZ**

Once at the Landing Zone (LZ), sometimes we would not be able to land at all due to stumps, rocks or other obstacles. In those cases, we simply brought the helicopter to a high hover resulting in kicking supplies out or having the Grunts jump from the aircraft – sometimes 8 feet to the ground. Some locations were so bad, a net filled with supplies with up to a 100 foot rope (called a "Sling Load") was used to drop off supplies. This was because the terrain was too steep, the triple canopy was so dense a landing was impossible, or tree stumps were too high to hover and unload. On many occasions, aircraft may have to hover down through a hole in the trees made by Grunts blowing down a number of trees with C4, land on an exposed, windy and/or high altitude ridgeline, teeter on one skid on a slope or hillside, or deal with dust in the dry season causing a brownout (not be able to see due to dust). Every day was different as well as every flight.



The Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP) mission was single ship and actually my favorite mission because each mission was challenging, different, and you had to use all your skills as an aviator. We got to work with the rangers who went out in teams of four or six to the most remote and potentially worst sites for 7-14 days to collect intelligence. Fuel management, navigation, and tactics were critical for both drop-off and recovery. No LZ was secure and we/they never knew when we landed or if they repelled in what was on the ground. In some cases nothing. In some cases the helicopter noise let the NVA know they were in the area and they began looking for the LRRPs immediately after insertion. In other cases the insertion was at an enemy location resulting in an aborted landing under fire, or a running gun battle shortly after landing with an immediate extraction under fire. We generally carried nets, ladders or ropes to get them out in an

emergency. The biggest problem with this mission was it was a single ship mission into the unknown – most of the time with no gunship or artillery support, and no back-up aircraft in case of a crash or we were shot down.

There were numerous helicopter Medical Evacuation (MEDEVAC) units in Vietnam with Hueys specifically equipped and ideally suited to handle the wounded. They were always unarmed and had large Red Crosses painted on them to identify them as non-combatants. Their status was seldom respected as they were constantly shot at and taking hits. MEDEVAC Hueys carried a MEDIC, had a hoist and Jungle Penetrator to pick up the wounded in dense forest, and had emergency medical equipment and supplies; however, they were limited in numbers and their response time was not always quick enough. Because of this, regular Hueys (commonly called "Slicks") were always being called upon to pick-up the wounded -- especially when bringing more ammo to a hot LZ. Once out of ground fire, the gunner or crew chief in the Slick would render whatever aid they could and we would do the best we could to quickly fly the wounded to the nearest medical facility. Sometimes, if a MEDEVAC was enroute we would rendezvous at a safe location and transfer any serious casualty to the MEDEVAC for immediate treatment and better care from a MEDIC.

Night flare missions were to drop magnesium flares suspended by parachutes. Each flare could provide one million candle power of light to the ground troops at a field location or on the perimeter of the base camp if we were under attack. A crew was on stand-by each night and flew on an emergency basis, but not normally every night.



**Combat Assault - Typical LZ**
**Photo courtesy of Bob Echols**

A Command and Control (C&C) Huey was a typical Slick aircraft equipped with a console filled with radios to support senior Division Officers when they were airborne. One Huey had a dedicated crew whose only purpose was to provide airlift support to the Division Commander (a Major General). Other aircraft supported his two Brigadier Generals or the Brigade Commanders, as required.

Combat Assaults had generally two purposes but conducted in the same manner. In most cases the Combat Assault put an infantry company on the ground to then move out on a search and destroy mission. In other cases, the infantry company would secure the Landing Zone (LZ) for a firebase to be built. In either case, the C&C bird, (usually a Light Observation Helicopter) with a Battalion Commander on board would orchestrate the event.

The Huey mission was interesting and diverse in its duties. Needless to say, helicopters are dangerous to be around especially in field conditions and everyone must pay attention. Something odd could always be counted on to happen from the moving parts or the wind the aircraft generated. For instance, the rotor blades of a Huey are 48 feet in diameter and normally about 12 feet off the ground -- but on a slope the distance becomes much less on the upslope side of the aircraft, and care must be exercised. It was not uncommon at all to have Grunts accidentally stick rifle barrels into the blades as well as radio whip antennas. On one occasion while I was dropping off some supplies, one Grunt accidently knocked a case of C-Rations from the hillside above down through the rotor blades. The whirling blades chopped it up and slung cans everywhere causing the Grunts nearby to duck for cover.

On another day, I was teetering on one skid on the side of a hill which caused the main rotor blades to be lower and closer to the ground when one of the Grunts who was not paying attention got his head too close to the main rotor and took a glancing blow to his helmet knocking him to the ground. He was very, very lucky as he was not killed or knocked out. He looked around, grabbed his helmet, got up immediately and did not appear hurt. In typical GI fashion, his buddies just pointed at him and laughed. Natural and man-made objects were always being sucked through the main and tail rotor blades. There were very few dull moments at a field location with the Huey mission.



**Taking a break - waiting for supplies to show up**

# CHAPTER 3:

## LIFE IN MY FIRST UNIT

My Huey unit was typical of many at that time. The unit flew combat missions every day – except Thanksgiving and during the Christmas Truce each year. On those cease-fire days, we simply flew hot food to the troops in the field.




*Each Huey had a four man crew: an Aircraft Commander, pilot, crew chief/gunn*er, and a gunner. The gunners were normally Grunt volunteers from an infantry unit who got crewmember pay and better living conditions in an aviation unit. The crew chief and gunner were critical as they not only manned the machine guns for defense but also advised us as to hazards like tree limbs and stumps, as well as what was happening in the cargo area and around the areas of the aircraft we could not see. It was a team effort and our crew chiefs and gunners were as critical as the pilots to the team and mission success.

The day started about 6AM with breakfast, then the Aircraft Commanders would get a morning mission briefing while the co-pilot preflighted, the crew chief prepared the aircraft, and the gunner mounted the M-60 machine guns. After the briefing we would then depart immediately to wherever we were assigned to support. Pilots and the aircraft they flew differed each day based on an individual's flying hours that month and flying hours left on the aircraft for maintenance. Crewchiefs and gunners normally maintained and stayed with the same aircraft.

After flying morning missions, we would have lunch at the most convenient mess hall and then resume flying in the afternoon. Unless we were doing multi-ship combat assaults with an Air Mission Commander in

charge, we were, for the most part, autonomous. We flew our mission as we saw fit, modified activities each day as required to meet the daily mission assignment, and filled in any spare time with requests from field units. Usually we logged about 5 to 6 hours a day and were done by 5 PM; but, if we encountered delays sometimes we would get back after 7 pm. At the end of each day, we would do our post-flight inspection and then mission debrief. The crew chief and gunner did maintenance as required and then they were done for the day. Their day was usually an hour or two longer to complete their maintenance tasks than it was for us to debrief. In spite of longer hours, they always did their job well – they were assigned to their aircraft and they had was a pride of ownership. So, each flying day was about 12 hours long from start to finish for most pilots and about 14 for crewchiefs.

As there were no TVs or other things to do, in the evening we would have dinner, go to the club, have some drinks and hang out, or simply have dinner then go to your room to read a book, listen to the radio, or write letters. On many nights we would just have dinner and go to bed because we were just beat from the heat and flying. The next day, we would wake up and the cycle would repeat from start to finish. It was actually a pretty good life from the aspect of no appointments, no duties other than flying, and time off was to do whatever you wanted.

Hanging out at the club was actually important as we would sit and "hangar fly" – exchanging information, tips, knowledge, and sometimes chew out each other for doing something stupid. While the delivery and criticism may not always have been gentle or polite – it was always well intended to try to keep the recipient alive. Everyone screwed up from time to time – the objective of Hangar Flying was not to ridicule, but to learn from mistakes and live. This was a new era for helicopters -- and tactics, techniques and procedures were always evolving. Very little was written to follow except our checklists for run-up, shutdown and emergencies. Very simply, we learned more tactics, techniques and procedures from our friends than we ever did in flight school.

As pilots, we normally flew every day; but, because pilots flying two pilot aircraft were limited to 145 flying hours in any 30 day period we had to take three days off when we reached that magic number. Therefore, on a regular basis we were scheduled for a day of light flying or for sitting on standby (really boring days) to keep our hours down. From time to time, we

would just have the day off. As we had no official duties other than flying and there was not much to do, we would just sleep in, relax, and run personal errands such as get a haircut, read, or go to the Post Exchange.

Haircuts were great -- as the barbers would finish with a massage of the scalp, neck, shoulders, and upper back that would almost put you to sleep. It was so relaxing and one of those times of contentment/peace that we would sometimes almost fall asleep and nearly fall out of the chair. Sometimes we would just forget the haircut and pay him for the massage!

One interesting thing about daily life was the number of Vietnamese civilians every unit hired on a continuous basis. For five dollars a month from each man in the company, we got four types of workers. The largest group hired consisted of hootch maids. One or two hootch maids were hired for each barracks. They cleaned our rooms, made our beds, did our laundry, shined our boots, and cleaned up inside and outside our hootches on a Mon-Fri work schedule. There were no washing machines or dryers, so everything was washed by hand in buckets or plastic containers. They generally worked from 8AM until 4 PM. Almost all spoke broken English and had little education - but were very friendly, reliable, and did a very good job for us.



**Hootch maids doing their thing**



A second group each unit hired was the kitchen workers. Approximately twelve men and women did all the dirty work in support of the cooks in the mess hall. They worked in two crews covering two shifts a day, 7 days a week. The Vietnamese were very happy for the work and pay and the enlisted folks were more than happy to pay and not have to do KP (Kitchen Patrol or mess hall duty which normally started at 4 AM and ended at 7 PM).



The third category of work was one guy who was hired to pull the urine and feces filled receptacles out of each outhouse, add diesel fuel, stir it, then light it and continue to stir it with a stick while it burned until it was no longer a bio-health hazard. Throughout the camp at each outhouse location every day, you could see the black smoke rising and a guy in the smoke stirring away. Because wind was usually light and variable, there was always a certain ambiance and aroma present throughout the camp during daylight hours from the fifty or more barrels burning at a time. Obviously, this job was a once-in-a-lifetime employment opportunity. Because they were generally older and many of the older Vietnamese men tended to look like Ho

Chi Minh (the leader of North Viet Nan), we generically named those who held this highly regarded position as “Charlie the Shit Burner” (CTSB). Needless to say, Charlie usually could be seen eating lunch alone or with other CTSBs. As a courtesy, we let Charlie use our showers and change into clean clothes before going home each day.

The final group was those Vietnamese on the actual U.S. payroll as U.S. Government employees. They were hired for such jobs as working in the Post Exchange (PX) and other jobs, such as the interpreter/translator in the picture on the right who was visiting our compound while we were living at Ban Me Thout. She was married to an American, obviously very western in appearance, excellent English, very personable, and more meat on her bones than most Vietnamese.



Most of the pilot positions in aviation units were filled by Warrant Officers with a small cadre of Commissioned Officers in company leadership positions. My Huey unit was the same and had approximately 12 commissioned, 45 Warrants, and 150 enlisted who lived in three distinct living areas. The Commissioned Officers in our unit filled all the official leadership and command positions and lived in a hootch un-affectionately known as “Snob Hill”. All of the Warrant Officers lived together in six hootches and the enlisted lived in a separate area of about 16 hootches.

This unit was typical of all assault, attack, and Air Cavalry units as almost all of the Warrant pilots at the unit level were right out of flight school, 19 or 20 years of age, and on their first tour. Most Warrants on their second tours were normally assigned to the Chinook or Skycrane units where flying was generally a little safer. Commissioned Officers were normally first tour also and filled all of the unit command positions (Platoon leaders, Maintenance Officer, Operations Officer, Executive Officer, Commander, etc) as well as Officer staff positions at the Battalion and Brigade. Staff positions flew very

little, as these were primarily desk jobs and most guys in those positions didn't fly enough to maintain high skill levels.

Regardless of the unit, the Commander usually set the tone of any unit with some being great and others that really sucked. My unit was commanded by Major Baker who I remember as a second tour pilot who I think had been a fixed wing pilot and did not appear comfortable with either helicopters or Warrant Officers. At the Commander's direction, there was not a lot of mingling between the Commissioned and Warrant Officers as the Commander made it clear there were Officers (RLOs – Real Live Officers as the Commissioned Officers were referred to), and then there was us, the Warrants.

Elitism and indifference seemed to reign supreme. For instance, I heard one Captain platoon leader very matter-of-factly tell his Warrant pilots it is his job to assign the missions and for them to fly them and get killed or wounded, not him. Making matters worse, some Commissioned only flew safe missions between base camps and only enough hours to collect flight pay (four flight hours a month). The most cowardly and reprehensible of the bunch was a lieutenant who was the awards and decorations officer and the Commanders main toadie. He was a line pilot who refused to fly any combat assaults, flew only the hours he needed to collect flight pay each month, openly told everyone he hated Warrant Officers, and routinely put himself, his friends and the Commander in for awards – of which none were deserved and everyone knew it. So, the reality for this unit was, while the Warrants were out flying some of the Commissioned simply spent their days in their hootch on Snob Hill playing high-stakes poker. From my observations and discussions with others, some units were like this one; but, in most units, the Commissioned and Warrants shared the burden equally and got along very well.

As bad as the foregoing might have sounded, the caste system and the unwillingness to fly did not bother most of us Warrants. We were Warrants simply because we wanted to fly and most would have flown if they made all of us sergeants -- which was an idea that the Army liked because once again, it meant less money spent in the manpower budget. In fact, the front seat of the Cobra was initially conceived to be for an enlisted man, but the idea didn't survive the reality of war.

As we were out flying each day, we did not see the non-flying RLOs very much and only had to contend with them when they were designated the Air

Mission Commander, in the evenings, or on non-flying days. However, to me the most galling aspect of this unit was the lack of support the Commander gave to aircrews. For instance, on many evenings we would return late because resupply missions took longer than expected and find the mess hall closed. In those days each unit had its own mess hall. We asked for meals to be put aside for late returning crews but Maj Baker refused and told us if we wanted to eat, to get back "on time". Obviously, his concept of supporting the Grunts was different from ours – and we continued to do what was needed and often returned late to make sure everything got completed. In those cases, we would go to the club, buy a steak dinner, and have some drinks – really no big deal – more principle and just something to bitch about.

In spite of what I considered poor leadership, the flying in this unit was great, as were my fellow Warrants and some of the Commissioned whose company I enjoyed. I flew every mission type that the unit had and learned a lot as most guys were eager to share tactics, techniques and procedures as well as lessons they learned the hard way. Although I never flew with any of them, the few Commissioned in the unit who regularly flew combat assault and combat support missions were great guys, good pilots, and easy to work with. However, we all knew they were in a bad situation career-wise if they were viewed as too friendly with us by Maj Baker (The Commander). The only thing I think members of this unit had in common was that the majority of unit personnel I worked with did not like the Commander. As they said in the movie "MASH", he was a "Regular Army clown" and in my estimation was no contender for either a leadership or Congeniality Award. But then, maybe he was not so bad and was just typical of many "old school" Commanders and how they operated in that era. Regardless, just as the victor of a war usually writes the history from their point of view, this is my book and my memory of that time.

# CHAPTER 4:

## FIRED BEFORE HIRED -- BUT UNFAZED

After flying almost every day and many different missions in a Huey for two months, I was assigned to a different platoon to be the co-pilot on the Division Commander's aircraft. I flew this mission for two weeks and thought it was interesting - but boring, as we spent most of our days sitting around waiting for him to finish meetings – many times not normally knowing when that would be and then rush to get airborne on short notice to another location to repeat this scenario. Worse, we would hear calls over the radio asking for airlift support for wounded or troops running out of ammo; but, could not respond because we could be late to pick him up or, God forbid, get the General's aircraft dirty. Many people wanted this job for the perks and I should have felt honored to be assigned this duty; however, I was ambivalent at best as the flying time was minimal and I hated sitting around all day waiting. I was not a happy camper - but doing the job the best I could.

At the end of flying one day, the General called me aside and asked me how things were going; and, if I enjoyed this mission. Being me, never really ever been intimidated by rank and not really caring that this might have some kind of adverse impact, I saw this as my opportunity to get out of this job. I answered him respectfully, truthfully, and bluntly. After a short honest back and forth discussion, I remember him turning abruptly and walking away, shall we say – a bit red-faced and very much less than happy with me. Yea, really, really mad!

We flew back to our heliport and when we checked in on the radio I was told to report to the Commander (Maj Baker) and he emphasized "*immediately upon landing*". As if that was not enough, upon landing in the revetment, an Enlisted man I liked who worked in the Operations office ran up to the aircraft, opened my door and simply said "*Sir, the Major wants you to report to him immediately and told me to tell you do not go anywhere else --- Sir, you need to know, he is really pissed*". So, I thanked him and told him I would be right there. I did my post-flight inspection and headed for the Commander's office – both hungry and now annoyed he was delaying my dinner.

Upon arrival and knowing I was in trouble, I did my most formal salute

and report to him. He immediately asked in a very irritated manner "*I got a call from the General. Did you tell him you did not come to Vietnam to be a chauffeur and by flying him you were not helping win the war or supporting troops in the field*?" My answer was: "*In different words and respectfully, yes sir*". Then he started ranting about how I had been picked because of my flying ability, brains, and appearance to fly this mission, this was an honor, and that I was not assigned as just a co-pilot but it was an audition to be the General's new Command Pilot. He continued on about how the General had already accepted me as the replacement and that was what he wanted to tell me today. All I could think about was that I was hungry, missing dinner, and he was taking this whole matter much too seriously.

As I stood there at attention, this now very boring diatribe droned on and on as he yelled and told me how I was supposed to make him look good and now I have ruined that by opening my big mouth. Finally, he stopped and asked what I had to say for myself. Having already thrown myself off the cliff once that day, I wisely discarded the first, second, and third answers that entered my mind which I wanted to give (Such as "I did not come here to make you look good, but to fly and help win"). Instead, I very simply and calmly said "S*ir, I believe I have done this job well; but, had you asked me in advance if I wanted to do this, I would have told you I was not interested*". At that point, he really went berserk, started by yelling "*Who the hell are you to think I should ask you and you have a choice?*", then he said some particularly vile things, hurled some personal insults at me, and then referenced my family lineage in a negative manner. I remember his last words were "*You want to participate in the war? Ok – you are going to take the next LOACH (OH-6A (LOH) Light Observation Helicopter) transition and hopefully you will get killed or badly wounded like the others I have sent. Until then, if I have a rotten job that can get you killed or wounded, it is yours, you understand*".

He certainly did not intimidate me as I had been through a Catholic elementary and high school education with Nuns tougher, meaner, and more intimidating than him and just survived flight school. Now realizing no intellectual exchange was going to take place, I was getting more annoyed with him for making personal insults and wasting my time. I was unwilling to give him the satisfaction of upsetting me or charging me with insubordination -- so, I looked at him and very calmly and respectfully said "*Yes sir, I understand. Will that be all*?". He got even madder and yelled

"*Get the hell out*". I saluted, did an about face, and left with the distinct feeling I was off his Christmas card list.

On my way to my hootch to drop off my weapons and flight gear before dinner, I probably should have been upset, worried, or maybe even remorseful; but, I remember being relieved at now being done with that mission and no longer a chauffeur – and besides in my mind none of this mattered as I was only in the Army to fly -- then get out, go back to school, and move on with my life.

I was like so many other Warrants, Major Baker probably had good reasons for not liking us. We certainly were not conformists nor did we have as our primary goal in life to please leadership – we just wanted to fly and otherwise have a good time. We had a saying in Vietnam when someone did not like what we did that went: "*So what is he going to do – send me to Vietnam*?" This ***was*** Vietnam and a lot of things were ignored or tolerated as long as the mission got flown and completed each day – it was simply a different time and era. I do not believe Major Baker ever adapted to this new reality of pilots, warfare, or the Vietnam mentality and given my recalcitrant attitude at the time, I was not about to adapt to his.

Based upon the truly great and close personal relationship I was able to establish with Major Baker and my new status as "Persona Non Grata", I would only fly the Huey for another three weeks before Maj Baker transferred me to another unit.

# CHAPTER 5:

## MY FINAL DAYS FLYING THE HUEY

My next three weeks ended up being as the Major promised - as he had me fly all the LRRP and combat assault missions. He thought he was punishing me; however, I got lots of flying time and enjoyed being busy flying the missions. Most insertions and extractions went well; but, some were what could be termed – somewhat problematic.

On one combat assault, we were fifth for landing in a three ship LZ that was now a lot smaller because one aircraft before us was already shot down in the LZ and burning. Like all the other aircrews, we took our turn hoping for the best and preparing for the worst. In accordance with normal procedures, we backed each other up on the controls in case one of us was shot and disabled, or killed. We commenced our approach, picked a spot, landed, and four seconds later departed. Not a shot hit us but the aircraft landing with us and two others after us were all riddled with bullets with two guys wounded. Obviously, we certainly were not the least bit disappointed in our survival; but wondered, why not us? Some things just cannot be explained.

On another mission we inserted a six man LRRP team and within ten minutes we got an emergency call that they were in contact and running for their lives to one of the planned extraction sites. We headed back knowing we had no backup aircraft, gunship support, or artillery. We simply advised them that when they saw us on short final to start running for the center of the LZ and they better be the first six to the aircraft. I then told my crew chief and gunner they were to confirm the first six they see are LRRPs and to shoot everyone else. The LRRP team advised they had us in sight and were heading to the LZ with the NVA hot on their heels. As we were on short final we could hear the M-16 and AK-47 fire, as well as exploding grenades the LRRPs were throwing and firing from M-79s to slow down the NVA.

As we were about to touch down, my gunner yelled out "*I see four, now six. Here come seven, eight and a bunch more! I think they are going to shoot at us*". I yelled "Shoot them" -- he yelled back "*WHO*" to which I yelled "The gooks -- *Anyone pointing a gun at us*!" He then opened up and cut them down as we set down right next to the LRPPs who were busy kneeling and also returning fire. The LRRPs jumped onboard as more NVA

came out of the woods and started shooting at us. We started to take hits as rounds went through the skin on one side of the aircraft and out the other -- but additional firepower from the LRRPs kept them at bay. As we took off we heard and felt more of the dreaded “tink” and “thunk” sounds as rounds hit and continued passing through the aircraft. Fortunately, no one was injured, we had no critical hits, and later the aircraft only required minor patches and repairs from the hits.



**Checking damage from ground fire hits on our aircraft at a fire base**

After we landed on a nearby firebase to check for damage, my gunner and I had a less than friendly one-way discussion on the firebase which started very gently with me yelling “*What the f***K did you not understand when I said shoot everyone after you ID the LRRPs*?” His answer really sucked and my “counseling” got even less sympathetic from that point on. I explained in no uncertain terms that I was responsible for giving the order to fire and what I expected from him – to kill or at least wound every NVA he could to keep us alive. He took it like a man, said “*Sir, I’m sorry, I’ll do better*”. I said “*OK*” and that was it. We called that corrective action --- immediate and direct feedback regarding job performance. We ALL gave it and got it in Vietnam!!

A few days later, I was notified a brigade OH-6A LOH pilot was badly wounded and sent home; therefore, they needed a replacement. I was told I would start my LOH transition in two days and report to my new unit in seven days.

The same week of my LOH transition, the Commander (the Major whom

I ticked off) was flying as a self-appointed Aircraft Commander and ordered his crew to open fire on what he falsely assumed was enemy troops on the ground. Even though he violated his own orders to verify an enemy location before firing and the crew said they thought they were Americans, he ignored them. The gunners followed orders and did open fire; but, did their best to miss and not to hit anyone. It turned out to be American infantry and a few Grunts were wounded.

The Major had a pilots meeting two nights prior to my transfer to elicit support for the impending investigation. In particular, he asked if anyone was willing to speak with the investigators on his behalf regarding how they had had a similar situation and it was unavoidable. No one volunteered that evening, not even his resident toadies. The guys and I went to the club that evening and had a few drinks to celebrate my departure and liberation from that unit. I really liked flying the Huey and the mission but the LOH was a really neat aircraft and I was actually looking forward to this next assignment. My only regret was to leave behind the friends I had made.

After leaving the unit, I never cared enough to ask what ever happened to the Major and do not know or care to this day. I bumped into the Infantry Company Commander later in my tour and he told me if they made one more pass he was going to order his men to open fire on the aircraft. Given that, I am glad this ended without any more American casualties.

# PART II

## The Grunt's Life



**Grunts in an LZ**

In the Army, everyone was taught victory was not achieved until we had boots on the ground and secured a location. Therefore, everyone in the Army supported that guy at the leading edge of the spear – the infantryman. The infantry in Vietnam had a number of nicknames but the most common was GRUNT. This term was not an insult, but seen as a badge of honor. One common myth was that all enlisted Grunts were young, dumb, and/or minority. We worked with the Grunts virtually every day - as we were their lifeline for supplies, transportation, and medical evacuation. Regardless what manning statistics show for the Vietnam War, during the time I was there most of the line units I worked with were actually manned primarily in the field by Caucasian soldiers and followed in decreasing numbers by Hispanic, then Black, and a mixture few and far between of other minorities such as from the Pacific Islands, American Indians and those of Japanese or Chinese descent. I do not remember seeing other minorities serving as Grunts in the Army in Vietnam -- probably because demographically they were a very small percentage of American society at that timeframe and; therefore, small in numbers and widely dispersed.

Because an enlistment was normally four years and the draft was a two year commitment, many people stayed in college hoping the war would end before their deferment ran out and they were drafted. I ran into many enlisted Grunts with 3 and 4 years of college, and many who had a Master's Degree before they were drafted. Two enlisted Grunts that I met had Doctorates – humanities, philosophy, sociology, or some other non-employable, worthless degrees they admitted they pursued to keep from being drafted. However, their deferment finally ran out and it was "*Hello Vietnam! Here I come!*".

Grunts came with many different types of training and specialties (i.e.: Airborne, Pathfinder, Ranger, LRRP, Mortar man, Machine Gunners, Sniper, etc.) but they all had one thing is common – they carried rucksacks and rifles and spent most of their time in the field. Also in the field with infantry companies were those who may not have had the Military Occupation Specialty (MOS) of 11B but also tromped through the bush and served admirably by their side. These were men with specialties such as Radio Operator, Medic, Forward Artillery Observer, and dog handler ... yes, dog handler.

Grunts carried over 80 lbs of gear to include: their weapon and ammo, fragmentation and smoke grenades, claymore mines, a rucksack, water, some extra clothes, ponchos, tents, and C-Rations. Some had an additional load,

such as the radio operator who carried an extra 20 lbs of radio and batteries, the machine gunner with his heavier weapon and ammo, and those that carried the mortars and shells. Virtually ALL Grunts had a P-38 C-Ration can opener on their dog tag chain and almost all Army Grunts had service numbers that started with "US" – meaning draftee. Volunteers and those "lifers" in the Regular Army had dog tags which started with the letters "RA" followed by their service number – which in those days was not their Social Security Number.

Grunts in the Central Highlands had it rough - they tromped through rice paddies, up mountains, across rivers and streams, and through dense 10-15 foot high saw grass (elephant grass) that was like razors and cut jungle fatigues to shreds. Jungle fatigues would have to be replaced very often from both the wear and tear from elephant grass or rotting as they wore them from the sweat, heat, and humidity. Additionally, Grunts contended with leeches, poisonous snakes, poisonous spiders, mosquitoes carrying malaria, Jungle Rot, and numerous other health dangers such as areas saturated with Agent Orange Dioxins or DDT.

Grunts in the field with the 4th Division were always dirty, constantly moving, and digging fox holes every night for perimeter protection. I would kid them that we took the doors off the aircraft not because of the heat – but because they smelled so bad. They would always laugh – and agree!



With regard to food, we would try to get them a hot meal once a day or as often as possible. Sodas were sent most of the time instead of milk as they would not spoil. Hot meals were delivered in insulated containers with three compartments – meat, starch and vegetable. Most of the time, they simply ate C-Rations and drank warm water or a hot soda to wash it down. Sometimes we would sneak some beer and ice to them.

Grunts had the worst job, knew it, and just did their best under trying conditions day to day. I was always surprised by their humor, hospitality, stamina, and appreciation for whatever we brought. They had the least but shared the most and always made us pilots who spent time with them in the field feel welcome – if not like family. More important, they did their best to protect us from enemy fire as we landed or took off and if we spent time in the field with them they looked after us (they instinctively knew most of us pilots were great in the air but somewhat worthless in the bush!). Most carried a waterproof container for their personal treasures -- such as family pictures, writing paper, and envelopes for letters.



**View from in an LZ – resupplying Grunts**

I do not remember the Grunts ever asking for much, but when they did, it was important. For instance, mail was always on the first aircraft to or from them as that was their primary wish. They were also honest and did not put us in unnecessary jeopardy – if they had wounded that could wait to be picked up when fighting subsided they would tell us or if fighting was heavy they only asked for immediate extraction when men were badly wounded and could not wait.

On one occasion, we were resupplying a company and taking a break talking to the Company Commander. We had a general discussion and asked where he was heading next. He mentioned he had to move six kilometers by the next day to a firebase. I simply said “At least it is a short hike on flat terrain”. He then lamented that when crossing a river the month before, he had one guy drown and he almost lost two others and hoped things would go better this time. We looked at each other and nodded in agreement without talking. The Aircraft Commander then offered to do a one-ship company move (normally three or four Hueys) – if the Captain was willing to wait

until we finished our other daily tasks and felt comfortable enough to secure the LZ. He looked somewhat shocked and relieved at the offer and eagerly agreed. We finished our day's mission tasking and showed up for the lift. Twelve sorties later we were done -- with the last two lifts obviously being the most dangerous. The Captain was a good man who was on the last load of GIs picked up from the LZ. No incident and no problem – but everyone hung things out a bit to get this done. One of those things we felt good about doing for these guys - a little work for us save them a lot of danger and humping through the bush.

Everything was made as simple as possible in the Army to use or operate. One comical aspect for the Grunts was a perimeter defense anti-personnel weapon called the claymore mine. It was filled with explosives and ball bearings and detonated by an electric charge from a squeezed trigger (called a clacker) via a wire that connected them. Sort of like firing 100 shotgun shells at once that sprayed ball bearings out in an arc – but more deadly. It had two metal spikes on the bottom so that it could be staked into the ground. However, the preferred method of deployment was to tape or tie it with its curved back against a tree trunk so that the trunk could resist and increase the blast recoil and keep the claymore oriented toward the enemy while it did its deadly work. It assembled with ease and just to make sure the troops used it correctly, the front of it said in bold letters "FRONT TOWARD ENEMY".




It was my observation that very few wanted to be Grunts; but, it seems almost everyone after the war wanted to claim they were one! From what I witnessed, there are simply not enough words of praise or admiration for those who served as Grunts in Nam – the salt of the earth. In the Army, bitching is OK but whining is not liked or tolerated – there is a big difference

between the two as most men can tell you. As long as they were complaining, joking, or making fun of each other, everything was OK. And that is how I remember virtually all of my time with the Grunts – never a dull moment and great company to hang out with.

## TACTICS

It was very apparent to everyone that Vietnam was a war without any front lines of combat and that we owned the day and the enemy mostly owned the night. Intelligence gathered from radio intercepts, LRRPs, photo reconnaissance, etc., did its best to find out where the NVA was massed or where they stored their supplies. Once this was done, a fire base (a fixed and protected location with artillery) was built close by the enemy location, and then infantry companies were inserted within range of the firebase artillery. With artillery in range, the infantry would have artillery support for flares at night if attacked and high explosive rounds to help protect them at all times. During the day, the infantry companies would search the jungle looking for the enemy and engage with small arms, artillery, helicopter gunships, Air Force Tactical Air Support (TACAIR) and whatever other means they had available to eliminate the enemy and its supplies. We were constantly moving firebases and doing combat assaults into new locations and searching for them. Very simply, the tactical objective was to go out each day, find them, and kill as many of them as possible. This very deadly game of "Cat and Mouse" or "Hide and Seek" became known in Vietnam as "Search and Destroy Missions".

In the Central Highlands, virtually all offensive action started with a Combat Assault. The sequence of events for a Combat Assault would be the same each time. First, the LOH would call in an artillery barrage on and around the site to minimize the enemy threat at the LZ (or he would employ Air Force bombing, if the LZ was out of artillery range). Next, the LOH would make a low pass over the LZ, mark the LZ with a smoke grenade (to ensure the right landing location and provide wind direction for landing) and do a quick threat assessment. Finally, the gunships would provide cover and fire support as the Hueys landed and then continue to provide support to the troops on the ground after their landing.

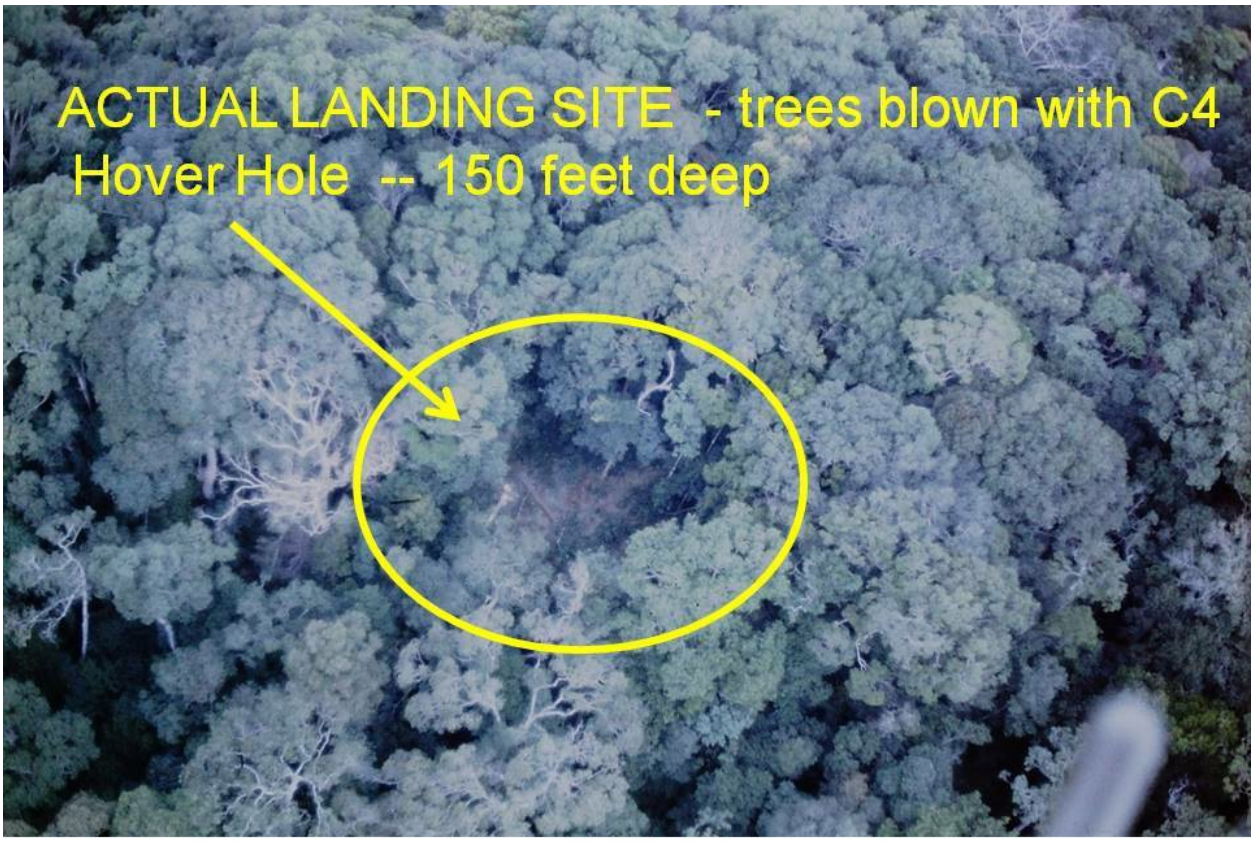
The goal was to get as many troops on the ground as fast as possible to minimize their vulnerability during this critical part of their mission - the

bigger the LZ, the better to get as many aircraft to land at once and get more troops on the ground. Large LZs with flat ground and low grass were available from time to time; however, the reality in the Central Highlands was most LZs were where the enemy was and only big enough for one to five aircraft. Adding to this size problem, many locations were in really challenging, if not downright dangerous, landing locations – like ridgelines, mountain tops, hillsides, etc.



**Sequential landing in a single ship LZ on a hilltop. Photo courtesy of Mike Mooney**

The worst LZs were single ship ridgeline/mountain operations and hover holes -- such as LZs cut in the jungle from Grunts using explosive charges (C4) to blow down trees, or a hole in the jungle made from a 10,000 pound bomb (called a Daisy Cutter) dropped from a C-130 or a Skycrane helicopter.




The Daisy Cutter created a hole only big enough for one Huey to land. As impressive as this explosion was when it went off, creating an LZ in this manner created four problems. First, is that the hole was usually blown days before any planned assault – so there was no element of surprise as to the intended site. Second, the entry and exit was vertical, requiring more power and less troops to be carried in each aircraft. Third, if it was in triple canopy, it was very dangerous to land in due to power/aerodynamic limitations or considerations such as a phenomenon called “Settling with Power”. Finally, on many occasions the massive explosion caused the trees to form a dense, jagged, and high wooden wall around the site perimeter that the NVA could hide behind and the troops would have to climb over to get out of the LZ. Lots of things could go wrong during a combat assault – the worst scenario was an aircraft shot down in a one ship LZ with a platoon (36 men) or less on the ground and under fire. In such a case, everyone’s pucker factor went up and a mad scramble began to find a way to save those on the ground.



A firebase many times contained the command element for an infantry battalion as well as the Battalion Tactical Operations Center (TOC) to manage the units it controlled in the field. Firebases always had artillery and/or large mortars to provide artillery in support of troops maneuvering in the field within range of the artillery. It was also normally within range of another firebase to provide support if either was attacked. Typically, a firebase would have two to six air transportable 105 or 155 howitzers. If a firebase was accessible by road, it would normally have a self propelled 155 or 8 inch howitzer battery. The perimeter of a firebase was usually defended by an infantry company.



**Hook bringing in a sling load of supplies**

If the combat assault was to establish a firebase in the LZ, a different scenario took place after the infantry landed. First, the infantry company would establish a secure perimeter for an LZ. A Pathfinder, who was normally with these first troops to land, would run the LZ. He would coordinate air support and the sequence of landings. Immediately after the perimeter was established, supplies and more personnel would begin flowing in by CH-47 Chinook or CH-54 Skycrane and the Pathfinder would direct the

load to the proper site. The first supplies were concertina wire for a perimeter “wall” and sandbags to build bunkers against attack. Then, on most sites mini-dozer would be flown in to level locations for artillery, clear fire zones, or dig holes for bunkers. The list of equipment and supplies brought in by air was long and in a constant flow -- 105 or 155 howitzers as well as the personnel and support equipment, artillery shells, food, a medical facility and supplies, communications equipment, ammunition, water, and everything else needed to provide protection, sustain life and support operations independently at that location. This massive airlift was completed in hours and the fire base became operational at that time for fire missions. Most of the bunkers were built by sundown.



Once completed and because most firebases were in remote locations, such as hilltops in the jungle, they were resupplied daily by helicopter as ammunition, food, water, etc. were expended.

Without question, combat for the Grunts in Vietnam was brutal, savage, stressful, and tough -- in terrain that was unforgiving. Most times the enemy could hear the Grunt unit coming. In those cases, they would just avoid contact or ambush the Grunts at an advantageous spot and quickly fade away until they got another tactical advantage by terrain or numbers. When a firefight or major contact occurred, it was usually after the NVA concentrated forces or when the Grunts stumbled upon a bunker complex or storage site containing food, weapons, and ammo.

Once the enemy was defeated and/or the supplies were destroyed, the site was soon abandoned as the troops moved on to find more enemy to engage at another location. We simply went out each day in the air and on the ground trying to destroy their supplies while finding and killing as many as we

could. Needless to say, it was somewhat demoralizing to give up what you fought for, knowing the NVA would just reoccupy the site, and then simply trudge around looking for another fight – not knowing where the enemy was (Like in the photo above – Courtesy of Mike Mooney), when he would strike, how many they were, or from what direction they would attack you. Without any clear objectives, front line, or land to capture and hold, Vietnam was simply a war of attrition in which we simply hoped to kill enough of them -- so they would quit. However, a large death toll did not seem to deter them and they seemed to reproduce faster than we could kill them

## NAVIGATION



**Lensatic Compass No GPS – A map and compass only**

Navigation and knowing their exact position was extremely critical for medical evacuation, resupply, and most important -- calling in artillery fire on an enemy instead of themselves. Vietnam was a time before electronics and the Global Positioning System (GPS). All ground troops navigated in Vietnam the same way --- with a Lensatic Compass and a 1:25000 terrain map. Given the mountainous terrain, the dense forest, and thick elephant grass, navigation was extremely hard and an art. In spite of the problems, the ground troops normally navigated extremely well using a method that went back centuries.

## THE RTO



**Chuck the RTO**

One critical member of any infantry unit was the Radio Telephone Operator (RTO) who lugged not only his equipment and weapons but also the radios and spare batteries. He was, in essence, the lifeline of the unit for support. One RTO in particular I remember and liked happened to be Chuck from my home state of New Jersey. Always smiling, never complaining, normally filthy (like all the Grunts) and always appreciative, he was the ambassador of his unit who had a rapport with the other pilots and me. His unit owed him a debt of gratitude as we liked him so much, most of the time when he asked, we would fill special requests (like ice, beer, hot meals, etc)

or work late to make an extra trip for him and his unit.

## FIREBASES AND FORWARD OPERATING LOCATIONS

Grunts were at one of five locations in Vietnam – a base camp, a forward operating location, a firebase, a SOF camp, or in the field. As stated earlier, a base camp was a very large installation and was city-like in nature. A Forward Operating Location (FOL) was a location set up to run or support an operation. For instance, Plei Djereng was a Special Operations Firebase/outpost but became a Forward Operating Location when the 1st Brigade moved there and expanded the operation in size, manpower and equipment to launch the Cambodian Invasion. Some FOLs were established just as refueling and rearming locations. A couple of FOLs are shown below:





**Plei Djereng SOF outpost**

A firebase was for defensive and offensive fire and always had artillery

and sometimes mortars. I never spent any nights on a firebase, but visited many and spent a lot of time on them. Firebases were normally built on a hilltop for protection and followed the shape of a hilltop. Living conditions were Spartan. Typical firebases and firebase living is shown in the pictures below:



**Hill top firebase with a 155 Battery (6 Guns/Tubes)**







**105 Howitzer pit on a fire base**

# PART III

## 1st Infantry Brigade
## An Khe – My New Home

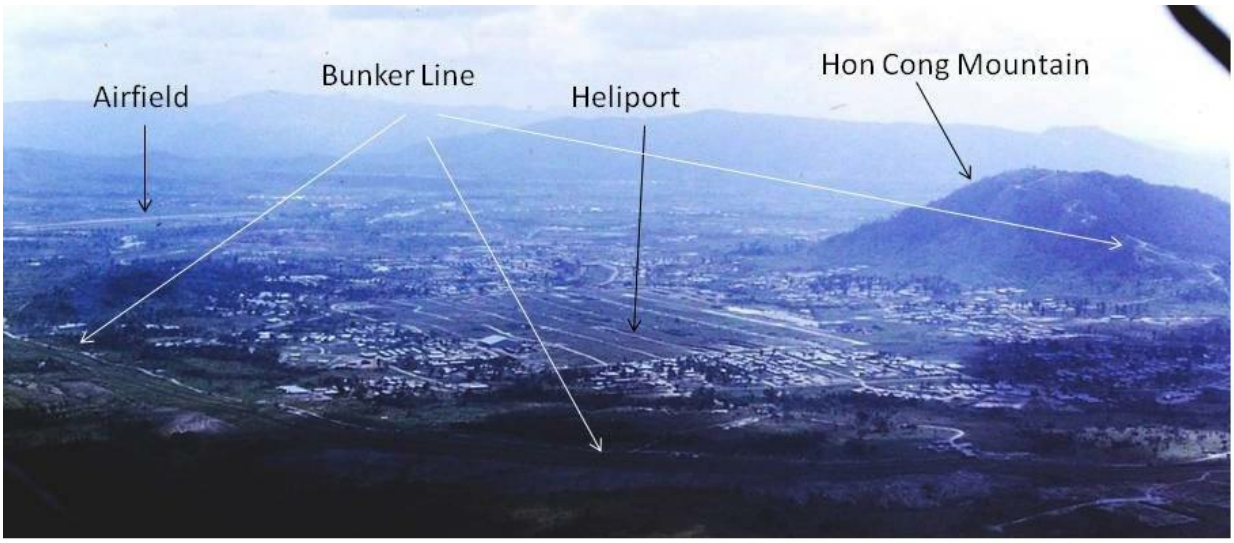
# CHAPTER 1:

## 1ST INFANTRY BRIGADE

I arrived at An Khe where I was assigned to the aviation section of the First Infantry Brigade. The Brigade itself had about 4000 men assigned to it in three Infantry Battalions. This Brigade was also augmented with field artillery and tanks to support the battalions while they were in the field. Our Aviation unit belonged to the Brigade Headquarters and consisted of three OH-6A Light Observation Helicopters (LOH commonly referred to as LOACH), one Captain, two Warrant Officers, four enlisted maintenance personnel, on enlisted to work in operations, a Jeep and a small truck. The callsign of this unit was Hummingbird; but, we just shortened it and my callsign was simply "BIRD 3".




An Khe had originally been the base camp of the 1st Cavalry Division and the compound was named Camp Radcliff. It had an enormous perimeter that included a mountain (named Hon Cong) inside of it and a huge heliport (nicknamed the Golf Course) that originally held over 300 helicopters. The 1st Cavalry Division relocated to III Corp, "down South", and the 4th Infantry Division took over the base but only used up 2/3 of the space. Large areas of the heliport, base, and buildings were simply abandoned or unused.




**Camp Radcliff at An Khe**

The reason why Camp Radcliff had a mountain was simple. This was a WWII and Korea era of communications before the age of satellite and cellular. On top of the mountain in the picture to the left was a major communications site that connected the camp with other locations as well as aircraft operating in the area. Virtually all the base camps were located near a mountain for improved communications with line-of-sight radios. Typically, the highest mountains strategically located throughout Vietnam also had communications sites on them to form a network. Additionally, the top of the Hon Cong Mountain had giant searchlights which could easily light up an area of the perimeter in case of attack. We owned the top of Hon Cong Mountain and its base; but, were never sure who controlled the area in between.



An Khe was very similar to Camp Enari as it had peneprime on the roads and heliport to keep down the dust, no air conditioning, power provided by a diesel submarine generator, and no running water. Like Camp Enari, we

had hootch maids, mess hall workers, and Charlie the Shit Burner. My new lodging was a private room previously occupied by the pilot I replaced who had been severely wounded and sent home. It was an area of mostly company grade and some field grade Officers who all got along well and were pros at their particular specialties. I had a good feeling from the beginning.



My first hootch at An Khe

On the plus side relative to daily living, An Khe actually had concrete sidewalks in many places, a big Post Exchange (PX), a United Services Organization (USO) building to provide some entertainment and relaxation, a fully equipped Field Hospital, Chapels, as well as Officer, Non Commissioned Officer (NCO was pay grade E5-E9), and Enlisted (pay grade E1-E4) clubs.

Living at An Khe was like living on a completely different planet from the unit I just left. Although I was still in an aviation unit, it was small (8 people and 3 aircraft) and a small sub-unit which was part of and worked with the staff of an Infantry Brigade. Bottom line, I worked every day with non-aviation people in

addition to aviators and crewmembers. In particular, I got to live near and associate with the Pathfinders, the LRRPs, and the Brigade Staff which included all the branches of the Army and the Air Force support element. Additionally, our NCO manned a desk in the Brigade Tactical Operations Center (TOC) and I spent a lot of otherwise free time working with him and the other planners in the TOC.

The exposure, interface and education I received from the guys in the non-aviation units and specialties was phenomenal. I was soon to find out

that this move was the best thing that could have happened to me – personally and professionally. One particularly great individual was a food service Warrant Officer with whom I became friends. He was about 12 years older than I, opened my eyes to many different facets of the Army, taught me that I was more than a pilot, and helped me grow professionally. A good Officer, great mentor, and nice guy, I will always remember and thank him. Others of great professional caliber and friends who helped me were a LRRP Platoon Leader, the Pathfinder Officers, a few Captains who had been Company Commanders in the field, and a couple of Majors.

An Khe was also my first exposure to the U.S. media and the reporting they did in Vietnam. Shortly after arriving, I was issued a CAR-15 and a new sidearm. CAR stood for Colt Automatic Rifle and was actually named the Colt Commando. A CAR-15 was an M-16 with the only differences being a shorter barrel and an adjustable length butt stock. It was issued to our LOH pilots simply because it could fit standing up between the two front seats in an LOH and an M-16 could not. If nothing else, it was cool and a novelty to have one because the Pathfinders, Special Operators, and Rangers used them. After being issued the weapon, we had to "zero it" for our use (that is we had to make sure it would shoot where we pointed it). So four of us from the LOH section hopped into our Jeep and drove to the range with our weapons in hand to zero them and have some fun shooting.

Upon arrival at the zero range right outside the perimeter wire, we zeroed our weapons with about 30 other guys and then did some target shooting in semi and fully automatic modes. While doing so, I looked over and a guy was crouched behind a bush nearby with a cameraman filming him. I asked the Range Officer what was going on and his reply was: "*He is doing a news report for back home. The news people hear about firefights from intelligence briefings and come here to get the M-16 firing in the background to make it sound like they are actually in danger and in the bush reporting*". This was my first lesson about media honesty and how they made up stories on a daily basis in Vietnam. I would see a lot more of this phony journalism as time passed to include false reporting, attributing comments to people that never made them, and reporting incorrectly that my location was overrun three times by the NVA. Obviously this caused my family additional worry until they got a letter from me dated *after* the false news event of us being overrun. I have been told there were probably honest and decent war reporters in Vietnam – I just never met any.



**Drying sheets and clothes on the grass**



**Doing laundry – she usually did it with her feet, like stomping grapes**

# CHAPTER 2:

## THE BRIGADE LOH MISSION

The purpose of a Brigade Aviation Section was to provide all kinds of aviation support to the brigade headquarters as well as the infantry battalions assigned to it. This support involved four separate areas: 1) answering general aviation knowledge questions; 2) providing advice on conducting air operations; 3) flying support missions; and, 4) coordinating daily support on a planned and crisis basis for the brigade through our NCO in the Tactical Operations Center (TOC).

The Brigade TOC was the center of activity for the brigade and operated 24/7/365. However, nighttime operations employed only skeleton crews -- due to the lack of activity, as field units dug in and bedded down each night. Each functional area of responsibility was represented in the TOC: S1 (Personnel), S2 (Intelligence), S3 (Operations), S4 (Supply/Logistics), S5 (Community Affairs), plus a USAF Air Liaison Element with a second tour Major F-4 pilot as the Air Liaison Officer (ALO) and a couple of Air Force NCOs to support him. Our NCO had his own desk and radios in the TOC next to the S3 so that he could constantly be aware of any problems or respond to S3 tasks immediately. He was indispensible, as he dispatched and coordinated daily air missions, requested tactical AF support for us through the AF ALO, got us firebase and artillery frequencies, and kept us informed of problems or needs in the field which required our response or help.

As helicopter operations were so new to the Army leadership, very few people understood how helicopters or aviation units operated or how to properly employ helicopter aviation assets. To be truthful, as aviators, we were also using initiative and creativity to develop new tactics as the war evolved. Compounding this problem of adapting new equipment and tactics to the war, there was a bias against, and some mistrust of, the aviation community as a whole by many in the Army leadership going back many years before Vietnam. Very simply, many non-rated Officers were jealous of those Officers receiving flight pay and openly stated that fact. Additionally, many senior military Officers saw helicopters as simply trucks that fly, pilots as overpaid truck drivers, flight pay as unnecessary, and both pilots and helicopters as an expensive, but necessary, evil. Legitimate problems like weather, aerodynamic considerations, flight limitations, crew rest,

maintenance and other factors were looked at by non-rated personnel as excuses for not doing something they wanted done. Many older Officers viewed us pilots as renegades who were shirking our duties whenever we could – especially whenever we were not doing something they wanted us to do.

While the renegade title might have been valid, I know we did our best to fulfill most tasks and accomplish the mission; but, daily we faced things they never considered. A classic example would be the payload of an aircraft and how it could affect operations. Non-rated personnel were perplexed and often mad that on one day a Huey could haul 10 infantry troops at a time, the next day we might be limited to two per aircraft. The reasons were legitimate due to numerous factors such as a different temperature, the landing site elevation and its terrain, aircraft weight or fuel status, wind, etc. which had to be considered for each flight.

As the only aviators in an infantry brigade, it fell upon us to answer questions, sort out truth from fiction, and better integrate air operations with all other Army operations. Many non-rated senior Officers were great to deal with, others became that way once they understood or trusted us aviators – while others would never change. The worst were the ones who referred to us as "drivers" and treated us as they would enlisted GIs, in this case -- a dumb "Jeep" driver to order around and otherwise ignore. On the contrary, younger Officers in the field truly appreciated the helicopter crews and their support. If we told them something could or could not be done, they just accepted it without question – or asked "*Why?*" simply to learn for future reference.

The primary purpose of our Brigade Aviation Section was flying support missions. These included missions of Command and Control support to the Battalion Commanders for combat assaults. However, most of our time flying was actually providing emergency support, such as: resupply of ammo, MEDEVAC, extraction of personnel from sites not suitable for a Huey, immediately flying to a unit in contact with the enemy to coordinate artillery, gunship or TACAIR support, or short notice missions of hot food, water, and anything else that could be done by an LOH needed by the Brigade S3. If a Huey was not available and a load needed to move, we broke it down into smaller loads and made multiple trips. Very simply -- if we could carry it, we did it. On a scheduled basis we would perform taxicab service for routine airlift between sites – to include flying the USO ladies and Chaplains out to

remote firebases for them to spend the day. Occasionally, we would pair up with a couple of gunships and scout out locations on behalf of units in the field prior to them moving into an area. On many occasions we would fly a Company Commanders on a short orientation flight so he could confirm where he was on the map or visually assess the area he would be moving into.

Unfortunately, from time to time I was tasked to fly what I consider the scum of the earth – the self serving, biased, lying, news reporters. On one occasion, I had to airlift one particularly obnoxious reporter and his cameraman to a firebase. Instead, I took him to the worst place I knew of that would provide the greatest danger and hardship. Better yet, they would be marooned there for days due to the weather forecast.

Needless to say, I was called in to explain what happened to the reporter. After I told him I apparently got confused and made a mistake, the Colonel looked at me and said "*Let me get this right, as well as you do your job – do you really expect me to believe you mistakenly took these guys to the worst and wrong place*?" I was trapped like a rat in a corner, as he was obviously not buying my story -- so I quickly shifted gears and answered, "*Yes sir – but on a good note maybe they will get a better perspective of the war and the troops fighting it after three days there.*" He just looked at me, got a half smirk look on his face and told me not to make any more mistakes like that again.

Later, I found out HQ U.S. Army Vietnam (USARV), HQ II CORP, and the Division were "not happy". As I expected and really no surprise to me, the scum-of-the-earth reporter complained to USARV Headquarters about his treatment. As many higher ranking people at that time had such a low regard for many of us pilots, when they were told it was a dumb pilot that could not read a map the whole thing blew over. I never regretted what I did; however, this did end my journalist rides to nowhere.

## NO SKIN IN THE GAME

Critical to all helicopter operability was the crew chief. He performed most inspections and oversaw all maintenance on his aircraft. Even when his helicopter went in for major maintenance he went with it to make sure all was done correctly. His role was absolutely critical. Most helicopters in Vietnam flew with at least their crew chief and a gunner; except, of course, for Cobras

which could only carry two pilots. The crew chief and gunner were assigned to a particular aircraft while the pilots simply flew what was available on a particular day. The crew chief depended on the pilots for their judgment and skill while the pilots depended on the crew chief to ensure that all maintenance was completed properly, to provide defensive fire with the M-60s, to assist in avoiding obstacles on landing and prepare or secure the load properly. Operating in this "integrated" manner assured everyone on the aircraft had "skin in the game". For reasons stated previously, we did not fly our LOHs on most fights with a crew chief; therefore, as our lives were on the line we had to have our full faith in them doing maintenance tasks well.

Unfortunately, because our crew chiefs worked split shifts, they appeared to be under-employed during the work day by the Brigade Headquarters Company (HHC) Commander (a Captain). He started to task them for odd jobs as his errand boys and on-call Jeep drivers. I was not aware until our maintenance Non Commissioned Officer In Charge (NCOIC - SSgt Barnes) brought this to my attention when I landed at the end of one day. His contention, rightfully so, was that they could all do some HHC tasks from time to time to share the load - but we were all doing that now. However, the Captain now wanted them full time during the day. My NCOIC correctly argued that, if this situation continued, personnel morale and quality of maintenance would suffer. He had already spoken with our LOH section Captain who, as usual, did nothing.

So I had a talk with the HHC Captain thinking the reasonable man approach should suffice. He was obviously unreasonable because when I tried to explain my problem and work out an amicable solution, he immediately "pulled rank", reminding me that he was a Captain and I was only a "Warrant Officer". He then told me how things would work and that he would use my folks as he saw fit. As standard practice for me, when negotiating anything important, I normally show up to a knife fight with a gun in hand, and this was no different. So, off came the gloves. Having already reviewed the unit equipment and manning documents, I informed him the truck and driver he used to deliver water were actually assigned to *me* as a "fuel truck and driver" and he had that one body to use every day full-time. I then told him my maintenance and operations people would NOT do ANY extra duties and, if he insisted they do, I would take the "loaned" driver and truck back to use as a fuel truck and that he would then have to explain to leadership the non-availability of water.

After shocking him with my water truck threat, I told him that the CAR-15 he was carrying around was only authorized and on the books for personnel assigned to the LOH section, which did not include him. Since I felt that I was on a roll, I continued to point out other equipment and personnel "on the books" that were also mine (part of it was a bluff, gambling that he did not know which part was which). Now having his attention, I told him I would only take his CAR-15 away today, and not my truck and driver, *if* he agreed to use my people only with my permission and if given at least a day in advance of such use. Otherwise, I would be back the next day for the driver and truck that I was loaning him. My last comment was to tell him if he does not agree, we would be suffering maintenance problems which would result in a loss of critical support to the Brigade -- which I would explain to the Brigade Commander was a result of his taking my maintenance personnel.

He was a bit shocked and pissed -- but now realized his predicament. He immediately chose to transfer his weapon to me that day and he never bothered my folks again. Had he been reasonable and not pulled rank, I would have been a lot nicer, reasonable and tried to work with him -- things would have worked out better for him.

During my time in Nam, we had truly great crew chiefs but two enlisted crew chiefs that needed serious attitude adjustments. The first was Specialist Clark, a man who was very competent but lazy. Instead of doing his more comprehensive maintenance checks independently and fixing problems he found, he would rely on the pilots preflight and post-flight inspections to identify problems. He then did maintenance on only those write ups as required; but, at least he did that work well.

The NCOIC and I both told him of our concerns and that we were not happy and why; but, he claimed the NCOIC and I were wrong and continued, as usual. So I made a plan with the NCOIC. SSgt Barnes would do the maintenance daily inspection when no-one, especially Specialist Clark, was around and then I would do the preflight before the other enlisted personnel showed up in the morning. I would then take Specialist Clark flying with me -- with him thinking maintenance and a preflight had not been accomplished that day.

We did the maintenance and preflight as planned and I showed up again at the normal time for a preflight and mission launch. Specialist Clark was there as I checked the logbook like I normally did prior to beginning my

preflight inspection. I asked him if he had completed the daily inspection, and he replied "*Yes Sir*". I then strapped in, called "*Clear*" and began to start the aircraft. Specialist Clark immediately walked over and reminded me I had not done my preflight inspection, to which I replied "*You did a better one on the daily and I do not have time to do one*". As he walked away planning to let me fly, I called him back and said – "*You are coming with me today. Get your flight gear and an M-60*" and then started the aircraft. He looked shocked, immediately ran over to the NCOIC to complain and tried to get out of flying. The NCOIC, being in on this, simply yelled at him to get his gear. He got his gear and then trudged back to the aircraft and got in – not a happy camper at all.

From time to time on that morning as we flew, I would subtly ask about any routine noise I heard or point out each place that if we had a malfunction we would die because we couldn't land safely – causing him panic. At each hot refueling between missions, he would ask if I was shutting down so he could check the aircraft. I simply said, "*No. Why should I? I fly like this every day*". As each hour passed and we continued to fly over extremely dangerous terrain, his worry seemed to grow exponentially; but, he was still not admitting he did not do the daily maintenance. Finally we stopped for lunch and I shut down. When he said he wanted to check the aircraft over, I said we only had an hour and he would miss lunch. He missed lunch to do the inspection he had failed to do and upon my return we continued the mission. He was really hungry; but, I deliberately did not bring him lunch. This lesson was supposed to be painful to work – and it was.

Upon return to camp, I advised him that I did not think he did the daily maintenance and I took him with me because if I was going to die – he would do so with me. I then advised him that in the future, he could expect to be told at the last minute he was flying and I would not preflight. We never had a maintenance problem with him again. We also never told him what we did. He just thought I was crazy to fly without a preflight or maintenance inspection, somewhat afraid of me, and never wanted to tick me off again. My NCOIC and I just laughed in private about this as our problem was solved!

Specialist Sanders was different from Specialist Clark. He was a real problem child. He was intelligent and capable but lazy and he did poor quality work. The Specialist Clark approach that we had used to teach him a lesson was simply not going to work with Specialist Sanders. I needed help

from a pro. So I talked to Lieutenant Colonel Franklin (an Infantry Officer and Brigade Chief of Staff) and asked his advice on how to reorient Sanders -- as the guy did have potential and I did not want to transfer him as a non-salvageable -- **y**et. LTC Franklin pointed out that under new Congressional restrictions only those who were infantry trained could be assigned to Infantry Companies; however, we could attach a maintenance man temporarily to a unit to support any helicopter that might need maintenance assistance on landing. Voila! That was the road map I was looking for. LTC Franklin then made arrangements for an Infantry Company to "host" Specialist Sanders.

I went right back to the flight line, informed the NCOIC of my findings and decision. He almost fell over laughing as this was poetic justice and in his words, "*No one deserves this better*". He then called over all the maintenance personnel, told them about our new "mobile maintenance concept", this would be a month-long task, and that the first individual would be leaving in the morning – complete with a ruck sack and all field gear, rifle, ammo, and a small tool kit for field repairs. He then dropped the bomb in front of the group that Specialist Sanders was our first assignee to this task. Sanders thought it was a joke, then bitterly complained, and then threatened to write his Congressman. I explained by the time the letter got to Washington and a reply was required, it would be at least a 4-6 weeks. He knew he was stuck.

I personally flew Specialist Sanders to his new home in the bush the next morning. I had no second thoughts or hesitation. He was willing to risk our lives with poor maintenance and I was going to teach him a lesson by letting him experience firsthand how it felt to be at risk. I knew the Company Commander and explained I needed this guy to work hard and get an attitude adjustment. I specifically told him he just needed to be taught a lesson and his attitude readjusted. I finished by telling him I was not interested in getting him killed – just to treat him the same as all his other Grunts without any special consideration and if he got wounded or killed, so be it. He smiled and said "*OK, we can do that*".

Over the next ten days, I saw Sanders almost each time I visited the Company. He went from mad and defiant, to mellowing, to humble, to penitent. After 2 weeks, he looked like a Grunt and felt their life – eating c-rats, digging fox-holes, being dirty, jungle fatigues torn from elephant grass and brambles, surviving a firefight with the NVA, hauling 80 pounds and a

rifle, and boots getting worn out from slogging through rice paddies and climbing mountains.

Thinking enough time had passed to make a difference, one day I shut down to meet with the Company Commander for a status report on Sanders. The Captain told me he thought Sanders had learned his lesson and was now performing as a "*good troop*". Before I left the LZ, Sanders came over and respectfully asked me if there is anything I could do to get him out of there. I told Sanders I would get him out; but, that such assignment orders would take time. With tears now welling in his eyes, he just said "*I understand. Sir, I know I screwed up. I'm sorry and I will not do it again. Please help me"*.

Although I could have taken him then, I wanted to make sure the lesson stuck and had changed. I told him I would do my best and try to get him released within the week. He very humbly said he understood and thanked me. I knew then he had had his reality check and had changed --- I had my pound of flesh. Early the next morning I picked up a very happy man and flew him back to An Khe.

From that time forward, Specialist Sanders was simply our most enthusiastic crew chief. He would not only teach the new guys maintenance, but more important, he would stress to them how critical the helicopter was to the guys in the field from a first-hand perspective.

I did what I had to do with respect to Specialist Sanders, as our lives depended on our maintainers doing their jobs. I had no regrets. Fortunately, it worked out well for all parties involved. Before I left Nam, I told Sanders I was proud of him, the job he did, and wished him well. Oh yeah, the "mobile maintenance team" concept may have ended on his return; but, they half jokingly would tell each other if someone was screwing off to do it right or "*You'll be going to the bush*".



A river bath for the LOH

# CHAPTER 3:

## BRIGADE UNIT LIFE

Life in the Brigade Headquarters and as a LOH pilot was completely different from life in the Assault Company. As there were only three pilots and just a few maintenance personnel, we did it all. We received most of our support such as administration, weapons, mess hall, postal, etc. from the Headquarters Company but we managed all our own aircraft supplies, maintenance, operations, and recordkeeping required of an aviation unit. Two individuals were key, indispensible, and kept us functioning on a daily basis – our maintenance and operations NCOs. Not enough good words can be said for these two individuals -- as we could not have been successful without them.

As far as a typical day went, it ran from about 6AM with breakfast until we were done – normally to have dinner by 6PM. Unlike the Assault Company, we normally knew what our first mission and report time was the night before. On most days we started flying first thing in the morning. After takeoff, we then modified the schedule through our operations NCO in the TOC as events unfolded during the day. On many occasions it was a later takeoff. On those days we would have breakfast, preflight and then be on standby at the flight line, in the TOC, in our room, or wherever they could reach us on short notice.

No two days were the same and normally no day was flown as planned the night before. Some days had as little as three hours of flight time, while other days we could log as much as 11 hours of flying – the typical day was five to six hours of flight time. Given the time for the morning briefing, preflight, refueling every 1.5 hours, and post-flight inspection, the day could be as long as 15 hours without stopping for lunch – but it was normally a seven to nine hour day from start to finish. Each day the flying varied and most support was on short notice in response to a problem – most typically we would be contacted to fly immediately to a unit in contact with the enemy and provide or coordinate whatever was needed such as TACAIR, artillery, gunships, or a rescue. On many occasions when we were not scheduled to fly, we would be called in on short notice for an emergency (day or night), fly in jungle fatigues and find out over the radio where to go and what was needed. There were simply not a lot of dull days and time passed quickly.

Something new or interesting always seemed to happen flying this support mission. I really loved the mission and flying the LOH aircraft.

As the Brigade Aviation Section, we were pretty much left alone as an independent unit in the Brigade Headquarters because once we established credibility as part of the team, the non-rated guys knew we would try our best and they trusted us. On very few occasions were our decisions questioned and they supported us even sometimes when they really did not understand everything.

During the day, if we were not scheduled for something, we had a lot of latitude – but always had to make sure the bases were covered in case we were needed. For instance, from time to time we would borrow an aircraft to fly somewhere not mission related and we would let the TOC know where we would be, how to contact us, and when we were coming back. On many occasions we would hang out in the TOC and see what was going on or I would go with one of the Commissioned Officers and have him show me what his duties were and how he did his job. We were normally not scheduled to fly a night mission; however, from time to time an emergency would come up and we would have to respond – such as a unit in a firefight running low on ammo, wounded that needed to be rescued, etc. Hopefully, we had not been drinking – if we had, the most sober among us flew the mission. Very simply, we did what we needed to do the best we could.

Although we would see and hang out with pilots at the club from other units, most of the people we associated with on a regular basis were non-rated. They were mostly Captains, a few 1st Lieutenants, and a couple of Majors with a wide range of specialties and very easy to work with. We would sometimes just sit in our hootch common lounge area and talk, tell jokes or share the latest treat sent by someone's family. Each hootch had a phone connected to the telephone switch in the TOC.



In the Brigade Staff, as well as during my travels, virtually all of the Officers I met in Vietnam were Caucasian. Although there were some Officers of Black, Hispanic and even American Indian heritage during that timeframe, I only remember meeting one Officer of Asian ancestry and no others of minority heritage. I believe the demographics and numbers to draw from in the U.S. were very low during that era and those who were in the Army were probably serving in other units.

One Armor Captain who lived in my hootch and worked in the Brigade TOC was a black Officer. Very simply, he was one of those people you remember regardless of race due to his personality, initiative, intellect, and ability. From time to time during my off-time, he and I would sit in the hootch lounge and discuss a number of things, but mostly operational issues. We would discuss tactics and educate each other on air and ground warfare pros and cons. One time he was lamenting about how armor was being improperly employed and felt it could be done more effectively. Like so many young Officers, he sent his suggestions forward but was rebuffed from above. His talents stood out as an Officer and eventually he was assigned as Commander of an Armor Company when a position came open.

The first month in the field he employed the tactics he described to me and was credited with a couple of dozen enemy kills. All of a sudden, instead of his tactics being disregarded, he became the Oracle. He was still in command when I left and doing exceptionally well. There were a lot of other junior Officers with initiative, creativity and dedication like him who were really an asset to the Army and troops who served under them.

Another interesting guy was a Captain and former Company Commander who also lived in my hootch. A really competent and decent guy who I was talking to one evening when out of the blue he brought up how much he appreciated us helicopter pilots – and then mentioned how one crew even took a giant risk and flew his whole company across a river with only one aircraft. I looked at him, told him the location, laughed and said "*Glad to have done it*". He was dumfounded, as he did not know I had even flown Hueys in country. The next night I saw him again. He got up went to his room, came back and gave me a cigarette lighter with his unit crest on the front and engraved with my callsign and a "Thanks" on the back. He said "*I know you do not smoke; but, my men really appreciated you hanging it out for us. Here is a thanks*". It certainly was not necessary; but, the fact he took the time to do that meant a lot. Funny how things sometimes come full circle

-- as I bumped into people later from time to time and found we shared common events.

During my time at An Khe, the Warrants in the Brigade Aviation Section officially worked for a Captain but most of our direction came directly from the Brigade S3 (normally a senior Major or a Lieutenant Colonel). I honestly do not remember the first Captain as he did not live near me nor did he fly very much. I am not sure exactly what he did; but, I think he may have spent time working at the TOC each day. He went home approximately 60 days after my arrival and was replaced by a really great guy.

From the time Captain Capable arrived, he wanted to fly, did his best to be in charge and lead our motley group, made logical decisions, and was very reasonable to work with and for. Unfortunately, he crashed in his third month and had injuries so bad he had to be sent back to the States. Sadly, I had to inventory all of his belongings, and ship them home. I wrote his mother a letter telling her what I knew (nothing) and offering my best wishes. I never found out if he ever recovered. Captain Capable was a good guy that we respected and missed. We never did find out if he was shot down, had a maintenance problem, or if it was pilot error that caused his crash.

The final person I worked for in the Brigade was Captain Gaines, who reminded me of some of those in the Huey unit I left. He had no personal rapport with us, did not fly often, exhibited poor pilot skills, and I felt disappointed by what I saw was his lack of leadership skills. Very simply, I made a lot of decisions he should have been making. If push came to shove with Captain Gaines, the Brigade S3 would intercede, be the arbiter, and take care of any problems for us.

One morning we were launching and our maintenance NCOIC ran up to my aircraft and, with a look of concern, advised me that Captain Gaines had three engine over-temps (one is cause for an immediate aircraft grounding) on starting and he still planned to fly in spite of being told the engine might fail. Not really caring about Gaines at all and tired of what I considered babysitting, I said to the NCOIC very matter-of-factly "*Let him fly. So what if his engine fails – we can finally get rid of him*". Our NCOIC then said in a panic "*I don't care either --- but he wants to take a crew chief*". I then understood the problem, got out, and walked over to the Captain's aircraft. I had the crew chief confirm the problem after Gaines denied it, and then told the Captain the aircraft was grounded for a hot-end inspection. Gaines did not fly that day and was not happy with me – again. Quite truthfully, I was at

the point where I did not care what happened to him as we could replace him and the aircraft easily and quickly --- but I was not about to lose a good crew chief. I probably should have treated the guy who was my boss better; but, I simply ran out of time and patience and I reverted to my standard way of thinking and operating in Vietnam –Give me a mission then **"Lead me, Follow me, Work with me, --- Otherwise, Get out of my way."**

## OFFICER OF THE GUARD

At An Khe, each organization had a sector of the camp perimeter it had to man and protect at night. During the daytime hours, there was minimal manning as most of the perimeter could be easily protected. As a member of the Headquarters Company, the only duty we had outside our normal flying duty was to serve on a rotating basis as Officer of the Guard. I pulled this duty about five times. Bottom line, this job entailed checking the perimeter and making sure the guards were doing their jobs and taking care of anything else that happened in our area of responsibility in the camp.

In support of my responsibilities, I had a Jeep and driver assigned to me, and we (the driver and I) would drive from one bunker to the next to check on the guards. Imagine at night, driving along the concertina wire between bunkers with the Jeep headlights off to keep from being a target and inadequate lights on the perimeter wire – you bet we were armed, locked, and loaded. It was quiet, lonely, dark and dangerous on one of the two most remote sections of the perimeter. Lucky us -- we had to do rounds two or three times a night. The second worst part was climbing exposed to the top of the watch towers or walking up to the bunkers in the dark. We made noise simply so our own guards would not shoot us by mistake.

The only fun as Officer of the Guard was firing a .50 cal machine gun, an M-79 Grenade Launcher (called a blooper from the sound it made), popping off hand flares, or shooting an M-60 machine gun from time to time from the guard posts. During those guard duty nights while driving the dark perimeter, I started thinking about Charlie the Shit Burner and how, comparatively speaking, his job was maybe not so bad after all.

The first time I pulled this duty I had no idea what I was to do or accomplish – so I turned to my Food Service Warrant friend as well as a couple of Captains for advice. They advised me on what to do and not do. As always, their advice was sound and relevant.

During my first round that first night, I noticed a dilapidated wood structure with a caved in roof and crumbling walls which blocked the field of fire from the bunker. I asked what it was and why it as there. The guard did not know so I called the sector chief who told me it was a known problem and they had asked the engineers to remove it with no luck to date. It was still daylight, so I took a stroll out to this wooden mess and it appeared to have no significance. Taking initiative and matters into my own hand, I asked my driver to bring me some MOGAS (Motor Gasoline). We spread fuel over this dilapidated structure and set it on fire. Problem fixed, obstruction gone.

The next day I found myself standing in front of the Chief of Staff who complemented me on all the things noted in my report from the night before. He was apparently impressed a pilot could do so well – but, I told him all credit went to the Food Service Warrant and Commissioned guys who gave me great mentoring. I was feeling pretty good --then with a stern look he referenced the pile of rubble I burnt down and asked me "*Did you know that was a protected religious burial site*?" Of course, I answered "*No*" which by coincidence was also the truth. He then thought for a couple of seconds and then said "*Ok, we have been dealing with that for some time and could not get permission to take it down. It is down now, and it apparently was an accident, understand*?" Of course I understood. Matter closed.

The second time I pulled guard duty was without incident – except for those I found sleeping on duty, a gate left open and unguarded, and other typical problems. The Chief of Staff thanked me again for the detailed report and then with a grin said "*Appreciate you not burning anything down this time!*". However, the third time I pulled Officer of the Guard I was called to respond to a riot at the enlisted club. Upon arrival I talked to the MPs (Military Police) who told me this was another race riot between our malingerers who hung out in base camp and some units who recently rotated in from the field.

Their primary concern with getting things under control was that a number of MPs had been hurt during the last fight they quelled. Sooo, in one of my more stupendous acts of incredibly stupid ideas, I looked around and told the gunner of a .50 Caliber machine gun mounted on the Armored Personnel Carrier (APC) to get ready. I then took a bullhorn and told the people in the club to cease and desist and to come out with their hands up and face the wall. They screamed back profanities and now as predicted, united

against the MPs. I told them they had to the count of 10 to comply or I would open fire on the club.

I then told the gunner when I got to the command "*fire*" to put a burst the length of the club right above the peak the length of the roof to get their attention. Anyway, I counted down got to 3 and said "*Ready*", *2 "Last chance, Aim" 1, Fire!* He fired a burst -- but missed firing above the roof and put rounds through the metal roof the length of the club causing a lot of noise.

Like some comedy skit, the club doors flew open, guys came flying out hands over their heads, some yelling "***Don't shoot***!" and they all threw themselves on the ground face-down spread-eagle. The MPs immediately went into the club and the rest were spread-eagle face down on the floor. No one was hurt and the problem was solved. Except for the holes in the roof, it worked out well in the end – or so I thought.

The next morning I found myself standing in front of the Brigade Commander who is now asking me what the hell I was thinking -- as he apparently expected more rational thinking from me. I told him my logic and that I was simply trying to get their attention and save injuries -- but then I quipped "*Sir, I did not know the gunner was such a bad shot. I am really glad now I did not tell him to shoot through the roof because he would have probably shot through the wall and hit somebody*". Anyway, he broke out laughing, told me never to do that again, and said if anyone asks, I am to tell them I got my ass chewed and am lucky not to get punished with an Article 15. The Colonel and I got along really well and I thought it was because I did a great job but now I realize why – I think I was so unconventional from all the other Officers some of the things I did gave him comic relief from the war.

I was Officer of the Guard one more time – without incident and certainly on my best behavior – but it was not as much fun. However, I found out later that whenever things started to get problematic at the club, the manager would put out the word the "crazy Officer" who shot up the club was on duty. Sooo -- that was my legacy and usually did the trick to keep things calm.

## EVERYONE DESERVES RESPECT

As I would walk by Charlie the Shit Burner he would see me, come to

attention and render me a salute. The first time I was taken back and responded with a half hearted salute back as I thought he might be mocking me or it was a joke. The next time I saw him he did the same thing for another Officer and the realization hit me like a bolt of lightning. His salute was like that done by the French. He had obviously been a soldier serving under the French, realized I was an Officer and gave me the respect he felt I was due – which was far better than some of our own troops.

From that day on, when he saluted me, I rendered a very smart salute, and then in French (from what I remembered from high school) I greeted him, wished him a good day, asked him how he was, told him to be at ease and then said goodbye. He would get a big grin and then go back to work stirring his excrement barrel. The man had the most disgusting job in the camp and smelled like burnt feces; yet, he showed respect to others and dedication to his work. Charlie the Shit Burner was a lesson in life with regard to class, attitude and work ethic many could learn from.

# CHAPTER 4:

## FLYING SINGLE PILOT

Unlike the UH-1H which had a crew of four (two pilots, a crew chief and a gunner) the Brigade LOH missions were flown most of the time with just a single pilot (we would joke about it – alone, unarmed, and unafraid). Although our crew chiefs were on flight status, had gunnery training, and each LOH had one M-60 machine gun authorized, we normally did not fly armed with a gunner for a number of reasons.




**Crew chiefs doing maintenance**

First and foremost, the LOH was only a four seat aircraft and the extra body and weight affected performance and kept us from maneuvering easily or carrying the loads we needed. However, if we knew the situation would be more dangerous than normal, or needed to kick out a load because we could not land, we would then take a crew chief/gunner with us. A second major reason was that, if our crew chiefs remained on the ground, they could do staggered maintenance schedules. All the routine and more labor intensive maintenance could be performed on aircraft not flying during the cooler morning hours and when we landed at the end of the day, they could do all minor maintenance and repairs before dark and not be too fatigued from flying all day to do it right.

There was a world of difference between a Huey and a LOH. The Huey was designed to carry a crew of four and a squad (twelve troops) while the LOH carried only a pilot and three people under ideal conditions. It was like

going from a big SUV to a sports car. The Huey was a dependable, predictable, and good aircraft to fly while the LOH was a really fun aircraft to fly; but, suffered from routine electrical problems, a weak transmission, and the loss of tail rotor authority (in certain flight maneuvers it would not work and the aircraft would spin out of control).

The Huey had a two bladed semi-rigid rotor system with an inherent slight vertical vibration, while the LOH had a four bladed fully articulated rotor system which gave a smother and quieter flight. One big advantage the LOH had was noise – the Huey sounded like it was beating the air into submission and could be heard coming a mile or more away, while the LOH sounded more like a mad bee, and did not give as much notice prior to actual arrival. Another great advantage of the LOH was that was much smaller and very maneuverable – like driving a sports car. Finally, because of its egg shape the LOH crashed better and provided greater survivability in some situations.

Both aircraft had armor around the engine and both pilot seats had armor on the bottom, back, and partially on the sides of their seats facing the exterior. The crew chief/gunner positions in the back of the LOH had no armor protection at all. When we carried a crew chief/gunner, sometimes they not only wore an armored vest, but had another to sit on.

Pilot gear was the same for both aircraft – helmet, NOMEX gloves and flight suit, chicken plate (ceramic armored vest) and sidearm. We did not have either a survival vest or emergency radio issued to us – as that was standard USAF equipment, not Army. On the LOH, I also carried my CAR-15 and 7 clips of ammo, fragmentation grenades, smoke grenades (4 smoke colors: red, yellow, purple, green), white phosphorus grenades, and my ever present large bag of peanut M&Ms in case I missed lunch or needed a snack --- which was often.

Flying alone provided a lot of independence but took some getting used to as it had both advantages and disadvantages. The biggest disadvantages were that the pilot had to do everything himself and, if wounded or shot down, in most cases he was on his own. Another was no one to read maps or look up information such as radio frequencies. Prior preparation and a good memory helped a lot. For instance, memorizing twenty or thirty different frequencies to use on three different types of radios (UHF, VHF, and FM) saved looking them up in flight. Also, map study prior to takeoff to memorize headings, coordinates, distances, terrain features, unit locations,

etc. was a must. Regardless, things constantly came up in flight that you needed two hands for -- such things as pulling hand grenade pins and throwing grenades out the door, map reading, or writing notes in grease pencil on the Plexiglas. In those instances, I had to fly left handed or put the cyclic stick between my knees and fly the aircraft using my knees.

One other shortfall of being a single pilot was the lack of another pilot to learn from – such as the great job most Aircraft Commanders in the Huey units did with one-on-one training. So "Hanger Flying" was essential. As stated earlier, Hangar Flying is simply the education that takes place between pilots on the ground. In Vietnam, most of our education came during daytime flying breaks or at the club in the evening. We would discuss the day's events without any bravado and the tone would be comical or serious such as "*I nearly got killed*" or "*I can't believe I didn't crash*" or "*Man, was I stupid*". We would then go on to say what happened and what to do or not to do to help us all stay alive. The ground guys we met with would also share past experiences they learned from or we would share aviation knowledge with them. It was a great education and interchange of questions, answers and/or information – then we would continue drinking and have a good time.

Flying as a single pilot was neither boring nor lonely – there was normally plenty to think about or mentally plan while flying and, unless you were schizophrenic, there was no one to object to how you were flying, the decisions you made, or the risks you took. One major advantage to me as a single pilot was that in most cases the risks I took did not involve jeopardizing the life of another crew member – so if something went horribly wrong, I suffered my own fate without feeling guilty of causing others harm.

Although I was single pilot, I did fly passengers on a regular basis in my other front seat and had a headset onboard for them do that we could talk. We would talk about nothing in particular; and, if they were friends, I would let them fly the aircraft.

I could always entertain myself and make fun out of almost any situation. For instance, if I had time I could run errands or do favors for friends. Also, while flying I could listen to music and news on one navigation radio (otherwise useless in Vietnam) which had a band that could be tuned to AFRN Radio. It was kind of odd one day listening to "Raindrops keep falling on my head" as I adjusted artillery, timed it to the music, and watched it explode over some NVA troops – injuring and killing a bunch. Even refueling the aircraft myself at the refueling hot points was no problem

(except for the time the collective lock slipped off, the collective rose on its own slowly, and the aircraft started to lift off the ground without me) – it gave me a chance to get out of the seat, relax and stretch – and what many pilots believed was a God given right on a landing -- to pee under the tail boom. I really liked the mission, the aircraft, and having the latitude to unilaterally decide to provide critical support with my own aircraft, while having as much fun as possible flying.



**End of the day flight log and maintenance forms closeout**

# CHAPTER 5:

## AN KHE BASE CAMP LIFE

Because An Khe was the home base for the 4th Infantry Division, it had all the things you would normally find in a fixed location and was in effect its own city, to include a full Field Hospital, Chapels, dental and medical clinics, a legal office, motor pools, Officer and enlisted hootches, mess halls, an airfield, a heliport, storage facilities, a Post Exchange, barber shops, a USO, Officer, NCO and enlisted clubs, a fire station, and a Class VI store (alcohol). Obviously there was no need for schools, commissary, education center, day care centers or nurseries, or other amenities required for dependents or accompanied stays of over 12 months.




**The Chapel -- One of the few real buildings on base**

Camp Radcliff bordered the town of An Khe but it was off-limits to all personnel, except those on official business. This was a result of years prior when the 1st Cavalry Division was based there and opened a small protected compound for the GIs to spend their free time and money to drink and socialize with Vietnamese women. The women all had passes to get into this area and were checked for disease by U.S. doctors. This system controlled venereal disease, lowered crime, and helped control black marketing. It was without question a brothel operation and appropriately named “Sin City”. The basic premise was logical and sound -- but not acceptable at all to hometown America. Around 1967, an American magazine did an expose’ complete with pictures which caused a public outcry. “Sin City” was shut down immediately and the town of An Khe was placed “Off-Limits”. Although An Khe was off limits, larger towns at other locations were not off

limits in Vietnam and a great deal of socialization took place as well as prostitution, black marketing, and the spread of venereal disease.

Recreation, boredom and stress relief was dealt with in many different ways at An Khe. There were three different groups of people in Vietnam -- combat troops, combat support troops, and combat service support people. In those days there were approximately eleven people supporting each combat troop in the field. This was referred to as the tooth-to-tail ratio. Many support units worked hard and long hours such as those in mess halls, vehicle and aircraft maintenance, etc. Unfortunately, Vietnam became a routine job for many support personnel in other areas such as finance, administration, supply, firemen, postal workers, etc. Many worked full days; but, there were too many of these people who never worked over six hours a day, generally produced little, always made you feel like you were asking for a favor for them to just do their job, and they had lots of time off to get bored or use drugs. This last group of underemployed support personnel was referred to as the "Rear Echelon Mother F**kers" or REMFs.

## THE MALINGERERS AND SHIRKERS

The world is full of colorful people but only in the Army when the draft was in high gear did so many people of different backgrounds, educations, philosophies, and diverse interests get thrown together and expected to work in an effective manner. I was simply dumbfounded by some of the people I met and they way they thought, viewed the world, how they understood the concept of right and wrong, and their work ethic – or lack thereof. Truly, they were some of the greatest and worst people I have ever known. That being said, not everyone who has worn a uniform has served honorably or well.

Two groups of habitually sick, lame and lazy people in the base camp the Army had to deal with were the *malingerers* assigned to the combat arms who did their best to stay out of the field and the *shirkers* of the support troops that simply avoided all work. Additionally, we had guys with apparent psychological problems like "Crazy Bob" who might or might not have really been crazy and who might have been just a good actor. He walked around the headquarters area each day with his jungle fatigues cut off at the elbows and knees reading a bible or extemporaneously giving a sermon to the air, outside an office window to those inside, or to whomever would

listen.

We also had those who deliberately tried to stay out of the field and went to more extreme measures -- such as the guys who came in from the field with their unit to relax and deliberately got a Venereal Disease. As crazy as it sounds, they would let it go as long as possible - usually the day before they were scheduled for movement back to the field before they would ask to see the doctor. At that point they would be put on penicillin and not be able to return to the field until they were cleared up. Needless to say, unless restricted to the barracks, they would get one case of VD after another as a means to stay out of the field.

A much more common approach used to get out of field duty was for those with curly or course facial hair to fake a known legitimate medical condition. Very simply, individuals would put a hot towel on their face and then put jet plane fuel where the hot towel was applied to give themselves facial sores. The resultant bumps and sores were indiscernible from naturally occurring ingrown hair condition called *pseudofolliculitis barbae*. With open sores they could not be sent to the field until they cleared up. It was not uncommon to see groups of twenty or more GIs roaming around the base camp with beards claiming this condition. Like the VD crowd, as soon as it cleared up, they would have it again within a couple of days in another area, repeating the cycle.

One last group was populated by people who feigned injury or pretended not to have recovered from an injury. I would routinely see people walking with a crutch over their shoulder at a distance who quickly put it under their arm and start limping when they got close enough to see I was an Officer. The worst part was that most these malingerers in all three groups could not be used for anything useful, even perimeter guard duty at night. Their sole purpose seemed to be drug use, complaining, hanging out at the enlisted club, and provoking fights. Regardless of the excuse, there were so many of these people in the base camp that many line infantry companies had only 95 of the 200 men in the field – leaving them seriously undermanned and unable to get replacements because the malingerers still counted against their end strength.

## HARASSMENT AND INTERDICTION (H&I) FIRE

The largest artillery piece in Vietnam was the 175MM howitzer and it was usually located only at the base camp or at firebases near a road. This

monster of a weapon could fire a round at such a distance that the firing computation had to take into effect not only the normal factors computed for a regular cannon such as wind, temperature and humidity but also barrel droop based on the heat from the number of rounds fired and the rotation of the earth during the time of flight for the shell.



Unlike an 8 inch battery which could put shells into the same hole time after time, the 175 was an area weapon because its accuracy was dubious at best at long range. When it fired at maximum range (approximately 25 miles), we would hope it hit within the designated grid square (1000 meters by 1000 meters). If you were lucky enough to see where the first round hit and it was in the right area, calling for another round at the same spot normally was without luck – no one could predict where it would hit. It also had one other major consideration, when it fired – those of us within 1/2 mile of this beast would be subjected to a massive blast accompanied by the ground and buildings within a large area shaking from the concussion.

The Army decided the best way to employ this inaccurate behemoth was on suspected resupply routes or enemy locations as Harassment and Interdiction Fire (H&I) --- and of course at night and at random times. I do not think anything of NVA value was ever hit and the only people harassed by 175 howitzer H&I fire by the Army were those of us trying to sleep.

## WOMEN? -- WHAT WOMEN?

The only American women inside the compound at Camp Radcliff were the USO ladies and the nurses at the Field Hospital – simply referred to in a non-derogatory manner as “Round Eyes”. The Vietnamese women in the compound each day were the hootch maids and other daily workers (I.e.: Interpreters, PX workers, etc) who were for the most part simply doing

honest work for the money. If they were found to be a security risk, black marketing, prostituting themselves, or stealing, their gate pass would be revoked and their employment terminated. Given the situation of twelve thousand men assigned to the base camp (about 4000 on base at any given time) and virtually no women, the "Off-Limits" rule for the town of An Khe was disregarded -- often. If there is a way, a GI will think of it – they are without a doubt "sly, devious and bear considerable watching" when it is something they want – especially liquor, drugs, women, and sex, and not necessarily in that order.

Our GIs evolved many different approaches to interact with Vietnamese women. Although dangerous, it was not uncommon to have GIs slip through the wire outbound or inbound at night with the help of a friend on guard duty on a section of the perimeter close to the town. Another means, and a more common one, was for troops to volunteer for official duty outside the compound so they could visit one of many brothels before returning.

The most enterprising and cheapest individual (as sex typically cost less than $5.00) was one convoy driver who would check out a C-Rations box (12 meals) for each trip he took. He then traded the whole box (worth about $20.00) for sex at a routine rest stop until he was caught. I asked him why a whole box when just one meal would do and he would not have been in trouble. He replied "I wanted to give her a good tip so she would not think I was cheap". The logic of some troops I sometimes found perplexing or comical, at best.

## MPC AND THE LOCKDOWN

In Vietnam greenbacks (U.S. Currency) were forbidden and only Military Payment Certificates (MPC) were used as a means to control inflation and to stop black marketing. It was "funny money" printed by the U.S. Government in the same denominations as U.S. currency and used to purchase everything on base. Although Vietnamese Dong was the official country currency and used

off base, the Vietnamese would accept MPC as payment. From time to time without advance notice the






MPC currency notes were exchanged for a new edition on one day throughout the entire country. At the end of that day, the old currency was worthless. A lockdown and MPC exchange could happen on any day without advance notice to keep black marketers from knowing in advance and exchanging funds.

Sometimes really rational and good people do incredibly stupid things (yea, I should know from firsthand experience). For instance, every now and then, someone or a group would sneak women into the camp for an overnight party. One morning I woke up to find one of the guys I knew well at my door with a worried look who said he needed a big favor. The base was locked down for money changeover and he had six women he needed to get off-base immediately. Apparently, his folks had an all night party in one of the deserted buildings they had turned into an informal club and thought they had planned for all contingencies -- apparently not.

Although he may have allowed his guys to do something extremely stupid (I never asked if he did), if not reckless to his career, this was a friend in distress. I could approve flights and so why not help him out. So his guys secretly got them to my LOH, loaded them onboard, and off we went on their three minute flight. I landed in a field next to the town where they got out. I looked over as I pulled pitch and there they were as pretty as they could be - holding their straw hats down with one hand to keep from blowing off their heads, smiling, and with the other hand waving good-by, and blowing me kisses. They were happy as they had dinner, drinks, got laid, paid in Vietnamese currency, and finished this escapade with a three minute once is a lifetime helicopter ride -- so it was apparently a great night for them.

That night at the club, my friend thanked me profusely. I told him that he had had his last “good deal” of that type and I suggested he forego any future dumb ventures like that. He just laughed and said – “*Don’t worry, as dumb*

*as we are, we learned that lesson*". Truth is, for them I would have done it again – and he probably knew it. As another good friend once told me – "*What is the purpose of having a friend if you cannot take advantage of him from time to time?*"

## NIGHTLY MORTAR ATTACKS

Although there were "starlight" scopes to provide night vision for the ground troops, they were primitive and not widely available. In a tit-for-tat exchange, we owned the day and the NVA mostly owned the night when most U.S. operations shut down. Therefore, there was always the possibility, and at many locations the probability, of night mortar attacks. We would average about five mortar attacks a month at An Khe. As each firing location was different, the impact points from one attack to the next would vary. Generally, the NVA would have time to fire only six mortar rounds and run before the counter-mortar radar would pick up the incoming rounds and a 105 artillery battery would fire back on them.

There was a personal preference and sometimes an art in responding to incoming mortar rounds. Many guys ran to the bunkers immediately – and more were hurt from falling, tripping, or banging into something in the dark than by the actual mortar fragmentation. For others like me, if I did not hear the first round sizzle overhead and it impacted in the distance, I simply rolled over and went back to sleep. If it impacted nearby or worse, you heard the sizzle of the round overhead, it was then time to get concerned – get on the floor or head to the bunker to avoid a short round or other rounds which were aimed in the same general area.



**Tracers from a gunship mini-gun at night firing on an enemy mortar site**

Within minutes of an attack, sometimes the standby gunships would launch and under the light of artillery flares try to find and kill the mortar

crew that would be fleeing. Normally, that was just a waste of time as they would be long gone or hard to find in the bush at night. Casualties and damage were not great from mortar attacks at An Khe because the camp was so big and there was so much open area. This was simply the NVA Harassment and Interdiction (H&I) fire on us – I think it was much more effective than when our 175 cannon fired on them.

## CLUBS AND SHOWS

One aspect of life in Vietnam was the shows we would have from time to time at the clubs on base. Some shows had a Filipino band but almost all others were Vietnamese bands that would play and sing popular American songs. The amazing thing was that these performers could hardly *speak* a word of English, yet most could *sing* a song in almost perfect English without an accent and imitate music by – Janice Joplin, the Animals, Peter Paul and Mary, Tina Turner, the Doors, etc. Songs like Leaving on a Jet Plane, Sky Pilot, I Want To Get Out Of This Place, Bottle of Wine, Satisfaction, Proud Mary, Ghost Riders in the Sky, and Homeward Bound were always crowd pleasers on the play list. In spite of some groups singing words like "Lolling on the Libber" instead of "Rolling on the River" we still enjoyed the shows (Of course being drunk resulting in our standards lowered helped!).

There was one problem with shows -- the longer the show, the more the drinking and most likely one or more in the audience would decide they wanted to perform. It was obvious that we were all great singers when we drank and some just wanted to share this talent (or lack of) on the stage. The bands were apparently used to it as they would tolerate this sing-along or give up the microphone to the typically off-key, if not really horrible, balladeer. Regardless, we were friends and virtually all were regulars at the club who hooted, howled, cheered them on, booed them, sang along, and had a good time. Do you think those who got booed to get off the stage did so quickly? – no way, most were pilots who simply believed it was our ears that were bad and certainly not their voices. We would roar in laughter. Never any fights or deliberate destruction – but one hell of a good time with friends on show nights. I would usually drive my Jeep and then load 10 or more guys on it for the ride back to their hootch and dump them off in front. What a sight – guys on the hood, hanging off the sides, and crammed into the jeep like a clown car.

Because An Khe had so many people normally on base at a given time, we were on the USO tour circuit. Normally there would be a show with stateside performers scheduled from time to time. However, I do not remember us getting any big stars where we were – they played at safer bases. We would get Playboy bunnies from time to time for a visit – but they were either past their prime or the airbrush had been used extensively to cover the reality of their actual appearance. Although normally no-name groups played for us, we always enjoyed something to change the daily routine and they were always appreciated. On one occasion the show stopped when we had incoming mortar rounds land nearby – the girls just stood there on the stage not knowing what was happening as everyone scattered. A couple of us ran up, quickly grabbed them by the arm, ushered them off the stage to safety and talked to them to help them relax. I spite of this being a war zone, they were not ready for a mortar attack. Afterward, they were still a bit shocked and shaken -- but got back up on the stage and did their best.




**USO show about five minutes before the mortar rounds hit**

On occasion strippers from the states would be booked by the clubs and put on a show. I remember one stripper who put on a show and six months later returned for a second. Wow, in six months she looked like something the cat drug in -- dead eyes, fat, drugged, and worn out. Her manager openly came up to a group of us after the show and without hesitation offered her services that night to any or all of us if we could get him some heroin. We blew him off for two reasons. First, none of us knew where to get heroin. Second, we might look desperate, be drunk, and have really low standards, but we had ***some*** standards (that is the story and I am sticking to it).

All of the shows ended as drunken boisterous events; however, the

stripper shows were normally more rowdy than most. We always had someone who wanted to strip to his shorts and join the act or was stripped down to his shorts by his buddies and thrown on-stage to join the show. One guy in particular we dubbed "Sock Man" for his penchant to join the ladies on the stage wearing only a sock on his schlong. On more than one occasion the women would continue the act with the guys mimicking them or just sit naked off to the side and wait until our local talent was finished doing what would be considered in any other venue making a fool of oneself.

We never knew who or what was going to happen next at a show: but, whatever it was, we had a great time being stupid, immature, boisterous, and crude – of course we compensated for these negative traits by being really loud. We would cheer, boo, hoot, howl with laughter, and egg-on any performer for more – no matter how bad the show or one of our own performed we had a good time.

After one particularly rowdy stripper show, a couple of us went to their manager and apologized for the lewd, crude, show-interrupting behavior. She just looked at us, smiled, said she understood, told us the girls took no offense and hoped we had a good time. She went on to say it was not a problem and they were used to it - her experience was that the more combat a unit has seen is the more rowdy the audience. We laughed as our take from that conversation was the Army needed to start funding strip shows as a means to gauge unit stress and to make sure we were OK!

On most occasions the day after a show, most of us just suffered through the next morning's flight. The late 1960s and Vietnam was a different age and mindset with regard to alcohol. Every now and then someone would ask if we ever flew drunk or hung over and our joking reply would be – "*Would you do what we did and fly sober?*" or "*I heard of a guy once who flew sober*". If nothing else, we were living proof that good pilots can fly successfully both drunk and hung-over. We did not advocate it then nor do we now, but it was a reality then.

For instance, on numerous occasions we had an emergency mission come up at night (wounded to be picked up or an emergency ammo resupply to troops in contact) and those least drunk were pulled from the club to fly – then return ASAP to continue with the party. In retrospect, maybe that is why we did fly -- we would joke that the only thing death would have brought us on some days was relief from the misery and pain of our hangover! The next day we would just make sure on a two man crew the two

guys in the worst shape were not on the same aircraft.

## NOT SO FRIENDLY FIRE

I really hate cold showers and during the monsoon there is not much sun to heat the water tanks. So, I designed and had a shower built for me with a heater.



**My hot shower**

It was great and I let friends use it. One night we were peacefully sleeping when a very loud explosion went off in our area of the compound. I could hear shrapnel hitting the sandbags next to me and whistling through the screen above my bed. In this case, I rolled over onto the floor to get lower as I did not know what it was and what was coming next. After a minute or so and no noise, I got up and went outside. No one was injured in this blast; however, our triple seat outhouse took a direct hit and the shower I had built was nearly destroyed by shrapnel. Making matters worse, hot feces were sticking everywhere with its associated smell.

In this case, it was not an NVA or VC mortar attack. Apparently, a Vietnamese Army 105 artillery battery had fired 180 degrees opposite from where they should have. Fortunately, this was the first round to adjust from and they figured out the problem prior to firing number two. Worst part -- it took a few days before the area stopped smelling like crap, we could get a new outhouse built, and I could get my shower fixed.

## SAPPERS

The NVA regularly employed personnel who would penetrate our defenses at night and blow up as many aircraft or as much critical equipment as possible with time delayed satchel charges. They were named SAPPERS (a descriptive title used at least since the 17th Century) and were employed as highly effective small teams sneaking through the concertina wire and moving through the camp undetected while setting explosive charges wherever they wished. If possible, they would sneak back out before the explosions, or if they were discovered, they would create as much havoc with grenades and AK-47s as possible until they escaped or were killed. We had over four sapper attacks while I was at An Khe.



**My LOH – after the sapper attack**



**Hueys blown up by sappers**

The worst SAPPER attack occurred in April 1970 when all three of our LOHs one night were completely destroyed by sappers. The base had a total loss that night of seventeen aircraft destroyed and a bunch more damaged. These guys were discovered before they could get out and all hell broke

loose. They ran around throwing grenades into buildings and shooting at anything that moved to include the hootch next to us which had a grenade thrown into their lounge area. Most people were at a disadvantage, as weapons for base camp support personnel were kept locked in the arms rooms.

We were more fortunate; as we flew each day we were authorized to keep our weapons and ammo in our rooms – so we made the best of it. I had a box of hand flares under my bed as well as one CAR-15, one AR-16, a.38 sidearm, a .45 sidearm, an AK-47 and an UZI. Bottom line, the two of us pilots were the armory for our building. Best yet, we had actual Infantry Officers who had rotated out of the field living with us. They would come to our rooms, grab a weapon and take defensive positions and fire off hand flares. I am happy to report, one Captain bagged a sapper one night with weapons from our personal armory**.**



**M-16, AK-47, .38, Fragmentation Grenade, CAR-15**

## JUICERS AND HEADS

Vietnam was before the era of political correctness, when alcohol and cigarettes were not only allowed but readily accepted. Drinking and driving was not a big deal in American society as a whole and the military only cared about a DWI if you were locked up and missed work. Stateside military clubs had happy hour, Commander's Calls, strippers, and a lot of entertainment. This attitude was easily transported to Vietnam where it exponentially expanded and became like the Wild West. There were two distinct social groups in Vietnam – nicknamed the juicers and the heads. Juicers were the majority who drank alcohol and heads were those who preferred pot. There was a small group who showed no bias and provided

equal opportunity consumption to both. There was an even smaller group who lived and behaved like monks – no alcohol, drugs, women, or socializing (it had to be a really boring tour!).

Because the U.S. Military was so ill-prepared for this type of war, so many draftees in the Army for only two years, so many troops in the rear with too much time on their hands (for many it was an 8am to 4pm job, if that) and such a permissive environment in Vietnam, drugs were virtually everywhere. Vietnam had its share of Quaalude, speed, and heroin users, but from my perspective they were in a very small minority. In retrospect, when I returned to the States the use of drugs was rampant – it was the age of sex, pot, and other drugs. I would not be surprised if the same or a higher percentage of college students were using drugs than the GIs in Vietnam.

Many pot users in Nam were recreational users and a spin off from activities at home. To the best of my knowledge, the guys in the field did not use drugs or drink as their lives depended on being alert. However, when they returned to base camp for a rest, many went back to old habits and became juicers or heads until load-up for the trip back to the field.

There were attempts by the Army to stop the drug use and trafficking. Some people did get prosecuted and sent to jail, but with little overall effect. There was no medical test at the time for pot or any other drugs, except speed. Heads would congregate with friends for pot parties or simply smoke alone in some out-of-the-way location. If someone was walking around glassy-eyed, mellow, and happy, he was most likely high on pot. I had a rule for my maintenance personnel – we depend on you and if I even suspect you are using drugs, you will be gone or your life will be made so miserable you will regret it. As I had already made an example of doing so with one crew chief, they knew I was serious.

## A JUICER TO BEHOLD

Liquor was cheap in Vietnam and allowed by the Army everywhere. A mixed drink at the club was normally 25 cents and a beer, 20 cents. There was no minimum drinking age – or any enforced, if there was. Because of excess profits, some nights at the club were reduced-price nights to 10 cents a drink and many times sodas were free. Very few guys did not drink at all, some drank from time to time, many were average social drinkers (that would probably be an AA candidate at home), and some were drunk virtually every

night.

Earl was an every night drunk and a “Rock Star” drinking legend in his time. If there had been a drinking Olympics, Earl would have been a Gold Medal contender. Earl’s habit was predictable on any night. After flying and dinner, he would grab his personal four man litter (a Medical litter for carrying wounded on the battlefield) he kept in his room and carry it to the club. Earl would then drink the night away, every night. When the night ended, any four people still left would put Earl on his litter and carry him back to his room and dump him on his bed. The next day he would be virtually worthless until noon. He never was an Aircraft Commander (AC) and whoever his AC was that day would make sure Earl got to the aircraft, would then strap him in, fly the mission, and wake him up for critical phases of the flight. For those critical times, he would shake his head, stretch, and then fly perfectly until the crisis or event was over – then give the controls back to the AC and go back to sleep.

One night we had a sapper attack which ended with a bunch of casualties and destroyed equipment. A head count showed Earl and four others missing – so we started a search fearing for the worst. When we could not find them, a few of us took alternate routes. One was a shortcut that a couple of us checked out that went through a field and across a stream. There at the bottom of the steep ravine were the five of them – dead drunk lying in the mud. Apparently, they got down one side of the embankment; but, could not get up the other slippery slope – so they all apparently sat down and eventually passed out in the mud with Earl still lying on his litter. They had no idea of the attack or anything else that happened that night. In true form and unfazed by the events of the night before, Earl took his litter to the club that night and continued his self-destructive role as the bar and unit drunk.

## LIKE MOTHS TO A FLAME

One day the First Sergeant had a no-notice barracks inspection. The result was three kilos of pot found and confiscated in a common area of one of the enlisted hootches. Obviously, no one claimed it when he held a mandatory formation where he announced his find.

After discovery and a failed attempt to identify the owner, the next step was to get rid of it. Not really giving much thought or consideration to the dynamics of pot, he simply threw the pot into a barrel of waste in the center

of the company compound and set the whole thing on fire. A gentle breeze took the fumes through four barracks ending up with an unknown number of personnel who got inadvertently stoned. Additionally, the smoke and easily identifiable smell spread over a large area and like moths to a flame, many resident potheads were lured to the burn site. As we walked to dinner, I noticed over 30 guys just standing there downwind of the barrel and breathing in pot smoke to their hearts content. I just laughed and then walked into the orderly room and pointed out this fiasco to the First Sergeant --- he walked outside and was speechless, as it was not quite the end result he and the Commander had desired.

## BUNKERS AND RAT MAN

There were two different kinds of bunkers built on bases – those for defense of the base perimeter and those internal for shelter during a rocket or mortar attack. Bunkers built on the base perimeter were on the ground or in elevated. These bunkers had numerous locations built in them to fire safely at an attacking enemy. Bunkers within the camp were simply sand bagged shelters without any windows, one door, no electricity, and normally no bigger internally than 6 feet by 8 feet by six feet high with benches on each side to sit. As they were not used daily, they became homes to large spiders, lizards, and rodents. There is simply nothing more pleasant at night than running into the bunker and having your head engulfed in a large spider web in the dark full of dead bugs and a big spider.

Whenever a mortar attack would take place, we would head to the bunker by our hootch -- if the rounds were close. One bunker had a rat that liked living there; but, would normally scurry away when we entered. However, sometimes it would just sit and look at us until we threw something at it. Somehow, this rat really bothered 1LT Jenkins and it became his obsession to kill this rodent. Use a rat trap – no way!!

On some nights, Jenkins would sit in the bunker with a flashlight and a .45 waiting to shoot the rat. We discussed the rat hunt with him and expressed our concern of shooting in the bunker and tried to discourage him; but, he was undeterred and he was now on a Crusade of some kind. When he spoke of this rodent, you could tell by the tone of his voice, the look on his face, and body language this rat represented more to him than just a rodent – as if it was personally taunting him and represented some kind of demon.

After three different nights of trying, he determined the rat would not come out with him there. As he lamented his plight to us over some drinks, we became willing participants in his folly and started to come up with what kind of bait to use as well as best ways to kill it-- mostly stupid and dangerous ideas for laughs we knew would not work (i.e. Claymore, grenade, riot gas, etc). Finally, someone suggested he needed camouflage so that the rat would not see him and we all agreed. We were half kidding; but, Jenkins ran with that ball and changed tactics.

I went down to the bunker the next night he did his rat watch. Not wanting to press my luck, I yelled down into the bunker to make sure he did not shoot me and then went in. To my surprise, in this very dimly lit bunker there was a camouflage net stretched from one wall to the other concealing a corner and a small flashlight providing minimal light. He was sitting in a chair behind the net – in his jungle fatigues, wearing a boonie hat, his face and hands painted with camouflage, and holding a .45.with a determined look. I just laughed out loud asked him if he was OK in his Rat Blind, as I called it. He assured me he was; but, that my presence was disturbing his hunt. I left, shaking my head.

Later that night we heard five muffled .45 pistol rounds fired and we all ran to see what the hell was going on. He finally saw his rat, fired at it – and missed. He apparently scared it so bad, the rat was never seen in the bunker again – however, just for fun from time to time we would tell him we saw the rat. Jenkins would get this determined if not some outraged look on his face and man his Rat Blind on those nights as he continued to be obsessed with killing that rat. We finally found a dead rat one day – put a round into it and took it to Jenkins claiming it was his nemesis. He asked if we were sure – we told him yes very convincingly. As it turns out, I am not sure he was happy that his Crusade was now over and possibly disappointed he no longer had this rodent to fixate on. Oh well.

Everyone has a different way of dealing with stress and I am sure a psychiatrist has a term for his obsession (projection, transference, or some 15 letter condition);.but Jenkins's was the most comical.

# PART IV

## The Monsoon Season



Vietnam has two seasons a year – dry and monsoon. The dry season was really hot, terribly humid, and the air smelled. For the aviators it meant clear skies but sometimes very hazy visibility, normally calm or light wind, and dry ground with a lot of dust making it hard to see on landings. When the monsoon season moved in, the situation dramatically changed - for the worse. I got to Vietnam at the beginning of the monsoon season and moved to An Khe when it was in full force.

For the aviation community, the monsoon season was still hot, more humid, the air still stunk, but we now faced ever changing weather that would come in waves. Some days we had ceilings as low as 100 feet with heavy rain and wind. Hours or days later the ceilings would rise sometimes to as high as 4000 feet, and then drop again – quickly and unpredictably. Low or high clouds, the monsoon season produced massive thunderstorms that would break the troposphere at 90,000 feet and release torrential rain that cut visibility sometimes to almost zero. These were not thunderstorms like in the States. It was not uncommon at all to experience raindrops that hit the ground with a loud thud and covered an area on the ground over two inches in diameter.



**Two thunderstorm cells to fly between**

The only two good thing about the monsoon season for pilots were that sometimes with high ceilings it was easy to see and fly around the rain cells and it was cooler at night for sleeping.

As many ground units had no other means for resupply or medical evacuation, helicopter operations during the monsoon season had to continue as much as possible. However, they became much more difficult in the Central Highlands due to its numerous mountainous areas combining with the clouds and rain to create aviation “challenges”. For instance, instead of

flying at higher altitudes directly from one point to another above the mountain and ridgelines, we now had to navigate low level through valleys and with poor visibility in the rain. In addition to near misses between helicopters being more frequent due to the compression of air operations at lower altitudes and lower visibility in rain, the trips took longer, and we were closer to the ground and more exposed to enemy fire. For Chinooks and Cranes, they were bigger targets and had to fly lower and more greatly exposed. I think the monsoon season was actually worst for the gunships, which had much less altitude to maneuver and much closer to the enemy when engaging targets.

Even more troublesome for all, and adding another element of stress and danger, was the necessity of trying to fly and read a map at low level while trying not to go inadvertent Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) in the clouds. Very often I would fly up a valley to a dead end due to the clouds capping my exit, or simply because the terrain looked so much alike at low level I would get temporarily miss-oriented (no pilot admits to being lost, and of course there was no one from whom to ask directions) and end up in the wrong valley. Traveling by following roads was not much better – as there were not many roads and when there was one, many other helicopters were following the same one at the same altitude and 90 knots indicated airspeed. The unwritten rule was to stay to the right of the road when following one.

The one good thing about helicopter flying at low altitude in Vietnam was the lack of power lines, telephone poles, towers or other obstructions as there were virtually none in the Central Highlands. For the helicopter pilot, this was the one great aspect of flying in a third world country.

## GRUNTS AND MUD

For the Grunts, the monsoon season was also much worse for them. They were used to the heat and being sweaty, but now everything was sopping wet and heavier to carry and the ground was move difficult to move across. Low spots were filled with water and sometimes became lakes, making movement and navigation harder. Dry stream beds or slow moving streams were now fast moving rivers and dangerous to cross. Even worse, the rain made it harder to hear enemy activity or to maneuver in a firefight. While we enjoyed the cooler temperatures at night for sleeping, the Grunts were wet and now cold in the mountainous areas.

Most troublesome for everyone in the field was the soil. Vietnam seemed to have two distinctly different types of soil and both sucked – brown and orange. The brown soil was fertile, found in the lowlands and mountains and in the dry season created brown dust. However, in the rainy season it became slick – making mountain trails extremely tough to navigate and hills even tougher to climb or assault.

Probably worse was the orange soil that was primarily clay based. During the dry season, the clay would dry out and turn into dust the consistency of talcum powder. This orange dust could be a few inches deep and got into everything – food, water, weapons, clothing, eyes, teeth, ears, etc. For the aviation community it was particularly treacherous for landings – as brown outs would happen often. BROWN OUTS are simply so much dirt being swirled up into the air by the rotor wash that the pilot is blinded, loses sight of the ground, and gets spatially disoriented. WHITE OUTS happen in snow – but that was obviously not a problem. If immediate corrective action is not taken from a loss of ground reference, a crash resulting in minor to major damage will most likely occur.



**LOH making typical dust upon landing**

While ground troops were happy to have us resupply them, the dust and dirt we stirred up in the dry season was no joyous event and the Grunts generally took on the color of the soil with their skin having a layer of dirt over it.

The powdery orange clay soil was an equal opportunity misery provider and provided even greater problems in the wet season than the brown muck. First, when water hit the clay dust it became sticky. As you walked, it stuck to boots and anything else that touched it. After walking just 20 feet, we

would have to use our survival knife to scrape an inch or two of mud off the soles of our boots. Second, as the ground got wetter and vehicles drove over it or numerous people walked over the same location, the harder clay below the dust turned to a slippery and sticky orange muck. Trucks would sink a foot or more in this slippery orange goo.



Finally, if that was not enough to make you hate this clay, it was the curse that would not end and gave one other unexpected treat. As this was truly a creation of the Devil, it had to be removed from anything it stuck to before it dried. If not, it turned into an orange rock which could not be scraped but had to be broken off in chunks with a hammer. After breaking off as much as possible, it had to be soaked in water and massaged by hand -- making it sticky and messy again in order to remove it.

## ARMOR AND MUD

Armor in the field consisted of two primary vehicles, usually the tank (M-48 or M-60 models) and the Armored Personnel Carrier (APC). The tank was a formidable weapon during the dry weather and was impressive to watch as it smashed, crushed, and knocked down virtually anything in its way. It could operate independently, in pairs or groups; but, in the bush always moved in support of or with infantry so that they could protect each other. Watching armor move from the air was particularly impressive when they knocked down trees with ease or fired their main gun. However, when one tank broke down, everything came to a halt. If it was for something major, such as throwing a track, it was a Herculean task to get it moving again. I only had to watch one track being put back on in the field (under good conditions with the proper equipment) to have an undying respect for the armor folks - and tank repair in the field.

The Armored Personnel Carrier (APC) would usually move in groups as part of a mechanized infantry unit. In Vietnam, the infantry troops would

ride on the top rather than inside as it was cooler and less deadly if the vehicle hit a mine or was hit with an RPG.



Driving around in an APC during the dry season was not a problem unless it broke down. If an APC broke down, the infantry attitude was that they would just tow it, hop on another APC, or walk. Getting an APC working again was sometimes tough – but not as hard as a tank.

In the monsoon season the dynamics changed considerably for the armor folks – as armor performs best on flat dry land. I was told one day to fly the Armor Battalion Commander and two of his recovery experts out to a field site as they had a problem with a stuck tank. I had seen tanks bellied up (the tank bottom sitting on the mud and the tracks just turning without traction) in the mud before – so this was nothing new, I thought. From the air we could easily see this was a major problem and then we landed. I shut down my aircraft and walked over to see this scene of chaos and frustration close-up.

One tank was bellied up in the mud with its tracks just spinning, throwing up mud, and going nowhere. A second tank that arrived to help pull him out was not only bellied up – but it had broken a track. The track was buried and almost impossible to access in the sticky, shifting and miserable orange muck. To make matters worse and compounding this misery, a tank retriever had arrived on site just before us. This monster of a machine had a boom, was much bigger and heavier than the normal tank, and was used to recover broken or damaged tanks. Unfortunately, it was also stuck in the mud. There must have been at least fifty guys out there pulling and hauling massive cables in calf high muck, straining on massive long crowbars, and shoveling sticky orange muck trying to get those tanks out. They were hot, covered in mud, and worn out doing this backbreaking work – yet they continued to perform their duty as professionals.

I talked to a couple of guys taking a break and asked them kiddingly if they were going to blow the tanks in place and move on. With a half grin they just said, "*No sir, it looks bad, but we'll get them out*". That to me was the epitome of the American GI – unfazed, determined, doing their duty, and dedicated to the task whether they wanted to be there or not. Most were really great guys who did their duty exceptionally well and had to be admired.

I had to leave after about an hour. Work halted just before I left as it was fruitless until more equipment was flown in. As deep as those tanks were in the mud, I thought they would be there until the dry season; but, two days later I was advised they were out the day after I was there. I flew over the site and the only things remaining were deep scars in the earth and tank tracks leading away. Stuck tanks became a common occurrence in the monsoon season – but this was the worst I heard of or saw.

# PART V

## My Cousin Mike





**After a 10 day mission**

Almost everyone in life has or should have an older friend, brother, or relative to look up to. For me, one of these people was my older first cousin, William Edward Mooney, Jr. or "Mike" as all family and friends called him (our Grandmom nicknamed him Mike, why -- who knows). It was easy to admire him as he was a great athlete, popular, had an award winning smile, and great personality.

About thirty days after arriving in An Khe, I received a letter from home telling me Mike was in Vietnam. He had been drafted out of college and then went to Basic, Advanced Infantry Training, Jump School, Ranger School and was now a Staff Sergeant (E-6). Of all coincidences, he was assigned to an infantry battalion in the same division as me – but in a different brigade. I immediately went over to the S3 shop, found his unit's location in the field, and got his unit radio frequency. Two days later, we had a light flying day so that afternoon I borrowed an aircraft and flew to his location on the Cambodian Border about 80 miles away to the west. He was easy to find, as his company was on a firebase, defending it from attack.

Upon landing, he came out of his sand bagged bunker and was quite a bit surprised to see me. Always a great host, he gave me a quick tour of his lavish accommodations (a sand bagged bunker) and offered for me to stay and enjoy his c-rats dinner with him. As appealing and mouth-watering as this was, I turned him down.



Later, I remarked how happy I was that he arrived when he did. He looked surprised and asked "*Why?*". I told him because his firebase was under major attack and nearly overrun just before he got there. In his typical fashion, he laughed and said "*That was my second night here on the firebase – one hell of a welcome*". As it turned out, his location was right near the

Chu Pong Mountain and next to the location where the battle of LZ X-RAY in the Mel Gibson movie "We Were Soldiers" took place four years earlier. That area continued to be an enemy stronghold throughout the years with American troops returning from time to time, having battles, "winning", then leaving again, and the NVA reoccupying the area.

I showed him my aircraft and took him for a short flight. We talked a little more before I left when he mentioned how he was trained as a Ranger and really wanted to get out of the infantry company and be a LRRP (Long Range Recon Patrol). He said he would be submitting a request as soon as he could. I advised him I thought he was safer with an infantry company, but given our apparent defective genes, he was more interested in doing what he wanted and trained to do rather than taking what most considered the much safer and easier road. We wished each other well and somewhat sadly departed ways.

Upon arrival back at An Khe, I spoke with the LRRP Company Commander and asked if he could do anything to get my cousin a change of assignment. When he heard he was a Ranger qualified (Staff Sergeant (E-6) he simply said, "*Hell yes, but I cannot guarantee whether he will be here or at Pleiku.*" I told him I did not care as long as he could get him reassigned. I am not sure whether it was Mike's request or mine, but he was reassigned to Company K 75th Infantry Regiment (LRRP) and moved to An Khe two weeks later. This time he surprised me at *my* hootch one evening when I returned from flying. We had a steak dinner and drinks at the club that night just laughing and telling stories.



**Mike's team waiting to go out.**

Mike and his team were like all the others. They would spend 7-14 days

in the field at a time doing reconnaissance, sniper, or abduction missions. Like all the LRRPs, Mike had some really interesting and obviously dangerous missions such as looking for an NVA camp reportedly holding American POWs, some sniper missions to take out NVA leaders, some missions specifically to abduct NVA to bring them back for interrogation and intelligence, and reconnaissance operations in Cambodia prior to the invasion to confirm the location of NVA camps, storage areas, and anything else of intelligence value. Once again, this was 1970 and all navigation was with a map and compass in rugged terrain that all looked the same from within the forest. Like all Grunts, their lives depended on good compass and map reading skills – for a proper pickup location, intelligence report, and for artillery support if they needed it. However, being a small team it was even more critical than being with an Infantry Company.

Being a small team in the middle of nowhere and trying not to let the enemy know you were there resulted in all of the LRRP teams having similar stories -- such as Mike having a tiger circle their location at night looking for a meal, and not being able to move, make noise or relieve their bladder other than where they were, being surrounded by NVA and just laying low until the enemy passed, making a routine radio report only to have an enemy radio operator finish it, rappelling into a site only to find they were on top of a bunker complex and had to be extracted immediately, on a couple of occasions being discovered and running for their lives, living through hot insertions and extractions, etc.

Like many others, he did not want to be in Vietnam, but performed his duties in a manner that can only be described as both professional and heroic – for instance, as the team lead he did not have to, but was, point man on every move and he always brought back excellent intelligence from the mission.

Mike would always offer to take me on a mission with him; but, I declined by laughing and telling him I would not go because I would get dirty. On the reverse, I would offer to take him out as my gunner or at night to look for NVA campsites, throw hand grenades at them to draw fire and then have the gunships open up on them -- he would decline my magnanimous offer. Truth is, as in the movie “Dirty Harry”, Clint Eastwood said “*a man has to know his limitations*” -- we both knew ours and were happy operating in our own worlds.



**Two different lifestyles**

Because he and I were deployed to different locations on a regular basis, we saw each other randomly but frequently. Sometimes we just bumped into each other for a few minutes at other base camps, fire bases, or LZs. When we did have some time at An Khe, we would always enjoy each other's company, go to the NCO or Officer's club, and have some drinks and/or dinner and hang out. In fact, we both went to Australia on R&R and our trips overlapped for three days which we spent together.



**Unexpected meeting in a village on the Cambodian border**

On one occasion, I was at LZ English where I bumped into him after he just got out of the field. He was dirty, smelly, unshaven and somewhat mentally fatigued. Having been raised by the beach I knew a swim would lift his spirits, so I flew him and a couple of my crewchiefs to the beach for a 40 minute swim. I would kid him about being so dirty he turned the South China Sea temporarily brown.

On occasion, I had time and would just take him flying for the fun of it

and let him fly the aircraft. He and his LRRP buddies were great guys. If they needed something from me, no problem, and in return when I needed their expertise such as cleaning, checking, or repairing my weapons it was never a problem for them.

Ironically, having spent so much time in the field and after numerous firefights, close calls, and emergency extractions under fire, Mike ended up being shot in the left hand when he was ambushed – not in the bush -- but while driving in a Jeep in what was supposed to be a safe area. After being wounded, he found himself in limbo. Due to his wounded hand, he could not hold a rifle or serve in the field but his wounds were not bad enough to be sent home -- so he was assigned administrative duties until his time in country was up. Like so many others, he applied for an early discharge to return to college as he had spent 10 months in country, had only had 6 months left on his enlistment and like so many before him, would be released from active duty upon reaching the U.S. west coast.

His notification to leave came quickly and unexpectedly -- I was flying when my NCO advised me over the radio Mike called and was departing on a C-130 in one hour. I flew to the airfield, asked the C-130 pilot to hold and why. Of course he agreed – another good AF guy. When I landed I asked the C-130 crew to screw with him and tell Mike his orders were changed and to get off. He came down the ramp, duffle bag in hand, and looking both confused and pissed. Once he saw me standing by my still running aircraft he knew what was going on and he got his usual big smile, dropped his stuff and sprinted over. We said good bye and I was thrilled not to worry about him anymore and knowing the family would get at least one of us home safe.

I still harass him about getting in country after me and getting shot just to leave a month before me. I also harass him about our lost 15 minutes of fame. He had apparently made a deal with a magazine (LIFE or LOOK) to do a photo shoot regarding the two of us. Apparently, the theme was to compare and contrast on the lives of two cousins in Vietnam through photos. As I did not trust the media, I was not thrilled with the prospect but he was – so I told him I would go along with his commitment. However, with his early departure that event never happened. Even though I hated the idea, was happy it never took place and was happy he was able to leave early, I cannot help myself from harassing him to this day about getting my hopes up for the photo shoot and crushing my hopes for fame -- because he so selfishly left early!



**Mike’s last day -- saying goodbye**

# PART VI

## Lucky, Talented, or Cursed

The old adage goes and is worth humorous debate: Would you rather be an extremely good pilot or an extremely lucky one? In reality, given the time and money almost anyone can be taught to fly, but not everyone makes a good pilot – especially an aviator (defined in the military as a pilot with wide range of expertise in the aviation field). Every pilot believes he is the best or, at least as a minimum, good; otherwise, he would be in a different and less hazardous profession. Like every profession, stereotypes exist because of the different personalities which are drawn to them -- for instance, not many men who aspire to be hair dressers, ballet dancers, or social workers want to be pilots and vice versa.

Some people are born with natural flying skills, mental acuity, and physical traits to *excel* as a pilot and aviator. Others not as adept can learn the skills over time to be a *good* pilot and aviator. With some others who aspire to be a pilot, regardless of how much they want to fly, no amount of time and effort spent will result in the reaction time, talent, or judgment to be a good pilot or aviator. Regardless of how well trained, confident or talented someone may be, all pilots will still gladly admit that luck is a very acceptable alternative to skill -- and sometimes luck was the only thing that saved them. What no pilot wants is bad luck, to fly with someone who is unlucky, or to fly an aircraft that seems cursed.

## FLYING STEEL

It was during the dry season and on one of those uneventful days when I was flying alone in my LOH between two firebases on a beautiful crystal clear day. I was very relaxed and cruising at about 2500 above the ground level (AGL) for the cooler air at the halfway point of the flight.



The view was spectacular with green grass fields below, the mountains to my left and listening to music from AFRN through my navigation radio.

Doing a normal scan, I looked up and noticed a CH-47 Chinook (Nicknamed the Hook) flying about 3000 feet above and passing ahead of me. Below the Hook was a sling and it was attached to a load of PSP (Perforated Steel Plating – sheets of steel used to build roads and runways. Each one was about 10 feet long, 15 inches wide and weighed 66 lbs). I simply wondered where it was going. I took in the view again, relaxed, and wished every day was this peaceful and had weather this great for flying. Life was great at that moment!

Things could and did change in an instant, in Vietnam! A few seconds later, I looked up at the Hook only to see the load of PSP had broken loose and each piece was now spinning like pinwheels over a large circular area while falling to the ground. Worse yet, this mass of steel (about 40 planks) was heading right for me as one large black cloud. Mentally running through all my options, I realized that I had none -- as I could not climb, dive, or turn to get out of the way. I knew any of these steel plates would knock me out of the sky or if any of my rotor blades even hit an inch of these steel sheets, the rotor system would most likely disintegrate. It was one of those times you experience in life when death was obvious, simply seconds away, and I knew no amount of knowledge or skill could save me.

As this cloud of steel came within 200 feet above me, I simply knew I was going to die, found an inner peace, and thought "*Lord, I am truly sorry for the things I have done wrong, thanks for a great life*" and had no more time than that. I then just flew straight and level, accepted my fate, and watched as the sheets of steel came down all around my aircraft. After the last one passed - I turned, banked hard, looked down, and watched them thump into the ground – covering an entire area within an almost perfect circle larger than my helicopter. I still cannot explain how or why they all missed me; and, if there are miracles, this was one -- I still thank God for each additional day he has given me. Later, I kept thinking of what a terrible way to go out – not in combat; but, killed by the equivalent of a dump truck that lost its load!

## A DENT IS BETTER THAN DETONATION

On numerous occasions I was asked to look at a planned LZ location for an insertion. This was a pretty simple task -- in concept. Find the location on the map, verify the location on the ground, do a high pass getting the overall

site picture for ingress and egress, then take a closer look at lower altitude to see what kind of obstructions were on the ground.

The reality is that one never knew what was in the LZ or the treeline around it. On one of these LZ surveys, things went well until the very end. As I was finishing a low pass, an ill-intentioned, if not downright hostile, guy came out of the treeline, aimed a Rocket Propelled Grenade (RPG) at me and then fired. As I saw him aiming, I turned abruptly and a couple of seconds later I heard a loud "Thud/bang" sound coupled with the aircraft rocking as the RPG bounced off the belly of my aircraft leaving a really big dent.



**RPGs with an M-16 shown for size comparison**

I am not sure if it did not fly far enough to arm, it was a dud, or my quick response made it hit at the wrong angle. However, had it detonated they would probably still be looking for pieces of me and my aircraft. Once again, I am more than happy to attribute this to luck over talent, or perhaps, a nice mixture of each.

## ARC LIGHT

In Vietnam, B-52 aircraft were used extensively to carpet bomb large areas of suspected NVA presence. The bombing events were named ARC LIGHTs. ARC LIGHT target lists were compiled from many sources such as signals intelligence, photo intelligence, electronic remote ground sensors, or LRRPs; but, the goofiest targeting source was from sniffer aircraft.

Some helicopters were equipped with air sensors which picked up ammonia as they flew just above the tree-tops. Ammonia areas were a result of urine -- ergo large concentrations of people that needed to be bombed. The only problem with that assumption is that monkeys also created the same urine and ammonia. Therefore, on many occasions we simply eliminated not the NVA, but groups of monkeys -- innocent monkeys.

B-52 aircraft were based on Guam and a typical ARC LIGHT involved 3 B-52 aircraft flying in a V formation with both internal and external bombs. Each B-52 could carry up to 108 500-pound bombs or a total of 88 bombs with a mix of 500 and 750-pound bombs. When dropped, these munitions devastated an area ½ mile wide and over one mile long. ARC LIGHTS were impressive to watch from afar as a dust cloud would climb to 1000 feet with trees, rocks and other debris flying up above the ground hundreds of feet.

We would fly Bomb Damage Assessments (BDA) sometimes after the dust settled from a strike and find nothing but potholes, churned earth, uprooted trees, body parts, and nothing moving --- in other words, almost total destruction. I met one NVA soldier who surrendered. He explained through the interpreter that he was one of twelve survivors of the 100 men he left North Vietnam with the month before, that he had survived two of these bombings, the cause of which he did not understand, and that he was not going to chance a third.



Bomb Crater

Late in my tour and during a routine flight, a Chinook accidently dropped a sling load consisting of a 105 howitzer and its basic load of artillery shells into the forest in the mountains just north of Phu Cat AF Base. I was sent out to see if I could find it so an infantry company could be inserted to blow it up before it could be used against Phu Cat Air Base, if the howitzer was still operational. Flying at tree-top level with a crew chief on board to help me spot it, we were having no luck seeing through the dense foliage but just continued to fly and look.

Our radios were always tuned to monitor the emergency frequency for obvious reasons. Suddenly, we received a broadcast we normally ignored

because it gave directions from a navigation device not installed in our aircraft and was only used by the Air Force. It simply said "*Warning, Warning, Warning – Heavy artillery warning, Channel 24 at 350 degrees at 12 miles*" and then repeated it again. I immediately got chills -- because on the map recon that morning I notice the NAVAID at Phu Cat Airbase was listed as Channel 24 and worse – Heavy Artillery Warning was in fact a B-52 ARC LIGHT mission.

I immediately climbed a couple of hundred feet to see where I was in relation to Phu Cat – yep, 350 degrees north and about 20 miles. I immediately turned eastbound trying to climb when the world around me erupted. There was an almost deafening sound as 500 and 750 lb bombs went off around and in front of me followed immediately by a surreal world of dust, dirt, and debris which flew up and enveloped my aircraft.

I was not sure we were going to make it out of this alive as all noise seemed to stop and I lost all visual contact with the sky and ground flying in this brown abyss of dust and debris. I did my best to hold level flight with my poorly working attitude indicator (a gyro driven device that shows whether the helicopter is turning, diving, or climbing). After about fifteen long seconds (seemed like an hour) of not knowing if I was upside down or where I was, and having debris hitting my aircraft, we flew out of that brown hell. As the attitude indicator showed, we were in a slight bank and ok -- the ground and sky were where they should be. Except for being a bit shaken by the thrill ride and near death experience we just had, and some minor aircraft damage from the debris hitting the aircraft, we were ok. Obviously, we quit for the day and returned to base for maintenance.

As it turns out, Division headquarters wanted that howitzer and artillery shells destroyed and were unwilling to wait for a search. They apparently diverted a B-52 strike from another target set and forgot or did not think it important to tell my brigade of the change of plan. That was their story and they were sticking to it – a typical military screw-up of not communicating. I was now in my last 30 days when that happened and lucky once again -- but beginning to feel like a cat that had used up most of its nine lives.

## A THREE FOOT DROP IS BETTER THAN 500 OR 1000

It was the end of the flying day and I had logged six hours without any real problems other than the normal AK-47 rifle bursts I would hear being

fired at me from time to time. I entered the traffic pattern at 1500 feet for a straight in landing at An Khe. After making a normal approach, I brought the LOH to a hover at 3 feet. I then gently applied right pedal to turn over to the revetment to park. At that moment, the main transmission seized, all rotor blades went from turning about 400 RPM to a complete halt in about three revolutions. The LOH dropped like a rock with a bang to the ground. All I could think about was: 1) how lucky I was only at 3 feet of altitude; 2) one minute earlier the results would have been different; and 3) the altitudes and locations where I had been flying all day. A helicopter without a functioning transmission or spinning rotor blades has all the aerodynamics and flight characteristics of a highly polished rock. Needless to say, I was very, very, lucky not to be dead again that day.

The crew chief and maintenance NCO came running over to see what happened. Our maintenance sergeant just looked at the aircraft and then me and knowing how bad this really was said very dryly – "*Jeez sir, couldn't you have gotten it into the revetment first - now we have to tow it.*" and then we all just laughed. The cause? Who knows, as the transmission had recently been replaced with a new one – just one of those things you accept while flying helicopters. Once again, I was very happy to accept I had greater luck than talent.

## THE MAGNET ASS

It seems that everyone has their own karma. Some people seem to be extremely lucky while others seem to have no luck at all. Everyone has good luck or misfortune from time to time with various things; but, some folks have what appears to be lifelong streaks based on nothing they have done to influence the outcome. Consider the people who buy cars and it is always a lemon (new or used does not seem to make a difference), people who have been hit by lightning over ten times, or the guy who wins at certain games of chance - often. There are those who always seem to pull defeat from the jaws of victory or those who fall into a dung pile and come out smelling like a rose. This concept easily relates to aviation. I met guys in Vietnam who had multiple engine or tail rotor failures when for the rest of us, they were almost unheard of. I met people who never took ground fire or a hit even though every other aircraft in the flight did. And then there was WO1 John Whitmore (Aka Magnet Ass).

I had just refueled my aircraft and parked it for a lunch break when I noticed a guy sitting in a Huey. As I walked by, I said "*HI*". He looked a little downtrodden, so I stopped to talk to him. I had never met him before and his name was John Whitmore. He explained his aircraft had been hit by ground fire and he was waiting for a couple of maintenance people to show up and assess if the aircraft was still flyable back to his unit location for repair based on the damage. I remarked, "*What a bummer, how many times*?" He said 10 hits this time and went on to tell me he had a total of 256 hits in the 81 days he had been in country. He then went on to lament that he had had one Aircraft Commander die, two who were wounded, as well as five other crewmembers who were wounded while flying with him. He finished by just saying no one in the unit wanted to fly with him -- but that he understood. I just wished him good luck and moved on – all I could think of was to get as far from his bad luck as I could -- as this poor guy was the Jonah of the air and needed a new occupation.

## LUCKY CHARM

Some people are naturally superstitious while others become so due to events. I met guys who would not wear a particular set of boots when flying because they swore they brought them bad luck. Other guys had a lucky charm of some type that they took with them when flying, based upon nothing special, just a "hunch" – it could be their helmet that they wore, or a rabbit's foot, or even a picture. One American Indian I knew had a charm given to him by his tribe – he was a devout Christian; but, he held onto his charm.

The most interesting group of superstitious people was one which had a particular event happen to them that should have killed them. They would analyze in their mind what had happened and sometimes link it to something they believed gave them "luck". And so it was with Kirk Dawes. Kirk was coming to the end of his tour and I noticed he would always fly with the same outfit -- flight suit, boots, helmet and gloves – probably underwear too but I was afraid to ask. All of these items were worn out and needed replacement so I asked him one day what was up. He told me it was his "lucky" outfit. Early in his tour he was nearly killed twice but survived and upon reflection he realized he wore the same outfit on both occasions. So, clean or dirty, when he flew he only wore that outfit and he would wear it to his last day in

Country. I just laughed – he looked at me and said very seriously "*I know it sounds crazy, but this flight gear is lucky*". If that gave him the confidence to fly, I was all for it. Who am I to screw with what gives someone else inner peace. My only concern was to stand upwind from him on some days when the flight suit missed being washed after a few days of serious use.

## NO LUCK AT ALL

I was advised by my NCO in the TOC that a MEDEVAC had been dispatched to a field location to pick up a guy with heat stroke. A MEDEVAC was needed because the unit was in the jungle without an LZ and only the MEDEVAC had a jungle penetrator. A jungle penetrator was a collapsible seat at the end of a cable connected to a winch that could lift someone to the aircraft up through the trees. I was only a couple of minutes away, so I flew out to see what was going on. When I got there, the GI was on the hoist and was being lifted -- but the MEDEVAC (unarmed with its big RED CROSS) started taking fire. The MEDEVAC was a sitting duck as it could not move during the hoist operation because the guy on the lift had now been shot in the butt and needed to be secured better.

I immediately dropped down and started flying a circular pattern around the MEDEVAC to hopefully confuse and distract the NVA. I ended up drawing the ground fire but took no hits. The MEDEVAC finished the extraction, loaded the GI, and immediately flew off to the Field Hospital. The MEDEVAC crew called me over the radio to thank me, let me know the guy who was being picked up for heat stroke had been shot in his ass during the extraction, and apparently had a heart attack after being shot. He was alive and the MEDICS were working on him. Talk about a string of bad luck. I never did find out how he made out.

## THE ENGINE GOVERNOR DILEMMA

One nice thing about all Army helicopters in use in Vietnam during my tour was that they had governors on their engines to automatically maintain a desired engine speed and power output as the pilot applied or reduced collective pitch (power). Without a governor, controlling the engine requires the pilot to manually control his throttle, a task that results in torque variations, and an aircraft that was very hard to control. Governors were very reliable but they could fail in three ways – to the "high side", to the "low

side", or completely – anyone of which could ruin a pilot's day.

One morning during the Cambodia Operation, I brought my aircraft to a hover in the revetment. Without any warning, I had a *complete* governor failure causing the engine to initially speed up. Then as I gained manual control of the throttle the RPM dropped unexpectedly, and then went wild on the high side again. This caused the aircraft to make all kinds of gyrations in the revetment – like riding a bucking bronco. Rightfully so, the crew chiefs ran for cover as they expected me to crash and parts to start flying as the aircraft went spastic with the main and tail rotors swinging wildly. Once again, great training taught me to focus on flying and to get things under control so that I could land safely. I was very lucky and put my helicopter on the ground without crashing in the process. Not a great start to my day – but the rest of the day was normal – or as normal as they could be flying in Cambodia and certainly better than the way the day started.

## LUCKY DAY FOR US --- NOT FOR ALL

Pathfinders are Infantrymen who are Airborne qualified. They also attend a special school to learn a multitude of duties to include operating an LZ or heliport, proper rigging for sling load operations, TACAIR and Artillery support calls, and providing Air Traffic Control services to a landing site. They are normally dropped into an LZ to mark it properly prior to an airborne drop or with the first aircraft into any LZ. This was always true when the LZ will have follow on activity -- like building a firebase.



**Our pathfinders. Photo courtesy of Bob Echols**

They are very talented and necessary people who ensure the loads are rigged properly and that the loads and landing sequence are organized. They designate the supply drop areas and keep the flow moving to assure success. Anytime I could work with them, I would. Very simply, they were truly great and talented guys.

I was shuttling a Pathfinder friend one day between two locations when we got a report that an aircraft had been shot down and that troops were in contact with the enemy at that location. As it was less than 5 minutes away, we immediately headed that direction to see if there was anything we could do to help out. Upon arrival at the scene we saw what was left of one Huey on the ground. It rested at the end of a 100 yard burn streak in large flat area in a field of low grass. It was a really gruesome site as the aircraft was still on fire with bodies burning inside the wreckage and others lying dead in the low grass around it. One pilot was still sitting and strapped in his armored seat lying on his back ten yards in front of the wreckage where he apparently burned to death. The Infantry Company was in a firefight about 100 yards to the east of the crash site and we could see the NVA firing on them about 40 yards to their east. The Pathfinder contacted the nearest firebase for an artillery fire mission and I called the company that was engaged in the firefight.

Before we could get the artillery started, the company radio operator advised they had wounded with one in critical condition and that he might not make it -- but the Commander advised against landing. Since I had another life on board my helicopter, I asked him if he was willing to give it a try or would he prefer to hold off as advised by the ground Commander. The Pathfinder just said he was with me – lets go. I expected no less and then made a call to the ground unit, requested they pop smoke close to the worst wounded, told them we were coming in, and asked for as much covering fire as possible. We saw purple smoke and confirmed the color. Then I selected what I thought was the best route in to minimize hostile fire and we landed. No one was bringing the wounded to the aircraft - but we could see the wounded being treated by a MEDIC. Within seconds of landing, the Pathfinder made an assessment, keyed the mike and said, "*I'll get him*", as he jumped out immediately and ran thirty feet to talk to the MEDIC.



**Pathfinder Bob Echols in the field. Photo courtesy of Bob Echols**

Meanwhile I am watching our GIs firing away and the NVA firing back from about fifty yards away. It was a surreal experience -- like I was an uninvolved spectator in a sports stadium looking down on everything from a box seat. Living with the reality I had to sit there as a big stationary Plexiglas and aluminum target, all I could think of was 'hurry up' as I looked around watching the chaos. Bullets were flying everywhere and I begin wondering how soon my aircraft and I would be riddled with them. Given the adage "No good deed goes unpunished" my good intentions and what I thought was good tactical planning now had me in an obviously bad predicament and I started to get – shall we say, quite concerned. Regardless, I had a duty and was not leaving until the wounded soldier was loaded onto the aircraft. A few seconds later (which seemed like hours) the Pathfinder threw the critically wounded Grunt over his shoulder, ran back, put him on the floor in the back, and yelled to me to go -- he was staying to help. I immediately took off and even more ground fire erupted at me -- but luckily only a couple of hits in non-critical areas.

After takeoff, the Pathfinder called me on the radio and advised the Grunt was in bad shape, described his wounds, and passed on his blood type. I then called ahead to the Field Hospital to advise I was inbound with a casualty. As normal procedures go, I advised the blood type, type of wounds and any other info I had, and we that were 10 minutes out of their location.

In the past when I brought in wounded, the hospital staff were always waiting and remarkable in their performance. This day was no different. Waiting on the helipad as I landed were two doctors, two nurses, two Medics, a gurney, and medical supplies cart. As the Grunt was loaded on the gurney they were already sticking him with an IV in one arm, blood in the other,

putting on an oxygen mask, cutting off his clothes, sticking him with needles (probably pain killer) and working on the wounds as he was being wheeled quickly inside. They all disappeared behind the operating room entrance doors and, like all the other wounded I dropped off, that was the last I saw of him.

I had already called the TOC to advise maintenance I needed another LOH ready for immediate takeoff. As always, our guys did their best. I put my LOH in a revetment, closed the throttle, ran to the waiting LOH, jumped in and then returned to the crash site. On the radio enroute and as I expected, I found out that the NVA had slipped away and were no longer in a firefight with the infantry company.

Knowing the terrain, I developed a plan. Unfortunately for the bad guys, the elephant grass was very high only in patches and there were large areas where they could not hide because the grass was less than two feet tall. I took my best guess --based on time, distance, and terrain -- as to where they went and Voila', there they were in the high elephant grass at my second "best guess". I called for a fire mission and was able to drop proverbial fire and brimstone on those who shot down the aircraft. If any of them survived the artillery barrage of air burst, proximity detonation, and impact detonation we laid on them, it was a miracle. Just for good measure, I marked any possible escape routes with smoke grenades and had a couple of gunships fire their outboard stores of 2.75 rockets filled with Flechettes (2200 small steel darts weighing 20 grains each in each rocket and each gunship had 14 rockets) on the areas. Flechettes were nicknamed "Nails" because when fired they covered a large area and had been known to literally nail people to trees.

Once done, I flew back to the crash site. I found out the Huey which was shot down and burst into flames was carrying the Battalion Commander, all his key staff, one of his Company Commanders and the Artillery Battery Commander. Why he decided to put all his critical staff on one aircraft is unknown but they all died causing short term turmoil for that Battalion. Apparently, the second big mistake of the day was for the aircrew to deliberately make a low pass firing on the NVA – who, in return, massed their fire and simply riddled the aircraft with bullets and blew it out of the sky. I never witnessed a Huey doing a strafing run that went well for the crew. A UH-1D or UH-1H Huey configured for cargo and passengers was not a gunship, as the more specialized UH-1 B and C models were, or as the AH-1G Cobra so efficiently performed. The two M-60 machine guns

normally carried by a UH-1D or H with their 550 shots per minute rate of fire were a far cry from being a Cobra's 6-barreled mini-gun capable of a 4000 shots per minute rate of fire.

The Brigade Commander had arrived by this time and was finishing up his discussions and assessment. He asked me if I could fly him back and then told his crew they were released for the day. He was a giant of a guy and a past West Point football player who fit into a Huey much more comfortably; however, for this flight, he crammed himself into my cockpit. He was a great guy and we had an enjoyable 20 minute flight back just relaxing and talking about nothing of importance. I felt honored to fly and work for him. Oh yea, they threw a badly wounded NVA in the back and I dropped him off at the hospital helipad. As coldhearted as it sounds, although I did not delay, I was not in as a great a rush to get him there as fast as I would a wounded American GI.

I saw the Company Commander from this event a week later. He told me the Grunt we picked up lived. However, he was in really bad shape had already been moved to Japan for better treatment and would be in rehab for some time. I passed it on to the Pathfinder who simply smiled and said thanks for letting him know. Once again, a day of great luck for the Pathfinder and me and terribly unlucky for those in the Huey and the NVA who shot them down.

## LUCKY FOR ALL

I received a call about a unit in a fire fight and proceeded to that location. Upon arrival, they had a critically wounded Grunt who needed to be picked up immediately. Unfortunately, the only LZ was a clearing on a steep slope on the side of a hill. Any pilot will tell you landing on a slope or teetering with one skid on a hillside is no laughing matter – doing it under fire is a whole new adventure most sane people would prefer to avoid. Making things a little more challenging, the LZ was within rifle distance of the NVA on the adjacent hillside and fully exposed. A Huey could not get close or low enough to load the wounded due to its 48 foot rotor diameter (rotors turning) and 57 foot long fuselage. The only other option was my LOH, as no Huey MEDEVAC could make it in time with a jungle penetrator. So I advised the ground unit that I would be landing, told them to beware of the main rotor as it would be close to the slope, and asked for cover fire.

I made my approach via the only way in and out, put my left skid into the slope and balanced the aircraft in a more or less level attitude with about two feet of rotor clearance from the tip of my whirling blades to the side of the hill. While the Medic was loading the casualty and the aircraft was rocking from the weight shifting, I looked down on the slope to my right and there below me where four Grunts returning fire on the enemy about 100 yards away. All of a sudden, one Grunt rolled over on his back, changed clips, and then put down his M-16. Teetering above him, I wondered what the hell he was doing – as I would have appreciated it if he would continue to provide suppressive fire. Incredulously, he reached into his backpack, pulled out a Kodak Instamatic camera, and took a picture of me perched precariously above him. All I could think of was that if I got hit or if the rotor blades hit the hill from the shifting weight, my aircraft would drop on the four of them and then roll down the steep hillside killing all of us.

After he took a picture, he smiled at me, gave me a thumbs-up, put the camera back, picked up his M-16, rolled back over and resumed his return fire. The wounded was now on-board and I took off, very happy to be out of there – thinking and laughing to myself that that was so wild, no one would believe it happened.

On the way to rendezvous with the MEDEVAC which was now enroute, I could feel the sweat pouring down my neck, so I wiped it with the back of my NOMEX glove; however, when I looked at the glove afterwards, it was all red with blood. At first, I was a little concerned and thought I might be hit and wondered where. I then realized that it was atomized blood squirting from the GI and swirling through the cabin and collecting on my neck. I was afraid the Grunt would bleed out so I met the MEDEVAC at a safe location, transloaded the Grunt and we both went our separate ways. We were all very lucky that day and the Grunt supposedly made it – but my crew chief was not happy cleaning out all the blood at the end of the day and kiddingly chastised me about this happing much too often. At least he knew that his helicopter had been put to good use.

## WHOOPS

Both Vietnam and helicopters were dangerous to be around and accidents happened all the time. There were many stories of luck.

I was at a Forward Area Arming and Refueling Point (FAARP) one day

and had just finished refueling and had strapped back into my seat when I heard over the radio a Division Artillery (DIVARTY) LOH call the Pathfinder running the FAARP. The pilot was dumbfounded and told the pathfinder he had a problem but could not figure out what was going on. Apparently, every time he hovered forward the LOH would stop and then drift backward. The pilot asked if the pathfinder could see anything wrong. The Pathfinder said "*Yes sir, your tail rotor is wrapped up in the concertina and the tail rotor has stopped*". I looked over and sure enough he was not going anywhere, and was very lucky he did not break loose from his wire tether, spin out of control, and crash.

## HER LUCKY DAY

Vietnam had what was called FREE FIRE AREAS in which all friendly personnel had been relocated leaving only NVA and VC within a designated area. Standing rules were, if anyone was found in this area they could be fired on and killed without prior permission. My crew chief needed some gunnery training so I took him out to a free fire area one day to shoot at anything he wanted for practice. As we were passing an open field in the Free Fire Area, I spotted out my side of the aircraft a woman walking with an AK-47 over her shoulder. I made a quick turn and advised my crew chief to get ready to shoot her -- but as we got closer, I noticed she was carrying something. I looked closer, saw something moving on her chest and realized it was a baby in a cloth carrier. She now saw me and started to move more quickly towards the woods. My crew chief was now coming into firing position -- but I told him to hold fire and not shoot unless she shot first. Because she was in a FREE FIRE AREA and armed, she was a legitimate target and we had no qualms about shooting her; however, killing or wounding the child by firing first was not an option in my mind. She kept her AK-47 shouldered and quickly disappeared into the woods. She was very, very lucky that day, as others may or may not have been as observant of the baby. In retrospect, given the same conditions I would do the same thing again. War is brutal; but, it does not have to be purposefully inhumane.

## HIS AND MY LUCKY DAY

As a normal course of business, we would take the crew chiefs out for gunnery proficiency and practice. Normally we would go to a FREE FIRE

AREA as there were ample targets and the chance of accidentally hitting a friendly was not a factor. One day I took a new crew chief out and advised him when we entered the area. We spent about thirty minutes picking out targets and having him fire on them. He was, without question a great crew chief, but a lousy shot, if not the world's worst shot. We finally ran low on ammo without much improvement in his aim and I told him we were quitting for the day and going home. After departing the FREE FIRE AREA we crossed over the main highway where a Vietnamese farmer was herding a bunch of cows on the road. All of a sudden my crew chief lets go with a burst of M-60 and then another. I did not hear any enemy fire so I yelled "*Cease Fire*". I looked down and the herd was scattered and the farmer was lying face down in the road. I asked him what was going on. For some reason, even though we were over the main highway, he thought he was still in the FREE FIRE AREA and that he could shoot the farmer and herd.

I thought we killed the poor farmer; but, to my surprise, the farmer hopped up, looked at us and then ran for the woods like a mad-man. I felt really bad and would have landed and given the poor guy some money as compensation – but he was gone and as scared as he was may still be running! So much for my contribution to making friends, winning their hearts, and building good relationships with the local populace. Lucky for all of us the crew chief was such a bad shot. For me – I learned to be much more explicit when giving instructions to ***this*** crew chief – and never used him again as a gunner.

# PART VII

## Leadership
## or
## The Lack Thereof

The troops in Vietnam had a number of commonly held views. Two in particular were "*We are the unwilling, led by the incompetent, to do the impossible for the ungrateful*" and "*the difference between the Boy Scouts and the US Army is that the Boy Scouts have adult leadership*". For years, the U.S. Army had prepared and trained to deter and, if required, defeat the Red Threat in Europe. In spite of lessons learned in WWII regarding jungle operations and combat operations in tropical settings, little of that knowledge remained in the Army. Except for those few who went to jungle survival school in the Philippines, I do not know of any formal training any Officers or NCOs received in order to prepare them specifically for assignment to Vietnam or to employ tactics for fighting a guerilla war. Therefore, we found ourselves in Vietnam not only fighting a guerilla war, but also trying to do it using conventional war methods and relearning old jungle lessons -- the hard way.

Most of the senior leaders I met were truly well educated, talented, smart, and professional. They were intent upon doing their best and to win. The problem was no one could really explain what constituted a “win” or “victory”. I honestly believe, they tried their best; but, they had two problems. First, they were stuck in a political quagmire they would have gladly avoided, if given the opportunity. Second, their training and background gave them a rigidity that did not inspire creativity for this new war.

The company grade officers and younger Field Grade were also well educated, trained and dedicated. Like their senior officers above them, they had trouble articulating a “win” or “victory” but seemed much more flexible in their thinking and adaptable to new ideas, tactics, techniques and procedures in the field. Every Commander I met, truly cared about his men and felt every casualty personally – therefore, their own feelings about the war and any loss of men tended to affect how aggressive and effective they were to the War effort. Regardless, the ones I met all seemed to try their best to lead effectively.

The most interesting thing I noticed about leadership was that there was no common core to competence or success as a leader. Good leaders could many times be developed over time; but, there were some people who had it naturally (Enlisted and Officer). Graduation from West Point, ROTC, or OCS did not guarantee a good leader – both excellent and incompetent leadership came from all three routes to a Commission.

With regard to helicopter operations, there was a significant leadership problem. Prior to the Vietnam War, the U.S. Army helicopter fleet was small with few pilots. Army rotary wing aviation was very small and had very limited use. As the war expanded, the need for helicopters dramatically grew. The need was so great, a year-long, 240 flying-hour syllabus flight school could not fulfill the senior leadership positions fast enough. Therefore, many senior Officer pilot positions were filled in one of two ways – a 40 hour rotary wing orientation/transition course for senior Officers who already had fixed wing pilot ratings, or for non-rated senior Officer personnel, a set of wings awarded basically after they took a few classes and learned to hover a helicopter. We called this the "Box Top" wings program, named after sales promotions in the states which required a number of product box tops in exchange for a prize.

Awarding helicopter pilot wings in these two ways caused major problems. First, many senior Officers who had a fixed wing flying background never really had a true grasp of the helicopter and its capabilities or limitations. They constantly tried to apply fixed wing rules, tactics, or principles to rotary wing flight operations.

The second group was those senior Officers who were part of the "Box Top" wings program who had no flying experience and simply made bad decisions. They had no credibility among those of us who were full-time aviators by professional choice. Thankfully, for most of us, senior "rated" Officers and company grade Officers flew infrequently, spending their time on the ground in staff or administrative roles. So those of us at the receiving end of this mess handled it very easily even when a really stupid idea or order was the flavor of the day. Many pilots had the attitude "*So what are they going to do, send me to Vietnam*?" when confronted with direction from above that was ill conceived, unnecessarily dangerous, or just downright stupid. We flew the aircraft, generally ignored their instructions on how to execute the mission (we had a lot of "garbled" communications or bad radios when dealing with "leadership"), and from my perspective we always did what needed to be done and accomplished the mission – as safely and as smartly as possible. We learned very early in order to survive we had to enforce the concept – do not tell us how to fly or do the mission, just tell us what you want done and we will do it. In retrospect, this was probably why so many of us were viewed as brash renegades, borderline insubordinate, unprofessional, and/or a "necessary evil".

Another major problem the Army faced was the Commissioned/Warrant Office aviator relationship. Like the Warrant Officers, many Commissioned Officers in Vietnam were serving their first tour in country, and had little combat experience. However, due to their rank they were immediately put into unit leadership or battalion staff positions. Many were truly good and talented people who shared the burden, loved to fly, and worked well with the Warrants. Unfortunately, there were some who went to flight school simply for the TDY money (Temporary Duty pay) and extra flight pay (the amount was paid according to rank at the time) and had no interest in aviation or even flying.

When both Commissioned and Warrant were assigned to a unit in Vietnam is where the collision of cultures sometimes collided. As individuals, I think most Commissioned aviators were great guys and tried their best -- but some showed no professionalism in flying, let it be known they were in charge, would do very little flying, and used their rank to get over as much as possible. For instance, they could have the lowest flying hours yet the highest flight pay, be the least knowledgeable, not know any emergency procedures, and be the worst pilot in the unit but self-appoint themselves as Aircraft or Air Mission Commanders, or simply fly the minimum required flight hours each month to qualify for flight pay. When this situation existed, many Warrants (who did not show any tact or maturity) would let the Commissioned know how they felt, make the situation worse, and ended up receiving bad efficiency reports because they worked for them. Most Warrants did not care -- as they had no career aspirations anyway. This situation was created by a very short-sighted, if not horrible, Army management system, with both Commissioned and Warrant Officers in these infected units to blame for the problems and tensions.

With regard to non-rated senior Officers assigned to ground units and working directly with aviation units, many I met were very bright and talented but seemed out of their element in Vietnam. They simply remained focused on the conventional war and its tactics - not understanding or adapting to the jungle or helicopter warfare at all. I would go into the operations center and see enemy lines and units drawn neatly on maps by the Intelligence personnel as if they were fixed in place – when in fact they were fluid and changing. It was obvious that those who were drawing the lines and plotting the symbols had very little real knowledge of where the enemy soldiers actually were and were simply making a SWAG (Silly Wild Ass

Guess). For the most part, these were good Officers who were trying their best to apply intelligence assessments in a war they were not trained how to assess the enemy or prepared to fight.

Compounding these problems was the Army's insistence on getting all Commissioned Officers some level of "combat experience". That attribute became mandatory for promotion perhaps due to expectations of an eventual "great war" with the Soviet Union in Europe. To get the most Commissioned Officers "combat qualified", there was a constant changeover of command leadership in six month cycles. This changeover was not always bad, especially when the outgoing Officer was a poor performer. I worked with some Officers who adapted quickly, performed exceptionally well with great leadership skills, and were highly effective from the moment they took command. I also worked with Officers who were the opposite. Regardless, I do not believe this constant leadership changeover helped the war effort and led to higher casualties from inexperienced Commanders. Furthermore, for those who served under the slow learner, it created situations which were frustrating, ridiculous, and deadly.

## THE C&C LEADERSHIP NIGHTMARE FROM ABOVE

Early one morning I was told to pick up a Lieutenant Colonel Infantry Battalion Commander and fly him to one of his units. He was an exceptionally good Officer with whom I had worked on numerous occasions. Once on the ground, he conferred with the Company Commander about a hill the company had been told to assault and occupy. The hill itself was about two hundred feet high, heavily treed, and had gentle slopes leading up to the top. After looking at the intelligence and assessing the terrain, they decided to wait for a couple of tanks to give the men cover across the open terrain and to prep the hill with artillery prior to the assault. Shortly after that decision, the Assistant Division Commander (ADC) flew by in his command and control bird and asked for a SITREP (Situation Report). The Battalion Commander told him the plan and indicated that execution would be in about one hour. The General was not happy with the "delay" and I heard him state over the radio "*Intel says there are minimal NVA in the area. You do not drive a tack with a sledgehammer – get that company moving,* ***now***". The Battalion Commander tried to reason with him -- to no avail.

Ten minutes later, a short artillery prep was accomplished on the hill.

The infantry moved forward and the assault started, but the company almost immediately came under heavy fire. Now being pinned down, they called in more artillery and waited on the tanks. The hill was taken at the cost of one killed and eight wounded prior to the tanks arriving. Only two were wounded afterward. The only good part of this incident was that I was able to fly the worst of the wounded immediately back for medical care and it taught me if I wanted to live, I needed to learn how to get the job done smartly and probably ignore direction from senior Officers on the tactics to accomplish the mission.

## ANOTHER C&C LEADERSHIP NIGHTMARE

On another occasion I was working with an Infantry Company coordinating gunship and artillery support while they were trying to maneuver through dense forest while under fire. All of a sudden a command and control bird showed up and came up on the frequency. Once the C&C bird arrived, this beleaguered Company Commander all of a sudden was being barraged by calls from the C&C bird as to the situation on the ground. The General in the C&C bird then demanded each platoon pop smoke so he could get a better perspective of where they were under the triple canopy. To make matters worse, the General who obviously had never been in the jungle began giving advice from the C&C bird and directions as to how the Company Commander should maneuver his troops.

Not having caused enough chaos, the General started telling me what I needed to do and, worse, how to do it. He then went on tying up the frequency asking dumb questions which were irrelevant and wasting time. Having had enough of his nonsense, I told him his radio transmissions were coming in broken and then ignored him (we used the excuse of garbled and broken transmissions in Vietnam on many occasions to ignore stupidity). The General in the C&C bird then went back to haranguing the ground Commander with his sage advice from 3000 feet above. Finally the Company Commander said "*Sir, I am doing the best I can under really tough conditions -- if you think you can do better, please land and show me how*". A voice from the C&C bird said "*roger*" and then the C&C bird quickly departed the area.

## WRONG WAY AND THE MIDNIGHT CARIBOU

When we got a new Battalion Commander in our Brigade, I would try to meet with him and explain what my role was for him as a brigade pilot. As most senior Officers at that time were new to Vietnam and had little experience with helicopters, jungle warfare, or the air tactics being developed in Vietnam, I tried to help them. Some were great to work with and things went well, some were a bit lost but tried, and some made it clear a lowly 20 year old Warrant Officer was not worth listening to and should simply take orders when and where given.

And so it was with Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Hicks who I nicknamed "Wrong Way" because he had an uncanny ability to misread a map, navigate to the wrong location, tell me to go to the wrong place or fly the wrong direction. Worse, he would refer to me as "driver" and would blame me or the other brigade pilot he flew with for his mistakes.

As the Battalion Commander and Officer in Charge on a combat assault or operation, LTC Hicks was charged with making command decisions. In our role as Battle Captain, the Brigade LOH pilots would put the air plan in place and synchronize the operation on his behalf as he made decisions and help/advise him the best we could. Our C&C duties included confirming the LZ location and arrival time of the Hueys and gunships, prepping the LZ in advance with artillery, dropping down to mark the LZ with smoke for the first landing, and helping fix things when they went wrong – such as coordinating additional airlift, MEDEVAC, gunships, and Tactical Air (TACAIR) with the AF Forward Air Controller (FAC).

I had worked with Wrong Way on a few previous occasions and his ineptness appeared to have no limits. If there was a poster child for arrogance and incompetence, it would have his picture. On one flight he lost his map marked with all unit locations, frequencies, and planned future movements. "Lost" is probably too generous a term for what happened ... he turned and stuck his map out the open door of the helicopter where it was ripped from his hands by the wind over a known enemy location. He fired a burst of M-16 and then claimed he destroyed the map.

On another flight, he nearly killed us both when I had to drop him off on a small spot on the side of a hill. On that day we were teetering on one skid on the side of the hill with the rotor blades nearly hitting trees and rocks on the up slope of the hill. As he got out, he sat on the collective with his full weight causing the aircraft to drop – I yanked up with all my strength to keep from crashing only to have him sit down again on the collective. Grunts on

the ground were running for their lives as they saw the aircraft appear out of control going up and down with rotor blades inches from hitting the ground and trees. It would have been a great comedy sketch if it was not such a deadly situation. He finally got out and was standing on the skid, but then grabbed the collective and pulled it down - again. Nearly crashing again, I pulled up on the collective and screamed – "***Jump!***" He finally did and the loss of his weight and his release of the collective made my LOH go momentarily out of control again as it leaped into the air and flew off the hillside. He was one of three passengers I flew during my tour, who singlehandedly almost killed me.

On one particular day, we were doing a combat assault for one of his companies and his lack of judgment and stubbornness was particularly impressive – truly the gold standard of bad judgment and leadership. Our first problem was he picked the wrong spot for the LZ – approximately 4 miles from where we were supposed to be. I advised him as such but he simply told me I was wrong and that I need to work on my map reading skills (I think arrogance was his middle name). Second, he called in spotting rounds for an artillery to prep the LZ based on the right location coordinates and then declared the prep completed after a call for "*Fire for effect*" but never seeing any rounds hit.



**Waiting to load for a combat assault**

I then climbed higher to show him where the rounds actually landed (at the correct location) – he ignored this and claimed the artillery battery hit the wrong location (demonstrating once again his highly honed arrogance and lack of leadership skills) and he would commit to a landing anyway. He then

decided he would use the gunships to prep the LZ. I advised not to do so as the gunships would be expended and he would not have anything left to protect the troops if things turned bad. After ignoring me once again, he ordered me to have the gunships prep the LZ and commence the landing. At that point, I saw possible disaster for the Hueys and Grunts making the assault and had had enough. The airlift and gunships were holding and waiting for the LZ to be marked. I called them on a radio Wrong Way did not have access to, explained the situation, and I asked them to slow up so I could get additional gunships and a FAC. They gladly agreed. I stalled Wrong Way by telling him the airlift was late. I then prepared for the worst at this LZ and called our NCO in the TOC to find the callsign and frequency of a firebase within range in case I needed it and finally requested additional gunships. Once back-up gunships were within support range, I made a low pass and marked the LZ with smoke. The primary gunships expended and headed back for reload, and the landing commenced.

Chalk One and Two landed together in a cold LZ and we were now committed with 16 troops on the ground. Wrong Way was pleased and made a snide remark about how I overreacted and that is why he was a Lieutenant Colonel. A minute later, Chalk Three and Four came under heavy fire when they landed and took a number of hits but got out ok. Faced with 44 troops on the ground, no artillery support, and no gunships, I asked "*What are you going to do now*?" Wrong Way had no ideas and sat there dumbfounded. Then he really pissed me off when I said “Sir, I need direction, what do you want to do?” He told me, “*It is your fault, you better do something*”. I immediately took over and called in the backup he did not know we had. After the gunships neutralized most of the threat and I got the insertion back on track, he then came up with a new dumb idea he told me to implement that would probably get people killed. I had enough of him and told him to just sit there, say nothing, or I’d turn off his radio and intercom. I then did a call for fire and started dropping artillery on the enemy location.

The infantry company finished its insertion and a couple of wounded guys were flown back for care. Before I left the area, I gave the actual LZ grid coordinates of where they landed to the Company Commander and provided him the callsign and frequency of the artillery battery within range of his location to continue support, if needed. I dropped Wrong Way off with his last words being as he got out of the aircraft – “*You disobeyed my orders and I am going to have you brought up on charges*” – in other words a Court

Martial. I was unfazed, felt I had done the right thing and had provided the guys on the ground the support they deserved, regardless what happened next. Then I finished the day doing resupply runs.

That evening, I was having some drinks at the club with some friends when my NCO found me and told me the Brigade Commander wanted to see me. Apparently, the Colonel had already talked to Wrong Way either because Wrong Way complained or because the TOC (Tactical Operations Center) reported gunships had been scrambled. Regardless, the Colonel was really a straight shooter, a great guy to work for and simply said he wanted to know what happened on the combat assault. I explained what happened in general terms and then he asked some very pointed questions in a non-accusatory manner. I honestly explained what I did and why I did it to each of his questions, letting the chips fall where they may. He grimaced a few times when I answered honestly what I said and how I dealt with Wrong Way. He then told me simply "*OK, thanks, you can go now*". I left not knowing how much trouble I was in or how all of this would turn out -- but still feeling I had done the right thing for the Grunts - regardless.

The next morning I was really surprised when I was informed Wrong Way's battalion had a new Commander. Wrong Way took what we called "the Midnight Caribou Ride" jokingly named after the Army C-7 Caribou fixed wing aircraft which shuttled people around country. He was relieved of command, shipped to somewhere else in country, and never seen again by me or the folks with whom I flew. The new Battalion Commander turned out to be the opposite of Wrong Way and great to work and fly with.

The Colonel never brought up the matter of Wrong-Way with me again but continued to call me in from time to time to ask questions about a specific event or get feedback about how things were going in the AOR. He was a really good guy who would chew me out for something I deserved, ask about my future plans, suggest things for me to think about, and complement me on a job well done while giving me hell for screw ups. I still remember one of his comments that went: "*You are smart, resourceful, and really talented for your age. You do an excellent job flying and supporting the Brigade -- but you are capable of far more once you realize flying is not everything*". He made me think, and I appreciated his concern and interest in pointing me in the right direction – but at 20 years old, flying, supporting the mission as best I could, and having fun was the only life I wanted. Flying ***was*** everything to me. He was a really great guy I respected who urged me to finish college and

get a Commission. He ended up with three stars (a Lieutenant General) when I saw him again years later. Obviously others recognized him as a "great guy" as well.

## WAKE UP --- THIS IS NOT EUROPE

Midway through my tour we had a change of command and a new Division Commander. Every Commander at any level likes to do things his way and always thinks they have a better idea or sees things that they believe need to be "fixed". Good Commanders sit back, ask questions and then make decisions after they find out why things are being done they way they are, especially if they seem different than what they think appropriate. Not so with our new Division Commander, who I am sure if he was in the Navy instead of the Army would still be a proponent of battleships.

While flying one day, the Division Commander looked down and saw a convoy. He noticed immediately that all the vehicles had their canvass roofs installed over the drivers. That day he put out an order that all truck covers were to be removed – his reason was so that those in the convoy could spot for enemy aircraft. When it was pointed out to him that we had air superiority, that there were no enemy aircraft flying in II Corps, that the only attacks on convoys were from the sides of the road which could be easily seen, and that the blistering sun was a detriment and would fatigue the drivers, he simply said they need to "train like they will fight in Europe". Apparently he considered the Vietnam War as a training exercise that the Army was undertaking so that we would be better prepared for a war in Europe. Additionally, he either did not comprehend or simply ignored the fact that virtually all of the enlisted personnel in Nam were draftees on a two year tour, would be discharged upon return to CONUS, and would never be assigned to Europe. I do not think he ever adapted to the fact this was Vietnam, with a different scenario requiring different tactics than a European environment.

## SOMETIMES A NEW APPROACH IS NEEDED

The Army is a top-down structure that does not encourage, condone or tolerate a debating society or dissent – mission first, or at least it used to be. When something needs to be done, options are considered, a decision is made, an order is given and those subordinate to the one giving the orders are

expected to perform. Because most Officers are well educated within their career field, this works well; however, it does not always work when directing or integrating activities outside their area of expertise. An air operation directed by a non-rated guy back in Vietnam was one of those situations.

I was called into the TOC one day by our NCO who advised me there was a problem. Apparently a new Brigade S3 (Major Dunbar who was on the promotion list to LTC) and Bill Markam (our other Brigade LOH pilot) were in a heated discussion about air support. It was the monsoon season and on that day the cloud ceilings were down to about 200 feet above the ground with heavy rain. Apparently Major Dunbar wanted to get an aircraft to fly supplies to a location that was on a hilltop and obviously inaccessible to any helicopters due to the weather. I joined the conversation, saw that the discussion was fruitless and just said to the Major – "*Sir, we'll try*". Bill was furious at me for what he thought at the time was a stupid capitulation that threw him under the bus. I explained to him on the Jeep ride to the aircraft, I wanted to show him an alternative when dealing with non-aviator types. I explained that many times they do not comprehend what we are saying, can't understand the points we are trying to make and have to be approached differently. They are smart guys, but linear in their thinking. They only understand trying – not what they see as excuses, arguments or lack of support.

After arriving at the aircraft, we did a run-up and I had Bill make all the calls as if he was alone. First, Bill called the TOC and advised he was taking off, we flew to the base perimeter (and circled there) and ten minutes later Bill called to say he was returning as the weather was too bad to continue - which it was. The Major took all the calls, said he understood and thanked Bill for trying – then told Bill to try again in an hour. Bill was pissed again – complaining to me that the weather will not change and this is a waste of time. I simply asked him – "*You got a hot date or a day of snow skiing planned? You're in Nam, what else do you have to do that cannot wait for an hour*?" He just laughed and we shut down the aircraft. An hour later the weather was still the same and he repeated his radio calls – but never even brought the aircraft to a hover. This time Major Dunbar simply said "*Thanks – if the weather changes and you can go, will you let me know*?".

We went back to the TOC and talked to Major Dunbar who was now willing to talk – the Major was happy and Bill was now viewed as a supporter

who tried, instead of a whining pilot. Later, Bill shook his head in disbelief and laughed about this lesson. From that point on and after a few one-on-one discussions about helicopter capabilities and limitations we had no problems with Major Dunbar. Mission accomplished and we all worked well together.

Over time I really got to like and respect Maj Dunbar. He used to kid about being the dumb Grunt and poke fun at us aviators as I would privately joke with him about dumb Grunts. One day I was working in the TOC and he came over and said "*OK, I may be a dumb Grunt, but I am not falling for this one*". I laughed and asked what was going on. He explained one support Huey was leaving early having made up an excuse for the early departure by inventing a part and problem – mockingly saying "*They claim it is a trunion bearing with excessive play*". I looked at him and said, "*The part does exist*" and it is important. He just deflated saying, "*Really a trunion – it's a real thing?*"

He then went on to tell me how important this final load was and that is why he was concerned. So, I called the aircraft to get the real story. Later I explained to Maj Dunbar that the crew identified the problem at lunch and could have quit then, but that they planned to finish the loads early and get back in enough time for maintenance to repair it in the daylight so the aircraft would be available for flights the next day. They felt bad they ran out of time and could not transport the final load. He had a whole different understanding now but still lamented about the final load.

To his surprise, I told him our LOH had returned for the day, had volunteered to continue flying, and was already picking up the cargo load. It would take him two sorties and I would do one and we would be finished just before dark. He was truly appreciative and we were now true warriors in his eyes. After that, Maj Dunbar became our best advocate, trusted us, let us do our job and never questioned a decision we made. If anything he would simply ask why we did what we did, so he could understand better.

The only problem I ever had with Maj Dunbar was when he told me he wanted me to stop most of my flying and to spend most of my time in the TOC working with him on tactics and coordinating aviation assets. Unfortunately, we had a heated discussion after he told me I was more talented than "Just being a pilot" and that the mission should come before my personal desires. I pointed out and tried to sell him on the fact he had better educated Officers of higher rank he could use – but he did not budge. I saw the mission as flying while he saw me in a greater role than I saw for myself -

- as a valuable planner and tactician. Once again in my life I faced a dilemma – first it was being a chauffeur, now it was not flying and being stuck in a bunker as a staffer. He ended up getting really mad and then throwing me out of the bunker – then sending my NCO to find me and bring me back. We then sat down and talked to and not at each other. He was the grown-up in this situation and he taught me another lesson about leadership and management. Grudgingly, I knew the Major really was right in his thinking and I respected him – so I made a deal. I would do both and if he did not get what he needed from me as I continued to fly, I would work in the bunker – for the better good. The compromise worked – more work for me; but, I continued to fly virtually every day.

Later he was promoted to LTC and took over an Infantry Battalion. The "Dumb Grunt" as he called himself was quite the opposite and taught me quite a bit about his job as S3 and being an Officer. He was more than fair, chewed my butt from time to time (rightfully so) in an educational way, did an excellent job, and it was a pleasure to work for him. He made me think and taught me a lot. One of the many great people I got to know and respect as an Officer. I was fortunate enough to be his C&C aircraft on numerous missions and to help him as much as I could.

# PART VIII

## Rest and Recuperation

# CHAPTER 1:

## MORALE IN THE FIELD

Life for those in the field was no joy; but, as all human beings adapt over time to the known over unknown. From what I saw, everyone got used to Vietnam and pretty much adapted. The Army did its best to try to support those in the field. For example, I know we flew hot meals, soft drinks, ice, and other things as often as possible to the ground units. That way they were not always eating C-Rations and they had something other than water or hot sodas to drink. However, no system is perfect and they normally did not get milk leading to a calcium deficiency for many Grunts.

As often as they could, Chaplains would make rounds for religious services complete with camouflage vestments. They were all great guys and I liked them all – regardless of their religion they treated all the GIs as if they were their own flock.



On a regular basis, the USO ladies ("Donut Dollies" from their nickname in WWI from handing out donuts) would make the firebase circuit to provide some entertainment and morale boosting for the troops.





**USO "Donut Dollies" visiting a fire base**

The ones I met were all very nice and dedicated to the task. They had a tough job boosting morale; but, always tried their best to be upbeat and have a smile. We would generally drop them off, continue with other support, and then one of us would pick them up later in the day and fly them home.

From time to time, a civilian band was flown in for a show to troops in the field. Some were Vietnamese and some from the Philippines.



**This show was during the Cambodian operation on makeshift stages at Plei Djereng.**

For major holidays our division went one step further to do the right thing and boost morale. It was policy that every man gets a hot turkey dinner for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Normally we flew Santa and his helpers (USO ladies) to as many field locations as possible over Christmas where they gave out little treats and did their best to bring the holiday spirit. From the mess hall and aviation perspective, this food and holiday support was a lot more work, but not a person complained -- as it well worth the effort and very much appreciated.



# CHAPTER 2:

## INFORMAL R & R

Line units were not always in the bush and on patrol. The Army made it a point on a scheduled basis to fly them back or put them in a safer location for some relaxation, hot meals, medical/dental checkups, clothing reissue, and entertainment. On most occasions, units were brought back to base camps where their unit and belongings were based. They were obviously happy to have beds, showers, the PX, the USO, shows from time to time, movies on the "lawn", and other free time activities. Except to pull perimeter guard at night on a rotating basis, they had few other duties.

Some units went to remote beach locations that were very safe. There was not much to do at these locations but it was far better than the bush and being shot at on a routine basis. Hot food was flown in each day and they just relaxed, swam and pulled guard duty at night. After about 7 to 10 days, they returned again to the bush.



**Remote Beach R & R Area**

Some units were a little luckier and were flown to guarded beach locations at a town such as Qui Nhon. These were protected locations with beds, hot food, and other base amenities. Nearby and easily accessible were bars, restaurants, brothels, swimming, and other leisurely activities. Other locations were more Spartan – improvised locations out of the bush and possibly near a town. The best part of this was hot food for all meals and no patrols or work except guard duty at night.



**Our truly great maintenance NCO taking a break at the remote beach R&R site**

# CHAPTER 3:

## FORMAL R & R

Every soldier assigned to Vietnam was entitled to two formal R&R trips of seven days each out of Vietnam. The first trip was not charged as leave, the second one required leave be taken. Transportation to and from the approved sites was free for both trips. The R&R sites included Honolulu (a favorite for married folks or those with serious girlfriends) Bangkok, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Sydney. Everyone went on at least one R&R. Throughout the entire war, except for a handful of deserters, everyone came back. There are as many stories as there were travelers. I went to Sydney, Australia and had a great time. The desire to go on leave was second only to the desire to get home. R&R trips departed from and returned back to Cam Ranh Bay.

I was heading to my aircraft to start the afternoon flights when I noticed a Huey inbound at about 1000 feet above the ground. Hanging below the Huey at the end of a 100 foot sling was a net with a load inside. Something about it did not seem right, so I watched as the Huey got closer. It started flying over some troops in tents and I thought right away about the hook for the sling accidently releasing the load. The hook release was electric but had a manual over-ride and was normally reliable; but, known to fail. I just hoped the load would not drop on the tents.

The Huey came to a high hover and gently put the net on the ground, then hovered to the side and dropped the heavy sling and its steel connection ring safely. OK – no problem, time to leave. Then I noticed the net move and rise, one arm then the other came out and finally a Grunt with his weapon and pack. I walked over and asked what the heck was going on – he looked at me, smiled and said "*Sir, I'm going on R&R and I was in triple canopy and that was my only way out of the bush. It was this or miss my flight!*". I laughed and said – "*Do you have any idea how dangerous that was?*" while thinking about how he was swinging 100 feet below an aircraft flying at 1500 feet or could have been dropped enroute by accident or crushed under the aircraft if it had an emergency or a dozen other deadly things. He smiled and said laughingly – "*No Sir, don't care, either this or stay in the bush and miss going to Australia*" and then walked off with a smile. And that pretty much sums up how R&R was viewed, especially to Sydney and the "land of the

round eyes".

## A MISSION OF MERCY – Maybe

Obviously, there were many more decent Vietnamese women than those who worked in brothels; but, the language barrier and lack of access limited the GIs to only a handful of these women. GIs in larger towns had the opportunity to meet and date decent women. Some got married and lived happily after.

Most of the women GIs met worked in bars were very adept at their art. They sold many a Saigon Tea (fake alcoholic drinks for the female companion, carrying a stiff price to be paid by the GI enjoying the girl's company), as well as additional money for services other than talking. There were bars that catered to specific ethnic groups or interests-- white guys, black guys, and Hispanics, Country Western etc. I am sure for the right money there were probably gay bars and pedophilia – but I never saw either. The women knew the slang, language, music, and type of dance for each group and how best to separate the GIs from their money. If anyone had the psychology of Americans down to a science by race or interest, it was these women. Of course, money was money and they were an equal opportunity provider who did not discriminate and would gravitate to any GI they could talk out of his money.

I was really amazed at how many GIs of all ranks got taken for a ride both literally and figuratively by prostitutes. While most GIs paid their money and moved on, some fell madly in love and so is the story of CPT Weller. George Weller was about 28, single, and an average looking nice guy. As an Officer, he was technically proficient in his field, smart, level-headed and reasonable. When it came to R&R, he chose Hong Kong. Upon his return, we were having drinks at the club and he told us about his trip. He went on to say he met a girl, she was the woman of his dreams, and he was going to marry her. I asked where they met and he said a bar – but as we groaned he quickly said she was only in there that night to meet a girlfriend and did not work there. We groaned again. That was the second alarm in my head to go off. Then he told us he left all the stereo equipment he bought with her, was sending her $300 a month to meet her needs (approx $1800 in 2016 money), and that she would meet him anywhere in the world for his next leave if he sent her a ticket. Ding, ding, ding, bells are going off in all

our heads as we tried to reason with him, but no matter what we said, we could not get him to see he might not be *her* "true love".

He was a friend though and we had to do something, so I concocted a mission of mercy. I found the next guy going to Hong Kong and told him of Weller's dilemma. I showed him a picture in Weller's room, asked him to look for this woman in the bar where Weller found her and get some compromising pictures. He asked, "*How compromising*" and I just said some that could not be disputed as to her ID, actions and line of work. In typical pilot fashion, he asked how much I was willing to pay for his "work". I laughed, pointed out she is really good looking, he gets the benefits and said, "*Nothing – except for the cost of the pictures*". He laughed said it was worth a try and off he went on R&R with a smile --- and with a mission.

Two weeks later we were sitting in the club for a staged meeting. My Hong Kong shill showed up, we played dumb and asked about the trip. He told us about the great girl he met – parroting Weller's story as we asked questions but never letting on this was a set-up. Weller sat there smiling and obviously unwitting of the ax about to fall. Then my shill pulled out pictures and as we passed them to Weller I asked her name. Weller saw the pictures, heard her name, was visibly shaken, cursed at us, abruptly got up, and left.

As heartless as this scenario may sound, it was the only way we knew to save him from himself and luckily it worked. He never sent her another dime. Later he confided to me about how stupid he felt. I just told him we all understood and as friends we were happy he was off the hook. He was one of many who fell and fell hard. Many others of all ranks and ages faced a worse fate at the hands of these professionals – especially those who married one and realized the mistake they made after she joined him in the reality of CONUS after his tour.

# PART IX

## Ban Me Thout

Shortly before Thanksgiving, our Brigade was dispatched to work near a town on the Cambodian Border named Ban Me Thout. This was a relatively large city best known for hosting Teddy Roosevelt on his big game hunts circa 1900 AD. How Roosevelt knew of or found this place over 100 years before is beyond me as it was extremely hard to get to in 1970. In the center of the town was a very large hunting lodge where he had stayed. Unfortunately, I saw it burn to the ground while I was flying and before I had a chance to visit this historic location.



Typical street scene

More unfortunate was that we were not in the town; but, outside of it and living in tents with dirt floors. This was my first experience at roughing it – no hootch maids or clean laundry, dust and dirt everywhere, and cold showers; but, at least we had three hot meals a day. Worse was that every third day I could not fly as I had to work in the TOC to coordinate air support for the Brigade. However, it was a great education in planning and executing operations as I got to work with the S1, S2, S3, S4, and S5 personnel and see how they all coordinated on an operation.

Ban Me Thout was near the Cambodian Border and there was normally a lot of enemy activity due to the Ho Chi Minh Trail nearby. Along the border were a number of Special Forces camps with small airstrips for resupply. Below was one I think was named Duc Lap. It had a Montagnard village at one end of the strip and a SOF compound at the other.



I spent about a month at Ban Me Thout supporting the Brigade with most of other folks from An Khe to include our Air Force Liaison. Major Bob and his team were interesting with their AF perspective, equipment and duties. Bob called being with us in the Army his "punishment tour". He was by training an F-4 fighter pilot who had previously completed a tour in Vietnam when the AF used sorties versus months to compute tour completion dates. Apparently, Bob had only served 7 months in theater when he completed the required number of missions to go home. However, the USAF changed the rules after he returned and told him he must complete a 12 month tour. His choice was to come back for 12 months and fly an F-4 or for only 5 months and be assigned to duty with the Army. Ergo, he chose 5 months with the Army and called it his punishment tour; but, he had a great attitude, did a great job coordinating USAF support, and was fun to work with.

From time to time, I would take Bob flying primarily to do BDAs (Bomb Damage Assessments). Bottom line, we would fly low over a fresh airstrike area and look for enemy damage, count the dead, determine how effective the strike was, and recommend a re-strike if necessary. On occasion, there were survivors who did not understand they were supposed to be dead, were not happy to see us, and would shoot at us with a vengeance. You just never knew what was going to happen until you did the BDA.

One day we were hovering around an ARC LIGHT strike site and were just finishing up when Major Bob said in passing "*these things seem simple to fly compared to an F-4*". I laughed, said "*OK, wanna try?*" and he eagerly accepted my offer to prove his point. I gave him a quick instruction on hovering, had him use each control independently, and then gave him all three flight controls after he said he was ready. Five seconds later we were spinning and out of control. I took the flight control back, got the helicopter

level, stopped the spin and let him try again. Five seconds later, same story. The third time I gave him the controls, he lasted about six seconds. He then without thinking, but probably out of frustration, took his hands and feet off all the controls and yelled something. The aircraft went completely out of control; but, at least I had enough sense to be close to the controls and recovered it before we crashed.

When I pointed out he nearly killed us by letting go of all the controls, he apologized and quickly admitted flying a helicopter was not as easy as it looks. After that episode, I did not have to listen to him boast (with confidence and pride, not really arrogance) about how much more talented a pilot had to be to fly an F4 anymore. He also did not ask to hover it again either.

After the operation was complete at Ban Me Thout, we returned to An Khe only to find out our hootch with single rooms had been reassigned to Field Grade Officers and we had to move to another part of the camp. I was now in an open bay hootch with a bunch of other company grade Officers. No big deal. I asked our engineer buddies to put stud walls up for us and they sent over a couple of troops to do so – as a thanks, we bought them a steak dinner. Once the studs were up, we broke apart a bunch of rocket boxes in our spare time for the wood. The pine boards from the boxes were 4 inches wide by 5 feet long and about ¾ inch thick. When we nailed them into place, they made nice walls. We stained everything with a mixture of diesel fuel and peneprime which gave it a nice rustic look. However, the fumes lasted a few days and no one could sleep in or smoke near our hootch for that period.



**My rocket box paneled room**

Except when I deployed temporarily to another location, this room was my final home until I left country and it was not bad, once the smell went away. Like most other hootch rooms, it did not have a ceiling or door but did have one table lamp for light, a metal locker, a couple of shelves, a bed, a small table and a radio to listen to AFRN.

## POP SMOKE

While based at Ban Me Thout, I experienced the NVA attempting to do deception firsthand. Because the terrain was so rugged, it was hard to identify a unit location or to identify the wind direction for landing, so we used smoke grenades extensively. The primary colors used were RED, PURPLE, GREEN, and YELLOW. WHITE was used sparingly as it was a White Phosphorous grenade intended to burn things and very dangerous. When approaching an LZ, especially a new or questionable location, the aircrew would ask the ground unit to "*POP SMOKE*". The unit would pick a color and the aircrew would then positively identify the color and thereby their location. It was well know the NVA would sometimes be monitoring the radio frequency and possibly pop smoke to confuse the situation and lure an aircraft into the wrong location.

Sometimes the tree canopy was so thick the smoke would not make it to the top in a vertical path so that the smoke we saw on top of the canopy was not directly over the source. Instead, the smoke would float through the trees as it rose, drifting and sliding through areas where openings in the canopy existed. The result was that the smoke would come out of the jungle nowhere near the troops who popped the smoke. This made fixing their location very difficult – especially when trying to give them support when they were in a firefight.

For the most part, the NVA were tenacious, resourceful, and a tough adversary – but also did dumb things. One day I was flying and got a call for troops in contact. I immediately flew to the location to render assistance. My plan was to cut off the NVA's retreat option by bringing artillery or gunship fire down on them. So I asked the Grunt unit to pop smoke. I immediately saw the smoke in an area of low trees and confirmed yellow (we nicknamed "BANANA") to which I heard "*NEGATIVE!, NEGATIVE BANANA!, NEGATIVE!*". Making another turn I saw purple now rising through the dense jungle canopy -- so I asked for confirmation of PURPLE

(We called it GOOFY GRAPE) and where the NVA was from the purple smoke. They confirmed PURPLE and advised that the NVA were east 100 meters which was where I saw the YELLOW smoke I had the gunships and artillery obliterate the yellow smoke area as well as where the NVA could retreat from it. The dead body count was high. In this case, it was not very bright of the NVA to Pop Smoke but did appreciate them marking their location for us. I am sure that if he lived, whoever decided to throw that smoke grenade must have been hated by the survivors.

## REALLY A SAD LOSS

It was about 10 PM when one of the enlisted folks from the TOC came to my room and advised I was needed for a mission. I quickly threw on my flight suit, grabbed my gear and rushed over to the TOC. Apparently an Infantry Company had been in a firefight and one of their Officers was wounded. As the pickup location was only about a mile away, my aircraft was ready to fly, we had gunships on standby, and artillery available to light up the area, I told them "*No problem. I will go get him.*" To me this was a very simple out and back mission that would be less than five minutes flying time from start to finish. I had done this type of mission many times before at greater distances – even at night. In my mind, this one was easier than most -- and it was no big deal.

After a few more radio calls, the unit reported the wounds were not life threatening and a morning pickup would be fine. I offered once again to go. Leadership then decided after much debate to wait until the morning. So, I returned to my room and went to sleep. Unfortunately, I found out the next morning, the Lieutenant bled to death. I always felt bad about that one – as it was so unnecessary.

# PART X

## Stupid Ideas

Everyone knows that an idea is supposed to become better through synergy when a group is involved in the process. However, when that is applied to males between the age of 14 and 25 not only does the stupid idea seem to get the greatest support, but with the addition of alcohol, there are no limits to what otherwise would be viewed as a dangerous and/or moronic idea being implemented. Sort of like the last words of a fool driving a car saying "*Hold my beer and watch this!*". Given that Vietnam was filled with guys in the prime years of stupid ideas and surrounded by unlimited alcohol, drugs, lethal weapons, prostitutes, and high explosives, almost anything could happen.

In retrospect, I am amazed that we had so few injuries from really stupid actions. I would like to think I was above that --- but no way. I am amazed and sometimes cringe thinking about some of the utterly stupid ideas my friends and I had executed back then, which did not get us killed or injured. Sometimes I think if it was not for stupid ideas, we would have had none at all!

## C4 AND GOURMET C-RATIONS?

I was taking a break from flying one day with some Grunts in the field.



**Parking for a lunch break**

We were just telling stories and laughing when they invited me to share a C-Ration lunch. How in the world could I pass up such an epicurean delight? The rations normally had their own fuel pellets to warm up the food. For some reason, they ran out of the pellets or could not find them -- so

they improvised. Silly me, I thought a wood fire would do fine. Nope, they brought out a stick of C4 explosive. Being a novice in the arena of C4 and seeing myself making the next casualty list, I asked what the heck they were doing. Calmly they explained how stable it was when burned and that in small chunks it could be lit and used as a fuel – then they cut off some pieces and demonstrated as much to me. It worked!

After convincing me C4 was a viable fuel, they then proceeded to mix and match different ingredients of the twelve meals together in a C-ration box to come up with this smorgasbord of food we were all going to share. It was quite a learning experience for me, from guys who had apparently spent a lot of time experimenting with c-rats making some of the less palatable selections into a cornucopia of edible entrees. I laughed about the C4 use when one of them said "*well – if you like that watch this*" (yes I immediately thought of the – "Hold my beer and watch this" scenario). While I was wondering what would happen next, he lit a small amount of C-4 then stomped on it with his boot – immediately causing a loud bang and his foot to pop up an inch. They all laughed and I just shook my head, amazed to see that his foot was still attached to his ankle.

## ROAD TRIP

During the French Indo China War, the trees came up to the edge of the single lane dirt roads resulting in convoys being successfully attacked all the time. In 1954, just prior to the Mang Yang Pass (located midway between An Khe and Pleiku) a French convoy was trapped and a Battalion was almost annihilated.



**Mang Yang Pass**

About 800 bodies were buried on the top of the pass facing France and I could see the white gravesite markers on my many flights over the pass. From lessons learned from the French, U.S. Army Engineers bulldozed the trees back at least 100 yards on each side of virtually all roads used by American forces. The result was that attacks on convoys decreased significantly and those that did happen were normally not successful.



**Mang Yang French Military Graveyard**

One day, our maintenance sergeant told me that in two days we could pick up one LOH which was finishing a major maintenance inspection and overhaul 60 miles away in Pleiku. We normally ferried a pilot over and flew both aircraft back. However, we were only going to have two flyable LOHs and they were committed all day. Given that I was almost at my maximum flying hours allowed in a 30 day period (95 for single pilot aircraft) and was soon to be grounded for three days, I volunteered to take the daily convoy. To me it was no big deal as the road between An Khe and Pleiku was relatively safe and a convoy had not been hit in over a month. The highway was tarred to preclude road mines, swept by mine sweepers each morning before traffic started moving, and trees and brush on each side of the road had been cleared back 100 yards by bulldozers. Additionally, tanks were stationed strategically at the worst locations to provide cover. Each convoy was escorted by V100 armored vehicles as well as other armed vehicles. So, in my mind it should be a 3-4 hour sightseeing road trip and something different to do.

I showed up for the departure with all my required equipment for the trip and return home – steel pot, CAR-15 and seven clips of ammo, pistol, ceramic vest (chicken plate), flight helmet, gloves, some water, and my normal bag of M&M Peanuts to munch on as a snack. The driver of my 2 ½ ton truck offered me a front seat – I glanced at the load of C-Rations he was carrying and I opted for the back, inflated an air mattress, and rearranged the boxes for as comfortable a seating arrangement as I could. I was ready – ignorantly, if not blissfully, perched on the C-rats with a great view. I was one of only four passengers in the convoy and asked where the others were. I was told there were only four as most people *flew* between camps – that should have been my first clue to think twice about this. Oh no, not me – I was clueless, oblivious and off on one of my adventures! We joined about 50 other fuel tankers and supply trucks that day and started out on time.

The drive was quite interesting and I got to see the countryside and villages from a whole lot different and much slower perspective – about 20-25 MPH. Houses were made with straw or tin roofs held down with sandbags and walls sometimes of c-ration boxes or discarded military supplies. There were cottage industries all along the route which were safe to stop at for a break. People always came out to greet us and see what was going on. At one location, one enterprising Vie**t**namese had a tire repair station. The GI truck drivers would gladly pay him $1.00 to change a tire or fix a flat. They would even bring tires from An Khe and drop them off for repair and then pick them up on the way back the next day.



**House along highway**





**Mom and Pop grocery store on the highway**

Intermixed with the military traffic were the Vietnamese on their bicycles and in Lambrellas we called Lambros. A lambro was simply a three wheeled vehicle with a drivers cab, a motorcycle engine, and a covered passenger area behind. These vehicles were noisy, had little power, belched smoke, held about four people (but they packed in six or more people) and usually had some cargo on top. As this was a two lane road, passing them was tough. If they held us up too much the lead driver would honk and make them pull over till we passed – especially uphill.



The 2 ½ ton (called “Deuce & a Half”) was a marvelous piece of equipment with all kinds of capabilities for rough terrain to support war operations, but not built for the ride or comfort. As we were on a tarred road and I was on an air mattress, the ride was OK – with the occasional bump which would throw me off the mattress and onto other cargo. No big deal – being young and dumb it was still an adventure.

We were now one third of the way to Pleiku and had just finished a rest stop. About four miles prior to entering the Mang Yang Pass, my sightseeing outing and the convoy karma was greatly disturbed. Approximately, 10 Viet Cong were hiding in spider holes and struck the convoy as we passed them. They hit the tank which was two vehicles in front of me with an RPG anti-tank round hoping to knock it out. They then opened fire on our vehicles causing the convoy to stop. The anti-tank round did not penetrate the armor. The tank swung its turret around and fired a beehive round (an artillery shell with thousands of ball bearings) at the VC, and then turned the whole tank toward the attackers and opened up with its machine guns.

Drivers and passengers grabbed our M-16s and picked targets as best we could. Needless to say, I was unlucky enough to have my vehicle in the middle of this attack. I felt like a sitting duck as these little heathens kept coming out of their spider holes firing AK-47s and RPGs. However, unlike when I was flying, I could now return fire. This event lasted probably less than five minutes -- but seemed much longer. I went fully automatic, picked my targets, fired in bursts, emptied four clips, and then it was all over. It was like a giant game of whack-a-mole – but the moles were armed and being inhospitable at best. Being shot at in the aircraft was a common expected event in which I directed my gunner, gunship, or artillery fire on them. But here in a convoy, looking at them shooting at me and putting bullets into

them was a whole new experience. I was completely out of my element.

After the shooting stopped, we threw grenades into the spider holes to make sure there were no more surprises. When it was all over, all the Viet Cong were dead. We had two drivers with minor flesh wounds and one guy hurt when he fell getting out of a truck. The convoy Commander had the dead bodies stacked in a couple of piles, doused with fuel, burned, thrown back in their spider holes, and buried.

As we were waiting to load up again and move out, I got in a discussion with a few of the drivers and how they felt about convoy duty. They all agreed they liked driving and that ambushes were just a fact of life they accepted. As they finished, a Huey came flying by and one of them pointed at the Huey and remarked – "*this is great work compared to them, no way could I be a pilot and do that*". As I was in jungle fatigues and no pilot apparently ever took the convoy (apparently I was the only one dumb enough to do so), they did not think I was a pilot. So I just laughed and said "*Yea, you would have to be really stupid*". Bottom line – I was as comfortable flying as they were driving and none of us would have traded places. The convoy moved on and we made one more rest stop. The rest of the trip was scenic and uneventful to include the flight back. Need I say, that was my first and last road trip.



**Convoy stopped for a break on the west side of the Mang Yang Pass**

## CLOUDS, WHAT CLOUDS?

During the Vietnam War era, the U.S. Army did not train helicopter pilots to meet instrument flight standards or to be certified for instrument flight. This was primarily because most aircraft were not IFR (Instrument Flight Rule) capable and most flights in Vietnam would be conducted primarily

under visual flight rules (VFR). Instead, the Army issued a "tactical instrument" ticket which was simply a cheap solution that gave lip service to a requirement to training personnel properly. All of us dreaded flight in clouds and avoided them -- as most of us felt we would probably not survive due to a lack of proper equipment and training.

During the dry season there were few clouds so IFR flight was irrelevant. However, the monsoon season presented low clouds and dangerous flight conditions. Regardless of the weather, the ground troops required a lifeline of helicopter flights for resupply, MEDEVAC, and other aviation support to sustain operations. Rightfully so, there was always great emphasis and/or pressure from senior leadership to fly if at all possible. Virtually everyone tried their best. Once airborne in poor conditions, it was easy for a pilot to get distracted and inadvertently find himself in the clouds. If such a situation happened and if he did not break out of the clouds within seconds, catastrophe usually followed. For those firebases in the higher terrain, that were hard to get to in bad weather, we resupplied at every good weather opportunity we had. However, wars do not wait for weather, and an enemy will use it to his advantage. Vietnam was no different.

Although aircraft were tougher to attack when visibility from the ground was poor due to clouds, fog and rain, the bad weather precluded air support thereby giving the NVA a possible advantage. Therefore, it was not uncommon at all to have firebases attacked during periods of bad weather. I was called into the Brigade TOC and advised one firebase was very low on small arms ammo. Apparently, there was a short break in the weather and supplies could get in if we got there fast. So I rounded up another brigade pilot and we loaded two LOHs with small arms ammo and some grenades. We then headed off as a flight of two. We flew up valleys and finally arrived at the site only to find it was on the top of a ridgeline and in the clouds again. They said they could hear me and I was to their south west, but they couldn't see us and we couldn't see them. After a short discussion and the fact they were low on ammo, I decided to try something pretty stupid and not in any book --- for a very good reason. I brought the aircraft to a hover below the clouds, and then slowly followed the tops of the trees through the clouds up the mountainside hoping to keep sight of the trees as I flew, and that no one with an AK-47 would open up on me. My only navigation was the Grunt radio operator having his guys listen and report if I was getting closer or further away by the noise they heard from my rotor blades and engine.

The rotor wash actually made the tops of the trees easier to see as it blew them around in the foggy/cloudy mist. I very slowly and carefully ascended up the mountain watching the tree tops out my door and following the radio calls. Midway up the slope I began getting second thoughts and remembered the old aviation adage "*It is better to be on the ground wishing you were flying than being in the air wishing you were still on the ground*". This had now become one of those times as I wondered if the first or last thing I would see would be an NVA in front of me with an AK-47 or an RPG igniting before blowing me out of the sky. The next thing that happened was a loud "Bang" – I was on the hilltop and a Grunt hit my aircraft nose with a rifle butt to get my attention as I hovered up to him in the dense fog. They offloaded the ammo and then it was decision time again – IFR flight was out of the question because the chance of survival was zero. So I hovered back down the slope with only the tree tops in sight – very relieved when I cleared the clouds. My wingman listened to this whole episode and then did the same – even after I told him that it was really dangerous and stupid and for him to go home. Apparently, he believed a stupid act good enough for one fool needs to be further proven stupid by another. So he did the same dumb stunt as me.

We went back to base camp for the night, had a few drinks, and talked about what could have gone wrong, how really stupid that was, and how lucky we really were. Finally we laughed about how that one will never be in the tactics books.

We never told anyone else what we did --- as it was too stupid to believe, we probably broke too many rules to count, and worse ---- if we did not get reprimanded or grounded by the aviation community, someone non-rated would see this as a precedent and probably want us to do it again, and again, and again.

## M-79 GRENADE LAUNCHER

The M-79 grenade launcher was nicknamed the "Blooper" because of the "BLOOP" sound it made when fired. It came in two versions, a stand-alone weapon like a short shotgun and the other version was attached to the underside if an M-16 barrel. It was a very good weapon for launching a round at a distance further than a hand grenade could be thrown by hand. The round itself had a safety, as the warhead had to spin a number of times after being fired in order to arm the fuze.

One day while walking through base camp, I noticed two GIs laughing and talking while using a survival knife to bang on something they were using to cap the end of a pipe for some unknown reason. Being curious, I wandered over and to my surprise it was the bottom casing for an M-79 round they were hitting. I remarked, "*I am glad that is just a casing and not a live round*" -- to which they said "*No sir, it is a real round -- but a dud*". Yep, sure enough they were shoving what they thought was a dud round into that pipe and banging on it. I exclaimed -- are you two out of your minds and they looked at me incredulously like "huh". I called EOD (Explosives Ordnance Disposal) and they confirmed it was a live round. EOD thought it was so dangerous they cleared the area and blew it up in place damaging a hootch. Once again, these two guys were lucky.

## NO BODIES -- NO CREDIT

In Vietnam the primary means by which success was measured was by the enemy body count. Because Infantry Companies moved with so many people and created so much noise doing so, the NVA usually knew they were coming, allowing the enemy to avoid contact. Therefore, contact usually only happened when the NVA had overwhelming numbers and wanted to fight, by mistake when they were stumbled upon, when Grunts came upon a bunker complex or established supply site the NVA had to defend, or by surprise as when an assault was made to an LZ. Because of this, the body count for the Division was very low. On the other hand, the LRRPs and the Air Cavalry Troop would move more swiftly or quietly and catch the NVA in the open or in ambushes. The result was that these two organizations for two months had more recorded kills than the Division Brigades or their maneuver battalions.

The Commanding General put out a policy that basically said "no body confirmation, no credit" which challenged the LRRP and Cav as to the integrity of their numbers. Both organizations had trouble retrieving bodies as doing so was a greater risk to their lives. Three days after this new policy was put out, the Cav called the Division TOC with a body count of six. They were told "*no bodies, no count*" to which the Cav replied "*Come outside*" where they dropped six bodies on the top of the Division TOC. The Commanding General was not pleased (actually pissed) and restricted them to their compound. In a tit-for-tat exchange, the Commanding General's

mess hall had a Chemical Smoke (tear gas) grenade thrown into it two nights later. Not being able to prove who did it, the Cavalry troop was not only now restricted to their compound but had guards on duty to ensure they did not leave. They were only allowed out when escorted to the flight line, doctor, and PX. This was imposed until the guilty party came forward – needless to say, the guilty party was never identified and they were still being escorted like convicts when I left country.

The reporting restriction was eventually lifted after the Division numbers of enemy killed dropped precipitously resulting in them asking the Cav to again report their numbers without body verification. The damage was done and the Cav kept killing the enemy but tried to never report the real numbers simply out of spite.

## WHY NOT

Flying a helicopter is fun and it can land virtually anywhere -- which can lead to trouble. Pilots over the years of both fixed and rotary wing aircraft have been known to do what otherwise would be considered stupid or reckless things such as fly under bridges, chase cows in fields, etc. On most occasions, there was no problem; but, on others some people have been injured or killed. As to why people do these things, it can be best summed up by George Mallory when asked why he climbed Mount Everest in spite of the danger and eventually died trying to reach the summit. He simply said "*Because it's there*".

In Vietnam a pilot was always faced with a legitimate and challenging place to land such as pinnacles, ridgeline, teetering with one skid on cliff edges and hillsides, or hover holes. But sometimes there is an urge to do something which by any other standard is not required and just plain stupid in the mind of any rational man -- afterwards. In this light, early in my tour I was flying over the main highway between Pleiku and An Khe when I spotted a truck on the highway below me hauling an empty flat bed trailer and wondered if I could land on it. Seeing the road was straight ahead and no oncoming traffic, I simply made an approach and landed on the trailer as it drove down the highway. The driver and guard turned around startled; and, the expressions on their faces were priceless! I smiled, waved hello, and then took off. Why I did such stupid stunt I cannot answer, except "because it was there".

On another occasion of egregious stupidity early in my tour, I was scouting out a site in a FREE FIRE AREA for an infantry company that was moving into that area when we came upon what we thought was an abandoned hootch. My crew chief and I were having a good time and we told the gunships orbiting above and supporting us we wanted to see what was inside. So, as in numerous times before, after the crew chief fired a bust of the M-60 into the hootch to make sure it was empty, I bounced the skids of my LOH on the main roof beam of the hootch to collapse the roof to take a look inside. To our surprise – on the second bounce, an NVA soldier came running out, turned his AK-47 toward us and opened fire. Fortunately, my crew chief was alert and opened fire before we took any hits. He nearly sawed the guy in half. We moved away quickly as the gunships opened up with mini-guns. After they finished we took another look at the now destroyed hootch and found three guys dead inside the hootch.

And so ended my days of busting hootch roofs with a helicopter as there are many bold pilots and many old pilots but very few old and bold pilots!

## TOO CLOSE

After flying many hours in an aircraft, it starts to feel as though it is no longer a machine but an extension of one's body. Because we flew only three LOH aircraft, and sometimes primarily one on a daily basis, things like fuel endurance and performance became second nature. Unfortunately, at that point hubris can set in.

As I was calling in artillery in support of troops engaged in a fire fight one day, I noticed my fuel was getting low and then the low fuel warning light came on. In my mind, I could stay another five minutes to support the guys on the ground and then head home. I did just that and then headed back. However, it took a little longer to return than I anticipated and 22 minutes into a 20 minute fuel warning light my pucker factor was now rising -- as I had another three minutes of flight left. I landed, then taxied over to the hot refueling point with a premature sigh of relief. As I was about to set down on the pad, the engine flamed out from fuel starvation. I simply pulled pitch with the collective and settled onto the pad as if I was landing. Fortunately, I landed close enough for the fuel hose to reach the refueling port; but, more important, I learned my lesson. In spite of the fact I performed a picture perfect flame-out landing, this was really stupid on my

part and I was lucky. I revised my thinking and reigned in my overconfidence before hubris became the cause of my demise.

# PART XI

## The Really Ugly Side of Vietnam

There really is no such thing as a good war; but there are wars fought for good reasons such as stopping oppression or an evil regime from committing heinous acts against its own people or other human beings. During the Vietnam War there was a saying "*War is not good for women and children – or any other living thing*".

In all wars, combatants and non-combatants are killed, maimed and harmed in some manner, even if it is invisible -- such as emotional harm. Over time, attempts have been made to make conflict more "civilized". Today there is a diametrically opposed pair of words for a new term called "civilized war" between combatants based on the Geneva Convention. The Geneva Convention addresses many issues to include the deliberate targeting of innocent civilians, the treatment of prisoners, etc. However, not everyone is a signatory nor do some nations feel obliged to follow the Geneva Convention.

Regardless of the Geneva Convention, combatants and non-combatants always seem to suffer greatly. When it comes to guerrilla warfare and ideological wars, all bets are off - things get uncivilized, brutal, and nasty very quick.

## POLICE CHIEF AND HIS WIFE

While an Infantry Company was out of the field and in a rest location outside Phu Cat Airbase, I was asked to fly the police chief of the local town around the area for an orientation flight. I did that on about four occasions. As a thank you he invited me to his home for dinner one evening as we finished flying for the day. This was an honor and I asked about the protocol so that I would not do anything offensive.

The house was in an upscale area. They had a nice clean home with cement walls, a real roof, furnishings and a tiled floor that was very modest by American standards but very good by Vietnamese standards. Upon arrival, I met his wife who did not speak any English and was about 7 months pregnant. They were a very nice couple and both were about 25 years old. We had a wonderful dinner of rice and chicken and made small talk as he interpreted for his wife who would ask questions. I remember her as pretty, smiling, and gracious and him as a great guy.

The next day I bought some treats at the PX and the next time I saw him I asked for him to give them to his wife as a thank you. He had a broad smile

and thanked me. This is what I hoped for as a future for Vietnam – nice, competent, and educated people in charge.

Three weeks later, I had a call over the radio to pick up two personnel and rush them to the police chief's town. Upon arrival, we found the police chief's wife dead lying on the ground. She had been impaled on a pole, her unborn child cut out of her womb and the fetus impaled on a stick next to her with the umbilical cord still attaching the two. I do not know if I was more sad, horrified, or mad at this sight. The town folk had taken them down just prior to our arrival and had put them on the ground with the poles still in their bodies.

The Viet Cong (VC) were capable of anything and proved it on numerous occasions – to include the murder of women and children, kidnapping, burying political enemies and their families alive, and something this horrific and ghastly. Killing in wartime was inevitable and a fact of life, but torture, murder and butchery of anyone – especially innocent civilians is beyond atrocious. She was a lovely woman and had not deserved this kind of death – no one did, not even an enemy soldier.

We asked about the police chief. We were told he returned home prior to our arrival, saw this, went berserk, and was last seen running off into the jungle with his M-16. He was never seen again. The war for the first time was now very personal for me as this was pure butchery without any honor, ethics or morals. I was determined to kill as many as possible of these rabid VC animals as I could before heading home.

## 100 MILE STARE

An infantry company had just finished a bad firefight and was now in need of ammo. So I had my LOH loaded with the requested small arms ammo and flew to the site. The NVA had apparently fled and the ground troops told me the site was cold for landing. Good deal. I commenced my approach when I saw the smoke and looked for my ground guide. On short final the dust all swirled around with the smoke and dust obscuring anything beyond 20 feet.

As the dust settled, I looked over to my side and there was a Grunt, sitting eating a can of C-ration peaches very slowly, not bothered at all by the dust and not even blinking. He had that look on his face we called the 100 mile stare -- as he was oblivious to anything going on or where he was. He just sat

there slowly eating his peaches --- oh yea, he was perched eating, unconcerned, oblivious, and very comfortable on the top of a pile of about 15 dead NVA soldier corpses like they were a park bench.

I called the company RTO (Radio Operator) asked if he wanted me to evacuate him back to camp. He told me "*No, thanks anyway. We think he is better off around his friends right now. We'll look after him and if he does not snap out of it by morning, we'll probably send him back*". Everyone has a breaking point, but his was the worst 100 mile stare scenario I saw during my tour.

## GONE

The Ho Chi Minh Trail was a supply route which ran from North Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia to their troops fighting in the south. It was the main supply route to Communist forces in South Vietnam. Most supplies were moved by individuals and many workers on the supply route were people abducted by the NVA and used as slave labor. The NVA would simply enter villages during the night and enslave everyone – men, women, children and livestock, leaving a completely deserted village the next day. I saw a Montagnard Village where that happened on the Cambodian Border – they were there one day and gone the next morning.



**The kidnapped village**

## ORPHANS

Qui Nhon was a city on the coast which not only had had an airfield but also a major seaport built by the U.S. to receive supplies. It was cease fire

time at Christmas, so we took two aircraft and all but one of our enlisted personnel to Qui Nhon for a couple of days to relax at the R&R center they had there. We were met there by some other folks who took a few vehicles and went by road. Because it was a relatively safe location, it was an in-country R&R spot for units to rotate to and from the field. The troops had access to the beach, a basketball court, shuffleboard, a USO, bars, brothels, and other amenities. We had a good time for a couple of days just relaxing and doing whatever we each wanted to do. When we went to the beach we were reminded every war has its tragedies. Innocent people suffer in wars and Vietnam was no different. Qui Nhon had an orphanage run by the Catholic Church for those children. Most were Amer-Asian kids abandoned by their mothers who were usually prostitutes. The USO would arrange for these kids to come to the beach each week where the GIs would spend time with them, teach them to swim and relax. As sad as the situation was, the Nuns and orphanage got a lot of support from the Americans and the GI's treated the kids like gold.



## RACE RELATIONS

During the Vietnam War, the draft was still in effect and the U.S. Military represented a much greater cross section of the American public than it does now – as it had men from every socio-economic class, area of the country, educational level, etc. The late 1960s and 1970s were a time of great civil unrest in American society and this was reflected in the military. To gloss over race relations in the Army and in Vietnam during that time period and pretend there were no problems would be dishonest. Adding to the problems of the draft was that Vietnam was not a popular war and it was easy to convince many people of minority status that this was not their fight. Even

Hanoi Hanna during her propaganda broadcasts would appeal to the minority soldier by saying such things as “this is the white man’s war you are dying for” or “you and your families are being oppressed at home, why die for nothing here”, etc, etc, etc.

In spite of the rhetoric, many minority troops served proudly and bravely; however, there was a radical minority that simply sowed discontent and downright insurrection. Unfortunately, a number of people got caught up in this, some only as an excuse for not working or serving in the field. Most were enlisted but one black Warrant pilot I know faced a Court Martial, was convicted, and sent to Long Binh Jail. While there, he started a riot and tried to burn the jail down leading to another Court Martial and long term confinement at Leavenworth Federal Prison. As an Officer, he was the exception, not the rule.

Given the timeframe and events at home, I felt most black troops were not radical but simply found better solidarity and comfort being a “brother” than being associated with or hanging out with the white troops. It was not uncommon to see groups of ten, twenty or more just wandering around the base camp. Normally there was no trouble as they were just simply hanging out. The only problems came from a small core of individuals who did try to intimidate others with the size of the group they hung around with and their “in your face” attitude. The biggest problem was at night in the clubs when drinking or drugs were involved. For some reason, the minority Officers and Hispanic troops did not seem to get caught up in this and they could always be counted on to, as we say, “soldier on”, in spite of the difficulty.

There were three somewhat notable race-related events during my time in the Division - one comical and two very serious. One ritual the black troops had when they met each other was “dapping” which included a number of hand and arm gestures. When two people greeted they did this ritual and it was kind of interesting with each greeting taking 10 or more different arm and hand gestures. However, when two groups of ten came together, each individual had to dap everyone in the other group individually. Then another group of people would join and the ritual would start all over again. I watched two groups of ten and then two groups of twenty come together and it was hilarious as they all got tired out and the looks on their faces became “Oh, no. Not another one!”.

During one of these mass greetings, I caught the eye of one of the guys I knew who came over to say Hi to me. I commented on the dapping circus

and he just laughed and said "*Sir, yeah, it is really dumb -- but a brother has got to be a brother*". He, like so many others, was a great guy and a good worker – just running with the crowd during his time off and just wanted to be accepted. I understood. I asked him if he wanted me to make it look like I was giving him hell so he would not be ostracized. He just laughed and said "*Thanks, but everything was cool.*" and then went back to his group.

On another and more serious note, two black troops on drugs took the Headquarters Company Commander hostage at gunpoint in his HQ Building. Not sure what their demands were except they did not like him, threatened to kill him, and made it a racist event by calling him every derogative term they could think of for a white Officer. Anyway they were surrounded and told to surrender. Finally, a black NCO I knew convinced leadership to let him talk to them. It took some time but he got them to surrender their weapons and they were cuffed and carted off to jail. He told me later he just kept them calm, waited till they came off their high, and convinced them that jail time was better than dead. This was a gutsy move on his part; but, could be expected, as he was a really good man.

The most ludicrous event was an attempted hijacking of a Huey helicopter by three black troops. They were apparently tired of being in Vietnam and threatened to kill the pilots if they were not allowed to takeoff for Thailand. Considering there was just enough fuel or flight endurance to get out of Vietnam, they certainly would not have made it across Cambodia, much less all the way to Thailand. They were simply given an ultimatum – surrender or die. They finally surrendered, walked away in handcuffs, faced a Court Martial, and spent some time in jail.

Bottom line, the racial problems at home were simply compounded in Vietnam; but, the bad behavior of some in all races should not overshadow the honorable service of the majority of individuals in each race. Those who served honorably know it, and those who did not have to live with themselves. Like a lot of other things, Army leadership simply looked the other way regarding race relations until things got out of hand.

## HO, HO, AND MORE HOES

Relatively speaking, Americans had a lot of money to spend and there were plenty of Vietnamese women willing to take it for sex. Obviously, the majority of Vietnamese women were very nice and decent people who did

not engage in the sex industry. However, brothels, massage parlors, and prostitutes were easily available anywhere groups of Americans set up camp – especially near larger permanent U.S. Military installations. These women were more than willing, able, and ready to give while the GIs were ready, willing, and able to pay. With regard to the hookers of Vietnam, they would be available almost anywhere and would travel to the GIs if they knew where they would be for a few days.

One day I landed at a field location near a small town where a unit had been resting for a couple of days. It was lunch time and the Grunts unloading my aircraft offered me a hot meal ("hots" as we called it) that was being served – I was told to just follow the trail that was about three feet wide through dense elephant grass and underbrush. I did so and got at the back of a line of about twelve guys. As always, I started to talk to the Grunts, out of curiosity I asked "*What is being served*?". They just got a funny look and I asked "*This is the chow line, right?*". Finally one sheepishly piped up it was not the chow line but a hooker in the woods ahead and they were waiting their turn. I asked how long she had been there and they said about three hours. Incredulously, I said "*you have got to be sh**ting me*" and they assured me they were not. Being typical Grunts, they generously told me I could be next.

I turned down their offer but went to the front of this line to see what was really going on. As I turned the corner and made my way through the brush to a makeshift entertainment area someone yelled "*Officer*". As I entered this small clearing, the hooker was laying there naked on a straw mat with a pile of money in a bag next to her. A GI was pulling up his pants, grabbed his gear, and left in a hurry.

I will not even describe what I saw -- except that by any standard she was unappealing, needed a shower, and had seen far better days. She looked at me and matter of factly said "*You next, pay first*" to which I answered "*No, not interested*". She then got mad and yelled at me "*You go away, I no make money if you here*". She was obviously unharmed and there by her own free will. Once I knew this was not a rape situation or an underage girl and simply what could be viewed as an immoral (if not downright disgusting and unhealthy) transaction between consenting adults, I left as she called for her next customer.

Being about the same age or slightly older than these guys and not a paragon of virtue myself, I now found myself dealing with a moral, health,

and ethical situation I could not have ever imagined. It was now time to be an adult and an Officer -- as I was concerned about their health. I then walked back to the guys waiting in line and tried to discourage them from this by telling them what I saw and that she was not worth the wait. No luck and they now began to ignore my remarks.

Changing gears rapidly to get their attention, I tried humor and asked "*Who has the two by four or the flashlight?*". They asked *"What?"and "Why?*". I then said "*To strap across your ass to keep from falling in and a flashlight to find your way out if you do fall in!*". They just roared and thought I was pretty funny. So I had their attention and they knew I was a friend and not just harassing them.

In a final attempt to have them leave and not return, I made a bunch of comical remarks to include reminding them that sloppy seconds is bad but sloppy 35th is disgusting and joked that none of them could be that bad off. Being young GIs with more sperm than brains, they disagreed with my analysis, were unfazed, thought they could be killed any day and believed in the old adage – any port in a storm. However, this port should not have been visited for any storm. Realizing this was going to happen no matter what I said, I appealed to their logic and asked *"What if you are not killed, but captured or wounded and in a hospital. Do you really want to suffer as a POW or in a hospital with the CLAP or Syphilis?"* In typical fashion, reality hit and one looked around as he answered *"F**K no, who has an extra rubber!*". I mentioned VD was rampant and asked the guys to be smart and promise me they would use a condom. They promised they would -- then I headed for lunch. I had lunch with the Company Commander who told me they ran the hooker off twice but she kept returning. He just shook his head, thanked me for trying to look out for his guys, and basically lamented that things are what they are in Vietnam.

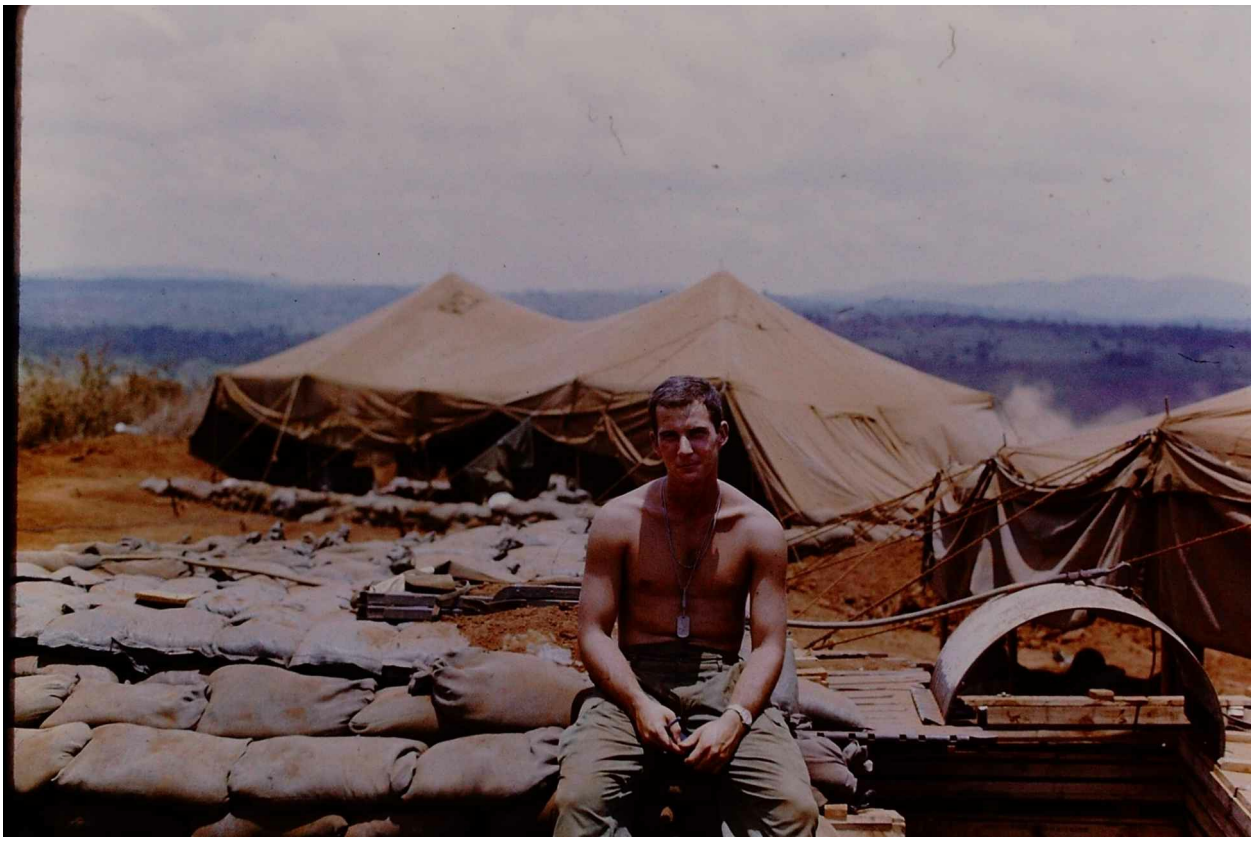
On my return from lunch 30 minutes later I passed by the same point and a whole new group of guys were in the line -- as each less than romantic encounter was apparently only about three minutes. I stopped shook my head and mentioned she was not worth the wait and said I hoped they had condoms. They laughed and each pulled out a condom (which were easily available as the Army issued them to cover the M-16 muzzle to keep out dirt and water). Ironically, they said they had them because some Officer told the guys ahead of them that *"We can F**k the hooker only if we use a rubber"*. Not quite what I said, but one small victory – glad they listened. Prostitution

was virtually everywhere and, like this story, in the most unlikely places.

Bottom line -- in Vietnam it seemed there seemed to be no limit to events that were disgusting, ugly, vile, heart wrenching, immoral, or gruesome. There are more stories, but I think this book paints enough of a picture of some of the ugliness of the Vietnam War. Fortunately, in spite of everything else, I also saw our GIs show the best of mankind as there was also a great deal of humor, caring, support, kindness, compassion, courage, and honorable conduct by most soldiers – especially to the elderly, women, and especially to children – and even to captured NVA soldiers.

# PART XII

## Cambodia



Sitting on my new sand-bag bunker home

Since the beginning of the Vietnam War, Laos and Cambodia were officially off-limits to combat operations. The reality was that the main supply route from North Vietnam was through these countries and was being bombed constantly by the USAF. Additionally, Special Operations Forces as well as Army Rangers (functioning as LRRPs) operated on the ground in both countries. We continually did operations along and across the border. One Army helicopter company out of Camp Holloway (Pleiku) specialized in cross border operations and were normally escorted by USAF helicopter gunships.

The Cambodia/Vietnam Border in the II Corps area could be identified easily as massive areas had been defoliated with Agent Orange and was covered with rows of craters from B-52 ARC LIGHT strikes. The USAF sprayed most of the Agent Orange; however, smaller areas were done by Army helicopters. I came upon a Huey crew one day at an airstrip with an open barrel of Agent Orange they were about to start pumping into their aircraft for a spray mission. At that time, no one knew any better and no one had any protective clothing, masks, or precautions for this liquid transfer or for the spray mission. I am just glad I did not hang around to watch or help.



**Spraying Agent Orange around a firebase**

Unfortunately, we flew many missions into these defoliated areas and landed in the swirling dust and Agent Orange residue, but worse, the Grunts and Special Forces lived and maneuvered in those areas on a regular basis. Years later, Agent Orange was found to be the cause of a number of cancers and nervous system disorders in those who served in Vietnam.

# HOOTCHMAID INTEL

My hootch maid was named Mai and she did a great job keeping our hootch clean, doing our laundry, and shining our boots. Best of all, she had a nice personality, she looked after us, and nothing was ever stolen or discovered missing. Like the other hootch maids, she spoke limited English and was a very decent person just trying to earn a living. She was probably in her teens but I never knew, as from their size and build they all seemed to look like middle school students to me.

Mai always seemed to be in the know and tried to look after me. If I saw her before she left at the end of the day and she told me "*You be careful tonight*" we would get a mortar attack. Likewise, if I got back late and found my steel pot in the middle of my made bed, we would get a mortar attack. For more dangerous events such as sapper attacks or major base attacks, she would just whisper to me that "*bad things happen tonight*" before she went home. She was correct 90% of the time. I would report these things to the S2 (Intelligence) but they would not listen or take any action unless I gave them the name of the source. No way – as I know how they worked and she could be dead within a month.



**Fellow LOH pilot Russ Puckett, me and two hootch maids – Mai and Kim**

One day when I was not flying, Mai came up to me and asked "*You go Cambodia with everybody?*" Even though I worked with the S3 in the Brigade TOC, I had just returned from R&R a couple of days before and had not even heard a rumor of "going to Cambodia". So I looked at her puzzled,

said “no” and asked her what she was talking about. She then told me “*Everybody go Cambodia four weeks*”. I just laughed, gave her a hug kiddingly and said – “*what, and leave you? No!*” She just pushed me back, looked at me seriously and said again, “*No -- you go, be careful. Cambodia bad place*”.

About six days later I was called into the Brigade TOC for a secret briefing. It was then that a number of us were notified we were to start packing our units for a move to a place called Plei Djereng which was less than ten miles from the Cambodian Border. Then they warned us not to let anyone know the objective was a planned invasion of Cambodia. I almost laughed out loud. So much for operational security!

## READY, SET, GO

Prior to the move, we flew key personnel out to Plei Djereng to do a site survey for the Brigade Headquarters set-up. There was already an established small Green Beret compound there and a dirt airstrip. If there was ever a hell, this was it. Red clay dust three inches deep and everything had to be brought in and built from scratch. I got to work with the S4 regarding logistics for the hundreds of anticipated aircraft sorties to be supported, and with the engineers to select areas to be cleared and prepared for aircraft bed down, refueling, and rearming.



**Plei Djereng SOF outpost with its 3 inch thick dust**

The week it took to move forward was a massive endeavor. Literally, thousands of trucks drove each day from An Khe and Pleiku. Making matters worse, the last 30 miles was on a dirt road from Pleiku to Plei

Djereng with dust from the trucks rising hundreds of feet into the air.



**Dust and trucks to/from Plei Djereng**

Grunts went in first, secured the site and established a larger perimeter encompassing the Green Beret outpost already there. .Engineers then went to work with bulldozers clearing the woods for unobstructed fields of fire, erecting concertina wire, and digging holes for bunkers. The Grunts both secured the perimeter and built perimeter bunkers. Everyone else started setting up their own locations – sandbagged bunkers first in case of the always expected night mortar attack. Our brigade aviation section with three LOHs went in the first day to be on-site for support. Three of our five enlisted personnel went by road with most of the tools, spare parts and stuff we would need at a bare-bones location. We were assigned holes to turn into bunkers for our new home and were most joyfully filling sand bags in this hot, dusty and humid hell hole when I got a call to meet with the S3. After a short meeting I returned to find all of my enlisted personnel gone. After a quick search I found them -- the Command Sergeant Major (CSM) had them doing area beautification duties. I told them to return to bunker building when the CSM tried to throw his weight around by ordering them to continue and telling me they were his people and working for him. Big mistake on his part as I explained in very clear and direct language how bunkers were more important than area beautification, that my enlisted would not be misused, and they would do what I ordered, not him. I then pointed out in no uncertain terms that if all the other Officers and I can help fill sandbags and build bunkers, he can take off his shirt and do so too. He was not happy with me and I did not care. I saw him as pompous and a prime example of the old

Army, its misplaced priorities, and the cluelessness of so many of the CSMs and older Officers I dealt with in those days.

I bumped into the Brigade Commander later that day and he mentioned that the CSM complained about me and asked "So, what happened?". In my normal matter of fact manner, I told him his CSM had misplaced priorities and that I would not accept him misusing my people or talking down to me in public. The Colonel just looked at me, shook his head and said "*Ok, I thought there was more to this story*" then asked if our aviation section was going to be ready and then went about his other business.

We finished our bunkers, set up our maintenance area, and were ready now for whatever came next. As for me, I was much more comfortable at night outside than in a bunker – so the first couple of nights I slept on an inflatable mattress under my tail boom surrounded by mosquito netting to keep out the flying insects, as well as the snakes, lizards, and other unwanted guests. Not the smartest decision by many people's standards, but I was comfortable, had my rifle by my side, did not care, got some good sleep -- but I made sure the two Grunts guarding our aircraft knew I was there.



**Trying out my new bed**



**Our Maintenance tents and work area**

During our time at Plei Djereng we really experienced life in the field. It was a self contained base with even a temporary hospital set up to be closer to the expected casualties. However, there were no hootch maids, mess hall workers, Charlie the Shit Burner or other civilian hires. We lived in bunkers, lived like Grunts, stayed dirty, and did everything ourselves – rightfully so.

One nice thing about aviation was the flexibility and opportunity it afforded. Our setup work was done and less than a week into our odyssey at Plei Djereng I was told to fly back to An Khe for something and return the following morning. As a reward, I took our maintenance NCO and two of the hardest working enlisted with me for a night back at base camp as well as all our dirty laundry. It felt great to shower and clean up as by that time we had all taken on the color of Vietnam from the sun and dirt. Needless to say, a real bed (well, an Army cot), hootch, and mess hall were all appreciated more for that one night.



**More dirt than tan**



**1st Bde HQ at Plei Djereng**

## THE MONTAGNARDS

In this region of the Central Highlands/Cambodia/Vietnam Border lived the Montagnard tribe people. Americans simply referred to these people as the "Yards". They were not Vietnamese and historically did not get along very well with the Vietnamese. They lived in huts built above the ground on poles. For many men and women their only clothing was a loin cloth and for the women maybe some beads around their necks.



**Ed Castoria, a couple of the Red Cross Ladies with Montagnards in Plei Do Lim**

They had been working with the Green Berets in the area and fighting the NVA. They particularly disliked the NVA more than the South Vietnamese because it was common for the NVA to come and abduct a whole village (men, women and children) and use them as slaves to haul supplies on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They were very friendly to us, were never a problem at the camp we set up at Plei Djereng, never stole anything, and came and went as they pleased through the camp. They were dirt poor (literally) and had no

education but were really wonderful, friendly and people.

These Yards were subsistence hunters and farmers and times were always tough. They were not starving, but they also did not have any extra fat. At each of our meal services, the Yard kids and some adults would hang around the clean-up area to take the trays from us to eat the leftover food before the trays were cleaned as it was a treat from their normal diet. They did not beg or steal, but just stood there looking for whatever we would give them. Somehow, I just was not all that hungry while stationed there and I would give most of my plate to the kids. They would smile, take it, and share it and put the trays in a pile when done. I noticed a number of other guys also felt they could eat a lot less each day. The mess sergeant would always leave any "extra" food out "accidentally" after mealtime near the trash pit before cleaning up.

## POTABLE OR NON-POTABLE?

One somewhat comical aspect of Plei Djereng related to a pond located inside our new perimeter. This pond was about 70 feet in diameter and no greater than two feet deep. When we arrived, shower facilities were scarce and forty or fifty guys at a time would bathe in the pond pouring steel pots of water over themselves to get wet or rinse off. As this pond served many uses, from time to time a single water buffalo or a whole herd would wander in drink, urinate, or flop down in it. I did not think twice about this obvious 5-star resort spa-like experience until I saw a 6 inch diameter hose coming out of it and wondering where it went.

Water supply is critical to any operation; however, the U.S. Army always planned for water to be a local procurement item. And so it was at Plei Djereng. Out of curiosity one day, I followed the hose I saw in the pond to a massive truck. This vehicle was the central part of a water purification unit that produced all of our drinking water and that was used for cooking in the mess hall. Considering the source, it did not taste bad and they assured me it was potable. By what standard I am not sure; but, by Army standards it "was", by fiat, I guess.



**Our Water Supply**

Less than a week later, the Brigade S4 set up a shower area using the excess "clean" water being produced. Shortly after that, I had the opportunity to fly two Army Medical Doctors (MDs) to Plei Djereng who visited our site on an official health and welfare visit. Naturally, I mentioned the pond as the source of our drinking water to them and my concerns. The MDs looked at the site and immediately prohibited bathing, dumping of waste water and sewage, and had a fence put up to keep animals out of the pond. For some reason after that most people thought the water tasted better. Imagine that!

## C&C IN A HUEY – BAD IDEA

The morning of the Cambodian incursion finally arrived in early May for the 4th Division. Our brigade had three hundred Hueys at our disposal plus Cobra gunships, Chinooks and Skycranes. We planned to make nine combat assaults that day. Three infantry companies were to be inserted to establish three firebases and six infantry companies were to be inserted into separate locations around the firebases to start search and destroy operations. This would require the airlifting of approximately 2800 men. Timetables were set and the ground briefing of the flight leads was completed. Two of us would take one battalion each for the first two firebase insertions, and whoever got their firebase done first would then start the third firebase insertion. As soon as all firebases were underway with their individual infantry companies inserted, we would start inserting the additional six infantry companies around them.

We took off and our LOHs and were the first helicopters to cross into

Cambodia for the invasion. Things went well for me during the first Combat Assault as it was a cold LZ (no enemy fire). I turned coordination of the airlift flow of supplies over to the Pathfinder on the ground and returned to Plei Djereng for the third Battalion Commander. This Battalion Commander showed up with unexpected personnel and equipment he wanted to carry on my aircraft. I explained the helicopter just would not take the weight involved with my crew chief/gunner on board and still be able to execute the mission successfully. I then suggested workable alternatives, but he refused to accept any of them and finally said he would use a Huey and do the C&C himself. I advised the Battalion Commander it was too dangerous with a Huey to mark the LZ as it was too big a target and less maneuverable. I finally advised him using a Huey may very well end up in disaster for him.



Once again during my tour, I was considered just a young Warrant pilot who did not know much. He simply dismissed me as irrelevant and walked away pissed. The C&C Huey and the flight of 50 Hueys loaded with Grunts took off with their 10 gunships in support. About an hour later the C&C bird came back riddled with bullet holes and spewing smoke. The 50 Hueys and gunships followed shortly after still loaded with troops and ammo -- but now needing fuel.

The Battalion Commander walked over to my aircraft, and curtly said "*Are you ready to go*". I replied, "*I assume you are willing to listen now, if so, yes*". Although he was now *really* pissed by my answer, he now realized he completely screwed up by failing to secure the first LZ and was behind schedule. As he had no other options, he swallowed his pride and just grumbled "*Yeah, let's go*". Not a bad guy – just not up to speed yet but pretending he was and following a old Army tradition that equated those of

lower rank to lower intellect, experience, and ability.

We took off ahead of the Hueys and Gunships to assess the situation. As we flew over the primary LZ it was obvious any element of surprise was gone. We discussed the problem and I provided options with pros and cons to him. The Battalion Commander wisely decided it was time to move to the alternate LZ site. Not having artillery available, I called upon our FAC. He was immediately able to give me F4 sorties to soften up the new LZ. By the time the assault aircraft and gunships showed up, the LZ was ready and ten Hueys could land at a time. I dropped down and marked the LZ and did my usual quick reconnaissance. The gunships covered the landings and all fifty Hueys got in and out. Luckily, it was a cold LZ. Twenty minutes after the first landing, a constant flow of Chinooks and Skycranes began flying in the supplies to build a firebase. It was imperative we get this built quickly, as we would need that artillery to support the three Infantry Companies due to be inserted within hours. Once again, I turned everything over to a Pathfinder and we left to begin the process of inserting the additional infantry companies into the field to begin Search and Destroy missions.



**Firebase in Cambodia**

## COMMITTED, SURROUNDED, AND LOW ON AMMO

At this point we now had three firebases under construction and it was time to start inserting Infantry Companies. I returned to Plei Djereng and picked up the first Battalion Commander and then headed to the next site for the insertion of an Infantry Company. The 25 ship lift (flight of Hueys) with

gunship escort was enroute to that location. Once again, USAF F4s pounded the LZ, I made a low pass and marked the LZ, and the insertion started. This was a smaller LZ and could only hold four Hueys at a time. The first four had no problem, not even a shot fired. As the second four landed all hell broke loose and two Hueys were shot down in the LZ – the crews were pulled out; however, one burning aircraft and one broken into pieces left us with a much smaller and more difficult location to land. The next two that tried to land encountered so much ground fire and hits that one had to abort and return to Plei Djereng to assess damage. The second Huey landed between the two destroyed Hueys, dropped off more troops and then flew out the downed aircrews and two wounded troops – it too, took hits from ground fire. The gunships continued to provide support but each pair of gunships quickly ran out of ammo. They returned to Plei Djereng to rearm and refuel as standby gunships replaced them. We tried repeatedly to land more troops but the ground fire was too intense and they had to abort each time. The ground troops advised they had more wounded and would need more ammo. At that point, I was running low on fuel and had to return to base so I passed oversight of the LZ to the Pathfinder and FAC until our return.

Enroute back to Plei Djereng I was advised there was no mini-gun ammo or rockets to rearm the gunships at Plei Djereng -- nothing, nada, not there! Later I found out, the ammunition was the last item to be sent by convoy and simply never got shipped forward. We now had a crisis – approximately 40 troops surrounded by hostiles without artillery or gunship support, fighting for their lives, men wounded, running low on ammo, and no additional aircraft could land in the crowded LZ with so much enemy fire. It would be about two hours before the firebase supporting them could be operational and provide artillery fire. We discussed many options over the radio as none of us were going to let them be overrun and die. For now, we thanked God we had the FAC and USAF support.

We needed to get ammo to the troops but could not drop it on them as each crate weighed too much and we might injure or kill them. Furthermore, there were now some badly wounded and someone needed to land to get them out. I came up with a simple plan that might work and discussed it with the Battalion Commander -- who would now have to fly in a Huey again. He concurred with my recommendation, so I had my guys load my LOH to the maximum I could lift (to include the front seat) with small arms ammo.

While my aircraft was being loaded I ran over to the Huey flight lead and

told him the plan. I explained I needed a Huey for the Battalion Commander and his C&C oversight. The rest of the flight of ten would follow me and make all the normal radio calls for a landing to the east (as the NVA were probably listening) and then fly towards the LZ as if landing in flights of two to divert their attention. While they were on final and before they aborted, I would drop in from the west with ammo and pick up the wounded. If the LZ turned cold, they would land the ten Hueys, reinforce the ground Commander, and pick up the wounded. I would then fly in the needed ammo after all the insertions were completed. Ok, we had a plan. No one liked the odds for success – but no one had a better alternative and we agreed this was better than doing nothing – now it was time for execution.

We got to the LZ and executed as planned. The Hueys made their approach but took heavy fire on final and aborted the insertion. The NVA were distracted long enough by the incoming Hueys for me to get into the LZ with my quieter and smaller LOH as they aborted their landing. As I sat in the LZ while the Grunts unloaded the ammo (a lifetime that was probably less than two minutes) and loaded on the critically wounded, the NVA realized I was there and opened fire on me and the Grunts unloading my aircraft – I watched AK-47 rounds hit the ground in front of my aircraft; but, like in other similar situation I had to sit there, wait and simply hope for the best. The NVA had apparently been taught to lead the aircraft (shoot in front) and we would fly into the rounds! I wondered when they would aim correctly - but did not have to wait long -- as two rounds came through my window passed by my face and exited out my side of the aircraft. Because I had my visor down (as I did on all field landings to protect my eyes from possible shrapnel), I only had a couple of very minor Plexiglas cuts on my face – so all was well. The Grunts returned fire to cover me and seconds later I was loaded with the most seriously wounded. Not wanting to fly into their bullets, I pulled pitch, did a 180 degree turn, nosed it over and started a spiral climb out -- as the tactic of low level over the trees inbound would not work outbound. I took lots of ground fire; but, no more hits as either the spiraling confused them or they were bad shots, or both.

I flew the three wounded guys back for medical treatment to our Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (MASH) at Plei Djereng and as always called ahead. The helipad was full of medical personnel who never ever disappointed me in their performance. As they finished, one nurse noticed the blood on my face and gave me some antiseptic on a rag to put on the cuts – which looked bad

but no worse than some cuts I have had from shaving. I then flew to the maintenance area, had some 100 mile tape (Duct Tape) put on my bullet ridden windshield to hold it in place, reloaded my aircraft with ammo and returned again to the LZ to drop off my load.

I knew the same tactic would not work twice, so I asked the FAC to napalm one side of the LZ for an entry and napalm the other side as an exit point as soon as I cleared the trees inbound. They did as requested, I entered at low level, landed, dropped off the ammo, onloaded wounded, and then took off at low level over the opposite flaming area the USAF most graciously cleared for me. A bit unorthodox and if things went wrong, the wounded and I could have ended up in the flaming Armageddon below, but it worked.

No more troops landed that day in that LZ. The USAF continued to provide cover and by mid afternoon the first LZ of the day was now operational as a fire base and able to provide artillery support to the Grunts stuck in the LZ. Likewise, the gunship ammo problem was fixed by late afternoon after Chinooks were dispatched to fly needed gunship ammunition forward. The next day a convoy brought in all of the additional needed ammo. The troops in the LZ made it through the night with gunship and artillery support and the rest of their company was successfully inserted at dawn the next day. Cambodia – like my hootch maid had said was a "*bad place*".

The Battalion Commander and I did one more infantry company insertion that day. As luck would have it, there were no problems, it was a cold LZ, and not a hostile shot was fired during or after the landing. The entire company got on the ground without incident and set up for the night. As daylight was now running out, we discussed the options. The LTC was no longer worried about how he would be viewed, did the right thing, and delayed the final LZ assault until the next morning. Fortunately, the first day was the worst. As firebases were built and more troops inserted we got the upper hand. The other LOH in my unit doing the C&C work reported many similar events with both easy and horrible LZs. By the time the day ended and in spite of a really rocky start, we had three firebases up and running as well as seven of the nine infantry companies inserted. It was a good day overall – could have been better but it also could have been a whole lot worse.



**Base in Cambodia - Started as a Combat Assault in the forest. The bulldozers cleared a road 10 miles from Vietnam to it and then cleared all the trees around the original LZ for the 1st Bde to use for the Cambodian Operation**

## NVA BUNKERS

The NVA had it best hope of survival by going underground. They were like moles and dug intricate and extensive underground complexes everywhere that were very hard to detect and defeat. Normally the only way we found them was for ground troops to stumble upon them by accident. One day I was told to take a Battalion Commander and a couple of engineers to a newly discovered bunker complex so they could determine what action would be needed to neutralize it. After landing I had the opportunity to walk around and explore the site – obviously above ground and with my CAR-15 locked and loaded. I knew the Company Commander and he (in retrospect) very wisely assigned two guys to go with and look after me. From what I saw, it was quite a complex – and still dangerous as the NVA were still under us and could pop out at any time from a concealed entrance. Typically, in a situation such as this, GI's called "Tunnel Rats" would try to find out what was below by actually entering and following the tunnels, but these tunnels were too small for most Americans and too dangerous (booby traps, getting stuck, no light, etc) for the "Tunnel Rats" to go too far into the complex. Numerous techniques were used to neutralize typical bunker complexes, but none worked well. Engineers would blow up entrances, bore holes in the ground to the tunnel and then fill them with slurry explosive and make massive explosions hoping to collapse the complex, or pump riot agent gas into the complexes to make the NVA come out, with the hope of making the

tunnels unlivable. It was tough and dangerous work with little chance of success. I was glad to get back in my aircraft. Some jobs are best when left to others better trained and qualified -- and this was one of them.

For the rest of the time in Cambodia, we found what we called a "Target Rich" environment. It seemed no matter where we went, we found and destroyed ammunition dumps, food storage sites, fuel dumps, bunkers, storehouses, and operations centers. There were lots of less than friendly (in fact, downright inhospitable) people who objected to us being there and tried their best to make us leave. One interesting event was when a number of six foot tall Caucasian men were killed in an NVA armored vehicle. Their personal effects had letters written in Cyrillic. Also, a number of Asians were killed wearing Chinese Communist uniforms. We used to joke that they were obviously Russian and Chinese tourists – certainly not advisors to the NVA!



**Captured Flags in Cambodia**

The most memorable part of the Cambodian Campaign was the massive helicopter operation. To see the sky on that first day literally filled with helicopters. Scores of Chinooks and Cranes were flying at the highest elevation. Below them gunships in eight and ten ship formations were ingressing and egressing at separate altitudes and below the gunships were the 20 to 50 ship formations of Hueys. We had to have had a least 1000 aircraft flying in our area of operation including the 300 we had dedicated to our brigade. A tremendous effort and truly impressive air power with no mid-air collisions. Additionally, there were no accidents at the rearming and refueling points in spite of all those aircraft coming, going, and hovering

around.

Key to all of this success for our LOH support was our maintenance personnel. Without question they went over and above that expected during the whole time of the Cambodia Campaign – filling sandbags, building bunkers, loading ammo and supplies in our aircraft, flying as gunners, and doing all their maintenance tasks. I could not have been more proud of them and the great work they did.



**Jim Grant (Center), me, our three crew chiefs and maintenance NCO at Plei Djereng - all great guys**

## BLACK PUFFS – WHAT'S THAT?

It seemed that something new and different happened all the time but a lot of it was unwanted, unexpected, or deadly. The week after the Cambodian incursion started, I experienced one of those memorable if not special moments. I was flying from Plei Djereng to Pleiku -- minding my own business and happily flying over what had been a safe area at about 3000 feet for some cool air. All of a sudden these black things start popping up above and in front of me. I was initially intrigued, then I realized what it was as one burst out my left side a short distance away --- FLAK. I felt like I was in a WWII movie rerun!

At that point, I did not have a lot of options as it appeared they had ranged me and the next rounds would probably be a hit. To confuse the gunners on the ground and to buy time, I immediately closed the throttle, entered autorotation, monitored my RPM to preclude a rotor over speed, turned sideways, and made it appear I was hit and coming down. They stopped firing. I then applied pitch, rolled on the throttle, righted the aircraft,

turned and continued at a lower altitude to Pleiku.  That was my first and last time for such an experience and it was -- not at all pleasant.  However, I took no hits and life was good again.

# PART XIII

## Notes and Oddities of Vietnam

# HEALTH CARE

Health care has always been a serious issue for the military – as disease in most past wars caused more deaths than battle. The medical care in Vietnam was multi-level. We had the standard health care provided by doctors in clinics, and dentists. Additionally, we had a Field Hospital on base with all kinds of specialties for emergency care. Regionally there were hospitals where patients were divided into two categories. One category was for stabilization and additional care before being evacuated to Japan or CONUS. The second category was those individuals who could be treated and recover quickly to be returned to their unit.

There are simply not enough good words of praise and thanks that I can offer to the Medics, Nurses and Doctors in Vietnam. The compassion, competence, and true dedication of the Doctors, Nurses, and Medics cannot be overstated – especially those who worked in the field with the units, on the firebases, or in the emergency and recovery rooms. They saw and dealt with the carnage, pain and suffering every day. They were true professionals who will always have my thanks and respect. We all knew if we were able to get the wounded to the hospital helipad, they were in the best hands possible with the greatest chance of survival regardless of how we delivered them -- burnt, broken, in pieces, missing parts, or on death's doorstep. To me, they are unsung heroes who dealt with the true carnage and made the difference between life and death for so many.

What many people do not know was that there were not only Medics with units in the field; but, there was an MD and staff assigned to each Infantry Battalion in Vietnam. They had a clinic on virtually every firebase to provide immediate care and decide if someone needed to be sent back to the base camp or hospital. One MD I bumped into on a firebase told me everyone in Medical School was deferred until finishing and then immediately drafted to meet the needs of the military.

For the aviation community, we had our own clinic with an MD specially trained and designated as a flight surgeon – as we had to meet certain medical standards and were restricted from taking many medications while flying. Most of us were very healthy so the flight surgeon was normally not very busy with typical problems found in civilian society. All Flight Surgeons felt it was their duty to keep pilots flying while most pilots felt the Flight Surgeon had a duty to ground you – possibly forever. Therefore, most people only

saw the Flight Surgeon when they arrived in country or at a new unit assignment to turn in their medical records and get cleared to fly, when they got shot down to clear them to fly again, and the month before their birthday for the required annual flight physical. A pilot could look like hell, be limping, or sick -- but if asked he had any problems by the Flight Surgeon, most typically said "*No*".

At the completion of my annual flight physical which was also the month before my Date Estimated Return from Overseas (DEROS), a pilot was brought in that had just been rescued after he was shot down. He had shallow cuts on his face and was a bit banged up but other than that nothing that looked physically serious. I knew him and he was a bit dazed and in semi-shock, so I stayed around for awhile to talk to him rather than leave him sitting there by himself thinking about what had just happened. From what he told me, he was shot down in an LZ during a Combat Assault and rescued almost immediately. He matter-of-factly described what happened and how lucky he felt not being in the hospital with the rest of his crew. Like most guys, after a couple of days passed, as well as a few drinks in the club, he appeared OK and was flying again.

In Vietnam there were so many different things that could affect your health and well-being that they are hard to count. Obviously, there were sexually transmitted diseases which could be avoided; but, there were also known hazards to the area which were a threat, such as Malaria, poisonous snakes, spiders, and rats. The Army had us all take Malaria pills (a big orange one and a little white one) as prevention and large salt pills to combat dehydration. While the intent was good – it appears the Malaria pills may have caused health problems in some people years later and salt pills were found out later to also be detrimental to your health and not required in tropical climates.

Adding to good intentions gone horribly wrong, the military sprayed DDT to kill the mosquitoes and Agent Orange to defoliate the forests so that we could find the enemy easier. Not only did we probably breathe in this stuff when we stirred up the dust in an LZ, but I am sure it contaminated the drinking water in many places – especially when we lived and worked on the Cambodian Border. Quite truthfully, it was not a matter of interest in those days as awareness of chemicals and their affects was not a subject of knowledge, an issue, or a concern. It is now known Agent Orange had Dioxins and is a cause of many types of cancer in Vietnam Vets.

One Captain I met had an interesting health story. Apparently he would break out in a rash and sores in different parts of his body. After a number of visits to the clinic he was diagnosed with an allergy – to the dirt in Vietnam. He was sent home as the hospital could not get it under control. We would laugh about the fact we were allergic to shrapnel and bullets and it did us no good!

On another medical note, there was a Lieutenant in our Headquarters who apparently just did not want to be in Vietnam more than anyone else. So he came up with what he thought was the ideal excuse. He went to the doctor and complained that he was depressed from a lack of sex, that morally the only one he could have sex with was his wife, and, therefore, he needed to be sent home. He even had crying on command and looking severely depressed down to a fine art. As convincing and rehearsed as he was – it did not work and he was an embarrassment as an Officer and the laughingstock of the headquarters.

## DENTAL CARE

We had Dentists at the base camp but I never got around to making an appointment – yes, they and others had banker's hours and weekends off so their schedules were "tight". One day I was on a firebase taking a break from flying and was just talking to some of the guys. Out of the blue, one of the Grunts suggested if I had time I could see the dentist. I laughed as we were in the middle of nowhere. He walked me over to a bunker and sure enough there was a dental office complete with a chair.



The dentist explained he moved from firebase to firebase and had time to check and clean my teeth. So here I was, in a sandbagged bunker, in

Nowheresville getting my teeth worked on. He did a great job cleaning my teeth. He said I needed to have my wisdom teeth out – he could do the top easily but the bottoms were impacted and he could not take them out there. So looking at this as a target of opportunity and it being the end of the day, I agreed. Less than an hour later I was done – two teeth out. Remembering my aero-medical training, I waited until the Novocain wore off then flew 25 minutes directly back to base camp at a lower altitude so pressure would not bother the extraction points. When I landed my jaw was sore – so I took some pain pills he gave me, had dinner, and went to bed. Craziest medical experience I ever had. To me, it was no big deal and all was well.

I went to the Dental Clinic five days later because the Dentist asked me to have my gums checked to make sure they were healing ok. The Dental Clinic was booked, so I went to the Flight Surgeon. The Flight Surgeon was somewhat furious at the Dentist and me – as having Novocain, two wisdom teeth out in a bunker, and then flying was a relatively big aero-medical problem in his eyes. He ranted for awhile and then finally in frustration said something like – "*What is it with you pilots, you are not stupid; but, are you all crazy? I am trying to keep you alive and you are trying to kill yourselves*".

He was much happier when I told him of the precautions I took -- I did not take any pills when I was flying or after the first night. Apparently, what the Dentist and I saw was a great target of opportunity for me to get this done differed greatly from our Flight Surgeon's much more educated and conservative opinion on this matter – and he was absolutely right and I did appreciate his concern. Looking back, yes, I would do it again, exactly the same way --- but still, I did appreciate his concern.

## BENEFITS

Not every aspect of Vietnam service was terrible. There were a number of benefits the military provided to those serving in Vietnam. First and foremost was that we were tax exempt in a war zone on all pay and allowances. Commissioned Officers were taxed on everything over $500.00 in pay.

The second big benefit was the Soldiers Savings Account. All U.S. Military personnel in Vietnam (maybe the War Zone) were eligible to put away up to the amount of their full pay each month amount into a savings

account  This account that paid 10% annual interest and could be claimed anytime within 90 days after leaving Vietnam.  Except for personal spending at the PX, bar, club, or brothel, we had no other expenses and I was able to leave country with about $6,000.00 savings still earning 10%.

Next, we all got Combat Pay of $65.00 a month (Based on WWII rates - which meant about $2.17 per day to let people shoot at you), and those who were married got a small stipend for family separation allowance (also based on WWII rates – about $30.00 a month), as well as housing allowance for their family at home (amount based on rank).

In the age before e-mail, one very convenient perk was mail.  All mail from Vietnam was free and did not need a stamp.  We just wrote "FREE" on the envelope or post-card location for the stamp and sent it out via the Army Post Office.

One real "Perk" the Army offered was a gem (Ha!) to behold.  If you volunteered to extend your 12 month tour for another 6 months, you could have your choice of unit assignments (within limits inside Vietnam) and take a non-chargeable leave for thirty days at the end of your tour to anywhere the USAF flew in the world -- for free.  A number of admin, finance, supply and other folks extended.  I do not know of any Grunts who did and only a couple of pilots (who were single, opted for a safer unit/job, wanted to save more money for when they  got out of the Army, or just liked being there).

The last and greatest perk was leave (or paid vacation time in civilian terms).  Everyone was authorized two non-consecutive 7 day leaves, or R&Rs, while assigned to Vietnam.  One R&R was of non-chargeable leave for 7 days plus free air transportation to one of five locations and the other was a 7 day chargeable (meaning it counted against your annual leave allocation of 30 days per year) leave authorized to a choice of the same five locations with free air transportation.  Those who extended their tours for a year got the same benefit again during the extension.

The only other real benefit was free ammunition and explosives, available in most popular calibers, complete with tracer rounds for everything up to .50 caliber. Additionally, some amazing firearms were available, including sub-machine guns from WWII (like the Thompson .45 caliber), M2 .30 caliber fully automatic Carbines, M3 .45 caliber Grease Guns, and several others from international weapons manufacturers.  It was a shooters paradise.  I had not only my CAR-15 and a .38 but also an UZI and an AK-47 to shoot.  Of course, the ultimate crowd pleaser was high explosive C4 – which always

provided entertainment and fun blowing up things.

## LIZARDS

Vietnam seemed to have a lot of oversized and over abundant things that crawled and slithered around. In particular, it had a number of lizard species; but, two were the most interesting. One was the chameleon which obviously changed color but was a welcome guest, as it ate a lot of bugs and flying insects. They would come climbing out of anywhere (boots, clothing, bed, etc) but were harmless to us and deadly to bugs. You just had to make sure you shook out your clothes and boots before putting them on.



The second type of lizard took all of us by surprise. I was standing outside my hootch one day and all of a sudden I heard someone call out "*F**K YOU*". Wondering who and why, I looked around not seeing anyone. Then I heard it again. No one was in sight. A minute later a fellow pilot came out of the hootch and thinking it was him, I laughingly asked him why he was cursing at me. He was surprised but almost immediately we heard it again. He then laughed, pointed out a lizard, and told me that was the "*F**K YOU*" lizard and the sound it made. I thought he was kidding me so I got up close to it and sure enough "*F**K YOU*" came out of it. Vietnam – heat, humidity, smell and now the only place in the world you can be insulted by reptiles!

## MEDALS

Awards and decorations have always been an issue in the military – Vietnam was no different. Most people I know who received awards were appreciative; but, simply felt that the award was for being at the right place at the wrong time and just doing their best in a bad situation. I do not know anyone who said "*You know, today I think I will go earn an award for*

*valor*". In spite of the fact there were a lot of big egos in the aviation community, they were and are still not braggarts about awards. Virtually every guy I know who was awarded a medal for valor normally does not talk about them. They are appreciative but actually very humble about their awards -- as most are just happy to be alive.

Awards were normally generated at the unit level and sent up the chain of command for approval at higher headquarters. Therefore, award packages were dependent on the unit's time to prepare the paperwork, the submitter's ability to write clearly and convincingly, and an interest in submitting the paperwork. One unit had an English major as the Awards and Decorations Officer who was able to legitimately document the details and get many deserving awards approved. However, many people deserved and never got awards simply because the package was poorly written, their peers deemed what they did as the norm and what was expected, or in some cases I know of ground commanders could not identify the faceless pilot by name or unit they wanted to recognize for valor. Worse, some people got impact awards on the spot for heroism only to find the paperwork was never submitted – so there is no record of an award, sometimes only a picture of it being pinned on them.

In other cases, people simply got awards based on their rank or duties without doing anything above or beyond. For instance, one abuse was the policy that a "Silver Star" was awarded to every Battalion Commander who completed his tour successfully. Another example was a Division Command and Control aircraft which flew over an ongoing battle and the crew and passengers were each awarded medals for valor. Ironically, those of us below them in gunships and an LOH slugged it out with the NVA and simply saw it as a typical days work without any award, and that is what we received ... nothing. Another example would be a typical firefight for a Grunt would be viewed as expected; however, some clerk who came under fire on the base perimeter while doing guard duty in a bunker would be viewed as heroic. Very simply – it was "different standards for different environments".

My observation was that the merit required for an award for valor was on most occasions inversely proportional to the rank or in other words, the higher the rank the more likely an award would be made for doing "nothing" worthy of the award. Except for SOF personnel and troops actually in the field, I am quite skeptical of anyone in the Army in Vietnam who received an award for valor who was above the enlisted rank of E-6 or Officer above the rank of Captain. I saw too many awards for valor given to higher ranking

career senior NCOs and Officers who did not deserve them and a number of awards for lower ranking Officer or enlisted turned down due to the poor writing skills of the submitter. If an Army enlisted man E-6 or below or an Officer with the rank of Captain and below got an award for valor, you can bet he most likely earned it.

Awards were also determined by service – it has been noted by historians that one service with the best living conditions but with less than 5% of the effective fighting force in Vietnam garnished 90% of the medals awarded for valor. It is what it is – probably in every war.

## GROUND FIRE SOUNDS

Saying helicopters are noisy is an understatement; but, it is amazing what external sounds an aircrew can still hear – in flight and while wearing a helmet. So it is quite surprising that while flying below about 1000 feet AGL, not only do we get to see the whites of our enemy's eyes, but it is easy to identify the weapon being fired at us by its sound. For instance, an AK-47 is distinctly different from an M-16 and a .51 caliber (12.7mm) anti-aircraft gun can easily be heard and identified. It was a common occurrence to be flying and hear a burst of fire from an AK-47 or a .51 Caliber anti-aircraft gun as it fired at us. It happened so many times on takeoffs, landings or flying enroute that I simply lost count, if I even kept a count. Additionally, artillery rounds, mortars, and grenades all sounded different and were easily discernible from the air when flying at lower altitudes. Enemy ground fire while flying enroute at a higher altitude was normally a burst from an AK-47 which could normally be ignored due to the effective range and accuracy of the weapon. However, the pucker factor would rise significantly and you took whatever evasive action you could when taking .51 anti-aircraft fire (or larger, such as the airburst capable AA mentioned earlier) – as the rounds would just keep coming, it had a much greater range to hit you than a rifle round, and some shells were both armor piercing and incendiary.

On the good side, if it is the sound of a friendly weapon you can relax and for the most part ignore it; with the exception of artillery and TACAIR. When observing artillery hitting the ground it is best if you know the gun-tube line (the ARC from the gun to the point of impact) so that you are not flying in the area the rounds are falling through from above. Likewise, it is best to keep TACAIR aircraft in sight so a bomb does not drop on you from a

fast mover. Just simple lessons you learn to stay alive, or not.

## TRIPLE CANOPY

One great operating limitation of Vietnam was the jungle. In many places it was dense, the trees were high and consisted of a triple canopy forest. The photo to the left shows a side view of the triple canopy and the arrow points to a small black spot which is actually a road opening that was wide and high enough for a dump truck to dive through with ease. It was tough to see through the canopies to the ground and in many locations that lack of visibility enabled undetected movement of enemy troops. For air resupply operations in the forest, a sling had to be used or a hole had to be blown in the forest for a helicopter to hover down low enough to off load the supplies. Support to troops in a firefight was very difficult as smoke grenades would take too long to rise through the thick canopies to be seen or the smoke would travel through a lower canopy and rise in the wrong location. To make matters worse, artillery and gunship support was severely hampered, chiefly because warhead fuzes would detonate in the upper canopies and mini-gun bullets would be absorbed or deflected by the foliage. We tended to kill a lot of leaves and tree branches when we were trying to kill the bad guys.



**Triple canopy with truck entrance circled**

## COMMUNITY RELATIONS / CIVIC ACTION

During the Vietnam War, there was supposed to be a concerted effort to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people. This was supposed to be an initiative with the Department of State (DoS) in the lead. From my vantage point it was a dismal failure with no real plan or focus – in other words a typical Department of State effort (a lot of talk and nothing

accomplished). From a military perspective, this effort fell under the Division G5 or the Brigade S5 which in those days was called Community Affairs.

What brought all of this to my attention was the day I noticed and asked about piping and drilling equipment for wells. I found out this and other material was designated for Vietnamese village improvement under the "Win their Hearts and Minds Community Relations Program". Subsequently, I had discussions with our Brigade S-5 and there was little he could do as there was no overall plan nor could anyone identify which villages were to get support or these materials. He said he needed DoS permission but never got any. Personally, I think he was lazy, lacked initiative and was a poor excuse for an Officer. The best I saw was on occasion the engineers were detailed to repair or build a small walking bridge or road for a village.

One major news story the media lied about was the relocation program. In some areas the NVA operated with ease and would abduct

villagers as slaves or kill those during the night who might be identified as supporting the Americans. Sometimes the VC would bury people alive with their families as a threat to keep others in line. To protect these individuals, many isolated and smaller villages were relocated to safer areas and guarded by men trained and armed in the village in what

was known as the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG). Unfortunately, this effort uprooted people from their homes as well as their fields and daily lifestyle. In many cases what the media showed back home on the news as American troops burning down the hootches/homes of the Vietnamese was actually people being relocated and their houses burnt down so the NVA could not use them after village was relocated. So this was the genesis of the saying "*We are here to win your heart and mind or we will burn down your F**king hootch*".

To my dismay, I did not see or know of any concerted effort to make life better for the typical Vietnamese. These people were for the most part uneducated, dirt floor poor, and even our barracks hootches were palaces to them. It would not have been that hard to pour a concrete pad and put up wooden walls and a roof to build a rudimentary school, medical clinic or any other tangible thing from a U.S. hootch design.

The U.S. Military was great at war and that was what we were there for (and did well) -- but from my experience, Nation Building was the job of other USG Agencies (I.e.: Department of State) and was not done well -- or at

all.



**Engineers with a front loader helping villagers repair a bridge before the rainy season starts**

## LIFESTYLES – THE HAVES AND HAVE NOTS

Vietnam was a very dark country to fly over at night. Except for major U.S. military bases and large Vietnamese towns, very few places had electricity or lights. One night while flying back to An Khe from Qui Nhon in the black abyss of Vietnam, I looked to the north, saw lights blazing and wondered what magical mystery place was all lit up. It looked like a giant Christmas tree with different colored lights and white lights pulsating in the dark. I was simply mystified. Upon arrival back to base, I checked my map and realized this must have been the USAF Phu Cat Air Base. I made a mental note to fly there the first day I had free.

The next week, two of us flew to Phu Cat and it was worth the trip. This base had paved (not peneprime) roads with concrete curbs, gutters and sidewalks, concrete ramps and taxiways, air conditioned aircrew quarters, and mail boxes at each barracks location. Some of the barracks were two stories and instead of sand bag walls to protect them from shrapnel – they had poured concrete walls. There was a 24 hour mess hall to support crews flying odd hours, and all kinds of support equipment and supplies. They even had grass lawns around the buildings that they cut with lawn mowers and nice plants here and there. Unlike the Army, the AF personnel had uniforms suited to the climate (Shorts and short sleeve shirts) as most of their personnel did not go out into the field. Those who did were in AF jungle fatigues and outfitted with some equipment the Army did not provide its troops. Additionally, they wore what they wanted off duty, to include

civilian clothing. The Air Force had a different standard of life and I thought and felt like I was stateside at Phu Cat. It was now evident why my father who served in the Army Air Corps in WWII encouraged me to go into the Air Force, not the Army.

Oh yeah, the lights I saw at this magical and mystical place were the approach lighting system for the runway as well as the taxiway and runway lights – obviously a very costly first class operation, especially for a war zone.

Our short visit to Phu Cat was good while it lasted. We returned to the heat, peneprime, dust, and bleakness of An Khe accepting our lot in life as --- Army people. However, we did return to Phu Cat from time to time to savor the good life and trade weapons and NVA gear for items we needed such as survival gear, a pallet of plywood, etc.

## SCAMS

There were more scams than you could count in Vietnam. Some were well intentioned and intended simply to get around the system so as to make the life of an individual or unit better. Most such people were simply trying to make life a little better with no intended malice. In all wars there are other people who engage in Black Marketing, selling drugs, or opening bars and brothels for their own profit. However, some groups and individuals may have been legal but took scamming to ridiculous level.

From my perspective the greatest scammers of all time were the USAF and Air National Guard / Reserve airlift (cargo) pilots stationed in the U.S. who flew to Vietnam. Combat pay and a combat pay tax exemption were both entitlements to those serving in a combat zone. Those benefits were for a whole month and all one had to do was to be in the combat zone for just one hour (not even land) during one day of the month to qualify for the pay. It was very typical of stateside Active Duty, Air National Guard, and Reserve units to fill their aircraft with extra crewmembers and land in Vietnam on the last day of the month and then depart on the first day of the next month thus claiming two months tax exemption and combat pay. If they landed the last four days of the month and were scheduled to leave before the first of the next month, there was a 99% chance they would have a broken aircraft until the first of the month. Needless to say, we never went to an AF base at the end of the month because the ramps were full of aircraft and they had

virtually no room for an Army helicopter.

For many USAF personnel stationed in surrounding countries, flights would routinely be made during the month with aircraft filled with airmen to get their combat pay and tax exemption. These people would usually be on the ground only an hour or two for the whole month. Once again, the end of the month with an RON (remain overnight) was always sought. Obviously, for those of us who spent the entire month in Vietnam, we saw this as unethical, if not fraud, waste or abuse and a slap in the face of those assigned to Vietnam – especially their fellow USAF FAC pilots, Combat Controllers, fighter pilots, bomber crews, C-130 crews, and other ground support personnel exposed to danger each day. Those many USAF and other senior ranking Officers who participated and allowed this to go on should have been stopped or held accountable.

## COMBAT LOSS SCAMS

In the military, every organization maintains a property book and losses have to be accounted for. In a combat zone, a Combat Loss does not have to be accounted for in the same manner as equipment lost or damaged in a peacetime environment. Things are always coming up lost or destroyed which is a property book nightmare.

In many units there was an easy solution equipment losses. Whenever a helicopter went down or a truck, tank, or other vehicle was destroyed, those items missing within the unit (furniture, starlight scopes, weapons, etc) were obviously on-board the destroyed vehicle and were a “combat loss”. Problem solved. Books cleared and closed. This was also a way to get extra or spare equipment a unit needed, because after the write off due to combat loss, the unit could requisition replacement equipment. One other way was to make a trade. In one case I remember a missing Armored Personnel Carrier being traded for a Starlight Scope. The books had to all balance out in the end – or someone had to pay for the missing or lost equipment.

## LEAVE AND R&R SCAMS

During the Vietnam War era and until recently, all recordkeeping was done at the unit level and on paper. It was very easy for the right person to “lose” or change paperwork to reflect what they wanted. With regard to this, all records of R&R and leave were managed by the unit administration folks.

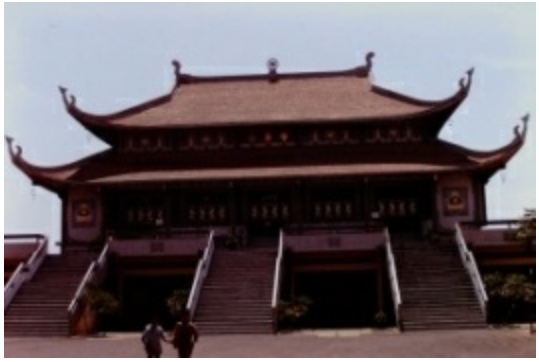
I know of a number of people who worked in the admin area or were friends of the admin clerks who had more than two R&Rs during one tour; but, none ever got recorded. Today, computerized record keeping with automated permanent database files has pretty much ended this scam.

## SKIMMING SUPPLIES

Trading equipment, supplies, and captured equipment in Vietnam was widespread. Someone always had something someone else needed or wanted. Enemy weapons, steaks, and C-Ration supplemental packs were the most common materials traded for something else. The only real problem was with food. Because steaks and other choice cuts of meat were being siphoned off the supply chain, we were relegated to meals of chicken, and ground beef made into hamburgers, meatloaf or meatballs and spaghetti. Very seldom would we get roast beef, pork chops, or a steak. No big deal, we just went to the club and bought a steak (which oddly enough looked just like the cuts of steak missing from the supply chain) and then we'd drink with our friends.

## SCENES IN VIETNAM

In spite of the war, Vietnam had a lot of beautiful scenery and interesting sites. Little scenic villages with rice paddies surrounding them, Buddhist temples, Catholic Churches, mountain and valley views, gorgeous beaches which could easily become a hotel resort, waterfalls, old French Foreign Legion Forts, and other sights.









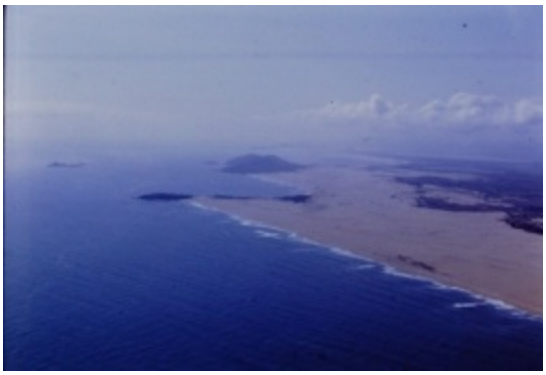












# PART XIV

## Bong Son (LZ English)



**Bong Son (LZ English)**

The focus of combat operations changed from the An Khe to an area 45 miles northeast out of Bong Son (LZ English). We moved our TOC to Bong Son as well as our aircraft pilots and crewchiefs for about a month.



**Our TOC at Bog Son**



**Our luxurious hootch**

I would fly out of Bong Son each day to provide and/or coordinate support for the battalion and other assets operating in that area. Some evenings I would return to An Khe with a crew chief, spend the night, drop off all our dirty laundry, and then return the next morning. Life at Bong Son was Spartan, at best for us. Fortunately, we stayed busy and time passed quickly.

Bong Son had one great advantage. I was less than five miles from the ocean and beautiful beaches – so I scouted out an unofficial beach recreation site for my enlisted folks and the Grunts that had time off. On occasion, I would round up my other LOH pilot and either I or both of us would shuttle the Pathfinders, LRRPs, and other personnel out to the beach

for a swim. Sometimes there would be about 20 guys just enjoying the surf for an hour. The beach was on a sandbar – with clear unobstructed views for at least a couple of miles and as safe as Vietnam could be.



**On our private beach**



My rule was the guys took turns standing guard and always went with weapons and a radio. Obviously, no one ever objected. I left my aircraft running and from time-to time-would do an aerial recon over the vast open beach to make sure we were not surprised. I also used these flights as an opportunity to give whoever wanted some stick time a chance to fly, a bonus ride of sorts. Kind of like our own amusement park.

The 173$^{RD}$ Airborne Infantry Brigade operated out of Bong Son full time, but we were there to support operations on a limited basis. One operation in particular involved searching for two Americans who had been reported as operating with the NVA and leading attacks against U.S. forces or trying to lure U.S. forces into a trap. One of the Americans was identified as white, the other was black and were referred to as the "Salt and Pepper Team". The Army, as always, had an answer to problems such as this – because they were traitors, LRRP teams were deployed for sniper duty to eliminate them rather than to attempt a capture. In spite of a great deal of searching and the willingness of the teams to kill them, the teams never did find them.

# A SINCERE THANKS WAS BETTER THAN ANY AWARD

It was early evening and I was just about to land for fuel at LZ English prior to heading back to An Khe when I got a call asking about my location. I was told four LRRPs were in trouble and needed extraction. The request included their planned extraction grid location and the mention that no other aircraft were available. Then they asked if I had any ideas, probably waiting for me to "suggest" that I could do the job. I checked my map and saw that they were in an area I was familiar with because I had used two artillery batteries in the area three days before. After mentally computed flying time and fuel based on their extraction weight and location elevation, I advised I would fly up there and do what I could --- such as call in artillery for them, coordinate a rescue, or as a long shot -- try to get them out. I knew it was a rugged area; but, with just four people, it might be possible under ideal conditions for me to make a successful rescue. I then asked my Operations NCO to continue to look for a Huey and a pair of gunships to send to me. After landing at LZ English, I took on minimum fuel, folded up my rear seats to create more room in the back, and then took off and flew directly to the site – less than 15 minutes away.

Enroute, I made a call to an artillery battery, requested them to get ready for a fire mission and gave them the LZ coordinates. I then made a call to my TOC and asked them to have our USAF ALO get me a FAC (Air Force Forward Air Controller). Soon after, a FAC contacted me (They used the callsign COVEY) and I told him what was going on and where I might need him. He said he would see what he could round up and headed my way.

As I got closer to the LRRPs, I made radio contact and found out they were literally running for their lives to the planned extraction point in a running gun battle. About five minutes out, I identified the general area but had no idea of their exact extraction site as they could not pop smoke. They then told me in whispers they had temporarily evaded their pursuers, described their location as in tall elephant grass, and that they had me in sight heading directly toward them. All I could see was a sea of elephant grass with some trees sticking out on the front slope of a ridgeline covering an area approximately ½ mile by ¼ mile in size about 3 miles ahead of me. I then asked the artillery battery to fire a smoke round for adjustment -- which they did. The smoke round impacted in the east side of the elephant grass and the guys on the ground told me they could hear it impact to their east. So, now I

had some idea of where they were.

The Huey and gunships I asked for had not checked in on my frequency and after a visual assessment it was obvious my aircraft was ill suited to do a pickup. The 15-20 foot high elephant grass could easily destroy my main or tail rotor blades, I could hit a stump or tree hidden by the grass, and in spite of lower fuel, their combined weight could be too much for takeoff. In my mind, any one of a dozen things other things could also go wrong wrecking the aircraft and leaving us all abandoned, captured, or dead at that site. My assessment was bleak and viable options were none. I put my odds of success at less than 20%. As the LRRPs were OK for the next few minutes and now realizing discretion being the better part of valor, I decided to wait for help as there was little I could do that was either "smart" or "safe". So it was time to implement my alternate plan of artillery to keep them safe. I then called the FAC on my UHF radio and gave him the FM radio frequencies of the artillery on the firebase and LRRPs in case he needed them.

Because the nearby firebase was ready with a 155 howitzer battery to fire, my plan now was to figure out exactly where the LRRPs were with reference to the smoke round and to adjust artillery fire around them to protect them until other help arrived. Then suddenly things went from bad to worse. In a whisper over the radio, the LRRPs advised they were surrounded and could hear the NVA beating the bushes 50 to 100 yards away looking for them. The choice was then very simple – leave them to be killed or captured and feel guilty the rest of my life or try to save them, and hope for the best. It was an easy decision I think most other pilots would also have made – in spite of that fact I really believed there was a high probability none of us would make it back that evening, if at all.

At that point, not knowing exactly where they were, I told them the following: I would do a low level pattern over the top of the grass to find where they were, that they were to make sure there were no stumps or trees within 50 feet of them, that they were to call when I passed over them -- and that they be prepared for me to drop in on top of them. I told them to leave everything except their weapons, ammo and radio to reduce weight and I would give them two seconds to get on board -- and tap me on the shoulder when they were all loaded.

I then started my pattern. I made one quick call to the FAC to make sure he was up on the radio frequency in case I did not make it out. Finally, I made one last call to the artillery battery on a different radio telling them to

be ready to fire for effect. I then added that if they did not hear from me within five minutes to fire for effect in a rolling barrage across the hillside, from the smoke round -- drop 50 meters, to the east add 200 meters and to the west add 400 meters, VT (Airburst), point detonating fuzes, and disregard "danger close" (in other words calling it in on our own position). If nothing else I was prepared to take out as many of the NVA as I could and hoped we would survive the artillery – surrender or capture followed by torture were simply not among my options.

After about two long minutes and a number of AK-47s bursts firing at me as I passed low level over the elephant grass, I finally overflew them. They immediately called -- I flew a really tight 360 turn back to them, chewed my way down through the grass, saw them crouched down to my front, hovered forward eating more grass, touched down two feet from them, felt the aircraft rock as they got on and then a tap on my shoulder -- and then I pulled collective pitch for takeoff. At that point all hell broke loose and ground fire came from everywhere accompanied by the ominous "Tink" and "Thunk" sounds of bullets passing through parts of the aircraft. We kept low and I skimmed the top of the elephant grass changing heading numerous times to try and avoid the ground fire. During this time, I watched my engine temperature (it was high) and transmission torque (on the limit) until getting enough airspeed to climb and get out of the immediate danger area. The whole extraction was about three minutes from the decision to land to that point – but it was one of those slow motion mental events that seemed like an hour.

Once at altitude (1000 feet AGL) I turned the aircraft and we looked at the extraction site – it was now dusk and there were about 100 flashlights moving around (an amazing number for the NVA as only one in ten normally had a flashlight). I immediately called the artillery battery "*Fire mission on last smoke round, proximity and point detonate -- fire for effect, then drop 50, left 100, repeat fire for effect*" for the 155 battery and watched as the elephant grass and hillside exploded 20 seconds later. I then gave the battery additional adjustment information to rake the areas missed by the first shells.

At that point, the Air Force FAC (COVEY flying an O-2) came up on my UHF radio freq, said he was now on station and asked if he could help – as he now had launched the two pair of F-4 (Callsigns COBRA) with napalm on alert at Phu Cat AB to support us. We then flew back over the site where I verbally pointed out the target area and then gladly handed it off to him. The

FAC rolled in hot putting 2.75 White Phosphorous (Willie Pete –WP) rockets in the center of mass. I confirmed WP was in the target area. The F4s were monitoring the UHF radio frequency and the FAC gave them the clearance to drop. They rolled in hot immediately, made a low pass, and dropped their napalm for a near perfect hit. Quite a show as the sun went down and the hillside was, in layman's terms – incinerated. As for the requested Huey and gunships, they called while we were on the way back to LZ English. I thanked them for their efforts and then had them follow me back in case my aircraft damage was worse than I thought and may cause me to go down.

When we landed at LZ English, all four LRRPs got out and walked slowly away -- heads down, shoulders slumped, dragging their feet, hardly able to walk or carry their weapons, and literally physically and mentally drained. I could feel their pain, exhaustion, and relief. As I pulled pitch and was ready to lift off, one team member stopped, turned, signaled for me to wait, and slowly walked back to the aircraft. As I lowered the collective to reduce rotor pitch, I wondered what he left onboard. To my surprise, he came to my door, looked at me with a face of someone that had been through the wringer, slowly put out his hand, made a small exhausted smile, shook my hand, nodded, mouthed "*Thank you*" and then turned and joined his guys -- who had stopped walking and were sitting and lying on the ground physically and mentally exhausted.

As corny as it may sound, I expected nothing as extractions under fire were much too routine and simply normal business with most Grunts getting out, giving us a "Thumbs up" and walking away. I had the satisfaction of doing something well and good for another GI – but the look on his face and the personal handshake and thanks was worth a million bucks – and made me feel great that my effort was appreciated. I think he did, but I am not sure that he ever knew just how low the odds were for a successful extraction and how close we all came to dying that evening.

I then put my LOH in a revetment, had dinner and then a great night of sleep really feeling good about the day and that those four guys were OK. My aircraft received some much deserved care and feeding – but it was down for repairs for a few days as all the blades had to be replaced, some bullet holes had to be patched, a "Hot End" engine inspection done, and other "minor" repairs had to be effected before it could take to the air again. Oh well, the aircraft damage was just the cost of doing business. The NVA body count? -- Who knows, and as callous as it sounds, I did not care and still do

not. I felt then as I do now, I simply tried to do my best and we were lucky that day – the enemy was not.

## SCAVENGING CAN RUIN YOUR DAY

I had an early morning show time at Bong Son so I left An Khe at sunrise. Flying at 3000 feet to pass over the mountains I was taking in the cool air and beauty of the blue sky, beautiful scenery, and early morning sun. As I scanned ahead, I saw a firebase on the top of a mountain that had been abandoned the week before and a target of opportunity. Approximately forty NVA regulars were rummaging through the site looking for anything they could use. I kept a distance away and they neither saw nor heard me – as none looked up and they did not scatter. I immediately called a firebase nearby for a fire mission. I told them the target was the old firebase and they confirmed the coordinates.

Instead of firing, they suggested I come up on a different frequency and contact "MARLO 11". I changed frequencies and made the call "*MARLO 11, Bird 3, Fire Mission*". They immediately replied and asked questions I never heard before on a call-for-fire as their lingo was completely different. So, I just said in the clear " *I have 40 dinks on a hilltop in the open that need to die at coordinates 1234 5678. Can you help me out*?". We now had common ground as they asked if I would accept point detonation and proximity air burst – answer, HELL YES!, over. They then wanted to know if I wanted to fire for adjustment. The answer was, "*No, fire for effect as they will scatter on the first round, this is all or nothing, and cleared to fire - give me a shot and splash*". This whole conversation was less than 2 minutes, tops. MARLO 11 said "*Roger*" and about three minutes later I heard "*Bird 3, Shot, Over*" and my reply "*MARLO 11, Shot, Out*" meaning confirmation of rounds "on the way". I did not know where they were so it did have me concerned as to the gun-target line and round falling on my aircraft; however, having worked many artillery missions I knew based on the distance it would typically be 5-15 seconds before I heard the next call of "*SPLASH, Over*" (which meant five seconds to impact).

Twenty seconds after "SHOT" I was worried I had lost radio contact and called MARLO 11 only to be told rounds were still enroute – in my mind this was strange and thought, from where, the moon? Then I got dismayed because I thought it was a 175 MM gun that could not hit anything accurately

and the NVA would get away. About ten seconds later I heard "*SPLASH, Ove*r" and acknowledged the call while turning my aircraft to see where the rounds impacted. I hoped to adjust quickly and fire another volley, if possible.

The NVA were still wandering around and rummaging when to my utter amazement, the entire top of that mountain went up in one gigantic explosion. MARLO 11 called to ask if I was ready to adjust for the second volley. I advised it was a direct hit, and told them to hold fire as I was dropping down for a closer look. I waited for the dust to settle and then flew around the old firebase. It was obliterated with one volley and I found nothing but half buried bodies and body parts – not even blood trails or twitching bodies. I then reported to MARLO 11 they had a confirmed kill of forty and to cancel any further support.

This type of accuracy and destruction I was not used to seeing, so I asked where their firebase was and what they fired. They answered it was a USN Destroyer five miles off the coast and what I got in layman's terms was a broadside of 5 rounds each from their fast firing 5 inch deck guns. So, I climbed to 5000 feet (virtually nosebleed altitude for a LOH pilot) and there they were – a small image on the horizon. Always being curious and having never seen a destroyer, I told them I wanted to fly out to see them if that would be OK. They could not have been more excited.

Enroute to the ship, the captain invited me to land for breakfast and a tour. Had this been earlier in my tour I probably would have accepted the offer, but having a little more common sense now and more lucid in my thinking (at least on this occasion), I declined. I would have a hard time explaining what I was doing five miles at sea and without water survival gear if I went down. However, I would have an even a harder time explaining what I was doing landing on a destroyer if my helicopter broke after landing and I ended up in a port in Singapore or the Philippines (although docking in some other country for a port call did seem tempting). When I got to the ship, I made a slow low pass 100 feet off the starboard side of the ship where all hands were on deck waving and taking pictures. I think we made each other's day!



The naval gunfire was awesome and accurate – never saw anything before or after as effective on the first round. I was late for my show time at Bong Son; but, I had called ahead and they fully supported the reason – of course I forgot to mention the 40 minute ship excursion. The rest of the day turned out to be routine and very boring after the excitement of teaming up with the U.S. Navy for "joint operation".

## GREEN BASKETBALLS

Tracer rounds are used in machine gun ammunition to help the gunner see where the rounds are going and are usually every fifth or tenth round. U.S. ammunition used red tracers while the Communists used green. They are easy to see in daylight and very dramatic at night.

It was a long flying day and time to return to An Khe. It was now dark and I took off without problem. Within two minutes after takeoff and at about 1500 feet all of a sudden I saw what looked like a dozen green basketballs coming at me. Even I realized this was not a good thing but I had few options. This was a .51 caliber anti-aircraft gun and I could see the tracers; but, since they were accompanied by their non-tracer counterparts, times four, I knew that there were at least 50 other rounds I could *not* see flying toward me. We used to laughingly say "*There is a round out there with my name on it and I can do nothing about it --- it's all those rounds labeled, "To Anyone", that I worry about*". As more of these rounds kept coming I reached up, turned off my exterior navigation lights, and then made a hard left turn. In the dark they lost track of me and I watched as more of the rounds continued to come up for a while longer where they thought I would be flying.

It was another good day without being hit by ground fire. As the mess hall was now closed, I went to the club, bought a steak dinner, had some

drinks with friends, and then went to bed.

# PART XV

## The ROKs

In the Central Highlands we had combat troops from the Republic of Korea (we called them the ROKs) with whom we worked. Their area of operation included the An Khe pass, just east of An Khe, which they protected and is in the picture below. From time to time, I was scheduled to go out to fly missions in support of the South Korean Army. The ROKs were tough and well disciplined. My first indication of how tough and how disciplined they were was their status of their camp. We struggled to find ways to keep the weeds out of the concertina wire in our perimeter at An Khe and had used everything from goats to flame throwers.



An Khe Pass

The ROKs had a different method. I landed one day and saw at least 50 guys wearing only loincloths and pads on their knees, crawling through the concertina and pulling the weeds out by hand. They never had weeds in their concertina perimeter wire. The ROKs seldom got attacked in their bases either. If they did, they immediately hunted down those who attacked them and killed them. When a ROK infantry company went through a Vietnamese village, they pulled out steel rods each man carried and probed the earth for tunnel entrances. It was not uncommon to find Vietnamese civilians on the trails in front of a ROK company clearing booby traps and land mines so they would not be blamed or have retribution taken on them. ROKs were well disciplined, fighters, and they were fierce.

## TALK OR ELSE

We captured a number of prisoners while I was with the 4th Division. Some actually turned themselves in, as they were tired of running, being

bombed, and living a pretty miserable life. I never saw any NVA soldiers mistreated. Most prisoners talked and voluntarily told the interrogators what they wanted to know. On the other hand, the toughest to get information out of were the Viet Cong -- who were ideological zealots and hard core communists (criminals) with no scruples. One in particular knew Americans and our rules, so he said nothing of value; but, gave plenty of insults. The interrogator finally told him he had had enough and that the prisoner was going to be transferred. The prisoner relaxed, thinking that it was all over and that he was probably going to Con Son Island with the other war detainees.

All of a sudden the door opened. There were two ROK soldiers at the door and he was told he was being transferred to them. He was so scared he started talking. I do not think he ever shut up and he answered every question. He may *still* be talking he was so scared. The ROKs played no games, operated under a different standard than the Americans or South Vietnamese, and the Viet Cong knew it.

## NO QUARTER

I was flying a ROK Battalion Commander one day to visit a number of his troop locations in the field. I was always treated well and with respect and I reciprocated. We landed at one location and all went well until he got a call which had him extremely agitated. He asked me to go to another ROK field location and land. Upon landing a Company Commander was in formation with his troops waiting on the Battalion Commander's arrival. The ROC Battalion Commander got out of my aircraft and walked directly up to the Company Commander. After a salute, the Battalion Commander proceeded to chew his Captain up one side and down the other in front of his troops. Something went wrong with this "counseling" session because the Battalion Commander pulled out his sidearm, knocked the Captain's steel pot off his head, and started pistol whipping the Captain about the head and shoulders in front of all of his troops while screaming at him continuously. This Captain remained at attention bleeding while the Battalion Commander continued to express his displeasure. All of a sudden I see the pistol whipping stop, the Captain's head nod up and down and then he salutes. The Battalion Commander turned, walked back and climbed into my aircraft and we took off to finish his rounds. I never asked nor did I find out what that

Captain did or did not do. I was just glad I was not in the ROK Army and that that Battalion Commander was not angry with *me*.

## LOSS OF FACE

On another occasion I was flying a ROK Battalion Commander around and we were supposed to land at a field location. The radio operator he had with him asked the company on the ground to pop smoke. We positively identified the color and they confirmed the LZ was cold. Good deal. On short final an AK-47 opens up on us and I made a go-around. The Battalion Commander was now more than mad. He told me the LZ was cold and we were fired upon -- which was in their culture a huge loss of face. I do not speak Korean but I could tell from the tone and volume of the conversation over the radio that the people on the ground knew they were in trouble.

We climbed up to altitude and held in an orbit for about ten minutes as they apologized to me. I smiled and told the Commander I understood and sometimes these things happen. He was still not happy. Finally a radio call came in and I was told we could land. We landed into the smoke and as the smoke dissipated two ROK soldiers had a Viet Cong (VC) kneeling between them. One soldier pointed to the AK-47 he was holding and then to the VC – obviously telling me this was the guy and weapon used to fire on us. I smiled and gave him a thumbs-up to acknowledge. He saw my thumbs-up, immediately pulled out his sidearm, and put a bullet in the head of the VC. They apparently took him alive at whatever cost and now in their minds their honor was restored.

Quite truthfully, shooting the VC did not bother me at all -- as this was after the murder of the wife of the police chief. However, I was taken back a bit by the whole episode only because it was so public and I thought I might be blamed for approving an execution. When I reported it, our leadership grimaced and said they would get back with me. I was later told that what I had seen was a ROK pull out his sidearm to escort the prisoner when it accidently discharged. I saw where this was going. Matter closed – I was not going to jail. So all was well as far as I was concerned with one less VC – the world was a better place.

## THE GREAT PENINSULA CAMPAIGN

There were very few large, text book, conventional-type operations in

Vietnam, such as an envelopment, strategic withdrawal, end run, etc,. However, there was one operation that I witnessed that lasted two weeks from start to finish. We had a particularly troublesome area that was a small peninsula about four miles long and a mile wide. It was a known Viet Cong stronghold and repeated American operations into the area did not end the problem. The enemy would just evade contact and return to their normal operations after the Americans left. So a plan was hatched at the Division Headquarters to end this once and for all. Our Brigade was airlifted into the area with all three Battalions forming a wall on the ground blocking the exit from the peninsula.

The ROKs were landed by the U.S. Navy on the sea end of the peninsula. From there they formed a line and moved down the peninsula eliminating every enemy stronghold they encountered. The VC tried to flee the peninsula but ran into the American blocking force. The American line took anyone who surrendered (very few) as prisoners and killed those who tried to get away in a bunch of nasty firefights, artillery barrages, and gunship/TACAIR attacks. The women and children were simply rounded up and relocated to someplace else in Vietnam. I would fly each day and watch events unfold from above while coordinating artillery, airstrikes, and airlift to troops on the ground. By the time the ROKs got to the American line, there was nothing left behind them as they killed every chicken, goat, and cow and burnt down or blew up every enemy bunker or storage site they found. They made Sherman's March to the Sea in the Civil War look mild - as that peninsula never gave us any problem again for the rest of my tour.

# PART XVI

## Tour One Completed



I received my orders to head home thirty days prior to my DEROS (Date Estimated Return from Overseas). I packed all my electronics (bought by a friend on R&R in Hong Kong) and excess personal gear and had them shipped home three weeks prior to my scheduled departure date.

I flew until three days before leaving. I really did not think anything of it at the time but a week prior to my departure I was asked to fly some ammo to some troops in a firefight. After a quick preflight and a check of the loaded ammo, I walked up to the cockpit as always and went to grab the hand-hold to climb in. However, my hand just shook and went limp. My whole body just shook and for the first time I had the strangest feeling of absolute dread. For the first time, I suddenly felt concern of a hot LZ that I could die and not make it home. I tried again to grasp the hand-hold and again I could not grasp it. My hand just shook and went limp each time I tried. I stood there wondering what the hell was going on, shook my head, told myself it was not that bad, said a quick prayer to the Lord to cure whatever it was, then grasped the hand-hold, and climbed into the aircraft without a problem. All was well again and I completed the mission – but, with some more bullet holes for maintenance to patch.

The proceeding few days had been particularly bad and it was not until I saw the movie "Twelve O'clock High" years later I realized what had happened – thinking about actually going home and the possibility you might not, can affect you psychologically. It had a name and was well known – called the "Going Home Jitters". I guess everyone had their "enough" point and apparently subconsciously I had had enough, whether I wanted to admit it or not. I put going home in the back of my mind and flew six more days without any problems. I never had that problem again in my life.

The night before I left, a Major friend of mine (the Brigade S1) told me I had an efficiency report written on me by my Captain that was really bad and would end my career. I shrugged my shoulders, as this was no surprise to me and told him it was expected. I felt the Captain did not have the leadership or pilot skills I expected and we seldom agreed on anything; therefore, to say we did not get along was an understatement. He wanted nothing to do with me and the feeling was mutual. In retrospect, I think we both could have been more professional and should have worked better together to support the mission regardless -- a lesson learned.

To my surprise, the Major told me he took my efficiency report to the S3 who then complained to the Brigade Commander. According to the Major,

the Brigade Commander called the Captain in and was not happy with the Captain's explanation as to why he rated me the way he did. The Major went on to say the Colonel told the Captain that the S3 would rewrite the efficiency report for him and that he would sign the rewritten version. The Major ended by telling me the Colonel gave the Captain an unflattering assessment of how he viewed the Captain's handling of this matter. I was really surprised by this obvious and totally unexpected show of support they gave me.

Unlike others, I was very lucky a number of people appreciated what I had done and that senior leadership looked after me in spite of the really dumb or unorthodox things I had done and the fact everyone knew I planned to leave the Army to go back to school. I thanked the Major and remarked how I had said goodbye to the S3 and Colonel and they had never said a word except to thank me while wishing me luck in the future – real class on their part and another lesson in life for me. They were non-rated Officers and great guys that I respected. I was very lucky to have known them, worked with them, and have learned so much from them during my tour.

As people were always arriving or departing Vietnam, there was no going away party for me or anyone else. I met friends at the club one last time, said goodbye, and wished them a safe return. It was one of those happy/sad occasions with friends -- most I would never see again.

The day before my DEROS (Date Estimated Return from Overseas), a C-130 picked a bunch of us up and flew us to Cam Ranh Bay. We processed out of country and were assigned a flight number and departure time for the next day.

The return flight was on a half filled B-707. It was quiet and uneventful. On one leg I was talking to one of the flight attendants (stewardesses in those days) in the galley about her job and asked how she got this route. She commented that they all bid on the routes that they flew, but that this particular route was easy to get as few flight attendants bid on it. She went on to say how the planes always are packed going over and only half or three quarters filled on the return. She simply, very honestly and somewhat sadly said a lot of the young stewardesses could not psychologically handle the fact that the empty seats meant so many were being returned dead or wounded. They just could not do the job without getting depressed. I thanked her for her conversation and for making the flight enjoyable. We landed in CONUS, passed through Customs, and like all of those before us, all of us went our

separate ways.

## REFLECTIONS ON TOUR ONE

As I reflect back on my tour in the Central Highlands, it encompassed the most interesting, challenging, educational, stressful, gruesome, dangerous, reckless, and terrifying things I have ever done in my life. There is no doubt that as LOH and Huey pilots we saw the whites of the enemies eyes on a regular basis, witnessed horrific and gory sights, heard the screams of those suffering, smelled and saw indescribably horrific things such as burning or decaying human flesh, and were shot at too many times. In spite of this, we did our best to keep flying when on many occasions if we had been smarter we should have been terrified and quit. However, from a flying perspective it was fabulous and the things I learned from others have been life-long lessons that gave my life a whole new perspective.

With regard to the war, I witnessed a military leadership that was well educated, trained, dedicated, and professional trying to do its best but ill prepared or suited for a guerilla war. They were trying to "win" without a clear mission or a plan to achieve victory (whatever that was), and trying to lead many soldiers who simply did not want to be there in what was an unpopular war. Within all the military ranks (both enlisted and Officer), there were true leaders and buffoons, heroes and cowards, hard workers and shirkers, as well as the majority who served with honor and the minority of those who disgraced their uniform and their Country. Regardless, during my time there, most serving where I was in Vietnam did their jobs, served honorably, simply tried to survive, and made the best of each day until they could go home.

The reality of helicopter operations in Vietnam was that safe flight was dependent on many factors, the most important of which were the excellent and ongoing maintenance done by the enlisted personnel, the quick thinking and skill of the pilot and crewmembers, and the great aviation training we all had received. However, for the majority of helicopter pilots and crews in Vietnam just taking off and landing in the field risked their lives every day. They did their job so well that they made extremely dangerous work flying in the most difficult conditions in high maintenance, complex, and vulnerable aircraft look easy and safe.

As I reflect back, one thing the U.S. Army did well with all of us in flight

school was to teach us that when a problem arose, to *fly the aircraft*, then assess our options and disregard other things. This focus on flying allowed us to disregard the fear or stark terror in some instances, instinctively do some things, think through the problem, and to do our best to resolve the situation. Like many others, I cannot remember how many times I was shot at or how many hits my aircraft actually took. I do know that during a crisis, I had many instances when I entered a state of mind that everything happened in slow motion with the external distractions and what should have been terror simply blotted out as my mind assessed options and made decisions. Immediately after a crisis was over, or in the evening, I would sometimes reflect on how lucky I was, how bad the situation really was, and wonder why I was not dead or seriously wounded. To this day, I still wonder.

Although flying was optional, I did not know of any pilot who turned in his wings and quit flying in Vietnam – although some would and did gladly take less dangerous missions or jobs, if offered. Most of the pilots I met truly loved flying, took the risks for granted, performed truly heroic feats to support those in the field as routine tasks, and simply felt the satisfaction of doing the best they could – without any expected thanks or fanfare. As a group, we woke up each day, put on our flight suits and boots, grabbed our weapons, preflighted our aircraft, put our chicken plates on, strapped ourselves in, put our gloves on, yelled "Clear" (for the crew chiefs to check the rotor blades), hit the starter, put our visors down, and then took off into the unknown without hesitation. As in any war, there were cowards and shirkers but they were so few in the Army Aviation field they were almost non-existent. I have never been more proud of anything in my life than to have served with a community of people as great as my fellow Commissioned and Warrant pilots, as well as the enlisted crewmembers.

As a group, we tried to do what needed to be done. While it may appear some things were reckless, there was always a mental computation assessing personal skill with aircraft capabilities/limitations and an ongoing situational awareness of terrain, weather, and the enemy threat. On many occasions, life and death decisions were made in split seconds - especially when under fire or people were dying or would die without help. In some cases, the odds were very bad and guys with the best intentions simply did what they thought was right and tactically smart at the time -- only to suffer horrible consequences when their luck, skill or aircraft performance was not enough for the tactical situation – some great plans and ideas just go horribly wrong

in war. As a group, most of us simply did what we were trained to do and tried our best to complete the mission – especially to support the guys on the ground. Very simply, the things I did to help other Americans were things that I believe any of my fellow aviators would have done under the same circumstances; however, I was very "lucky". I lost count of how many dying and wounded I flew to the Field Hospital; but, I am very proud of the fact that I was able to pull them out of what in many cases could be described as hell or certain death and get them the care they needed.

On some occasions I, like everyone else, sometimes did some ill-advised, stupid, or reckless things for fun simply because we were so young, had an aircraft, and felt like doing it. That did not last long as we quickly learned there are many old pilots and many bold pilots but not many pilots who were BOTH old and bold. We also quickly realized that normal day-to-day operational flying in Vietnam was dangerous and exciting enough without hanging it out any further.

Most of us Warrants thought of ourselves as great pilots, mission oriented, outspoken, resourceful, independent-minded, and without any plans of an Army career. On the other hand, many of those who commanded us thought of us as obnoxious, borderline insubordinate, opinionated, immature, crass, and not suitable for an Army career. In all honesty, I think both views had a lot of truth. For the most part, the combat troops and helicopter crews had a mutual respect, trust, and appreciation for each other's jobs.

Thinking back on those days, I guess flying helicopters in Vietnam being young, single, naïve, having youthful ignorance, and the feeling of invulnerability was truly an advantage. In retrospect, I think the personal and emotional toll was much worse than most were willing to comprehend or admit. Obviously, the drinking and wild behavior was just one manifestation of how most dealt with it. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was an unknown condition at that time and it is obvious now looking back how many of my friends may have or continue to suffer from it. Upon arrival home, most guys continued the party and it was very common to hear about single car wrecks, violent outbursts, depression, marriage breakups, relationship problems, DUIs, etc.

One last thought about tour one. Every professional learns and trains for his job and then should perform it to the best of their ability. I was trained well and performed my duties with great enthusiasm. In the process I was happy to have saved a number of lives but also created a great deal of

destruction leaving many dead or wounded. For me, it was not a blood lust or immoral actions I took; but, simply doing the best I could at what I was trained and ordered to do -- defeat an enemy. There was, in fact, a certain excitement, adrenaline rush, and pleasure of actually using the training I had received and in doing a job successfully and well in combat - whether I was flying, destroying something, throwing a grenade, firing my CAR-15 to repel an assault, calling in artillery, performing a combat assault, or rescuing wounded under fire. It was our job to win and if the result would have been their mass surrender without injury, I would have felt the same pleasure and satisfaction of doing my job as well and successfully as I could. To me, war is simply them or me on the losing end -- if I have a choice, I am narcissistic, and I chose it to be them.

With regard to enemy deaths, normally no rational person wants to kill or wound another human being intentionally; however, it was a war and the rules were very simple in Vietnam – you find and kill them before they kill you. I performed my duties the best I could to win, save my life, and save the lives of other Americans. It was our duty and choice to continue fighting and to accept the consequences while hoping for the best. Therefore, having done my job as honorably as I could, I feel no pride or guilt for any of the deaths or wounds I was responsible for inflicting. I am sure it can be debated that I may be screwed up and need some kind of therapy -- but not because of my year of service flying as an U.S. Army Aviator in Vietnam.

# PART XVII

## Between Tours

Upon arrival in the States I was already aware of the war protests; therefore, a public hostile to the war and the GIs who served in Vietnam was no surprise when I got home. I really was not bothered by any of this -- except for those who carried the NVA Flag and called us war criminals and murderers. My best analogy is that it was like being on a school football team in a bruising game doing your best while your own fans root for the opposing team, wear the opposing team colors, and call their own team dirty players, cheats, and bums! It is just not what I would do and I will never understand that behavior of that era.

My family had a welcome home party for me with a lot of my relatives, neighbors, and high school friends my first night home. At the party I was a zombie -- my body clock was off 12 hours (still on Vietnam time) and I had just traveled non-stop for over 30 hours. A number of my high school classmates stopped by and were leaving the next week for their senior year in college. We would remain friends and I really appreciated them stopping by -- however, as our experiences were so vastly different, we no longer had a lot in common to talk about and I was so tired, conversations were somewhat awkward.

The most memorable moment occurred when my life-long next door neighbor and childhood friend came up and just blurted out loudly in front of a group of family and friends "*So how does it feel being back here after spending a year murdering women and children?*". Jolted by this, I just looked and said "*What!*" – as his mother grabbed him by the arm and quickly whisked him away. We have never spoken since then – most likely never will.

A week later I went to church with my mother. The priest used the sermon to condemn the Vietnam War and through innuendo vilify those of us who served there as cold blooded murders of women and children. This was the same priest who taught me years before in High School religious classes that Communism was evil, anti-religion, enslaved people, and had to be stopped. I was going to stand up and say something but my Mother asked me not to embarrass her and to just leave if I needed to, so I did. I walked out never to return again to that parish except for the funerals of my parents.

Two nights later we had a family dinner with my Cousin Mike (the ex-LRRP) and his family. We opened and polished off a bottle of whiskey between the two of us in the hour before dinner as we laughed and joked – which had everyone kind looking with puzzled faces at us. We were

considered “average social drinkers” in Vietnam – but apparently we were AA candidates in the States! Mike had been discharged upon return to CONUS and left to finish college one week after my return.

During the last three years of the war, there was an overage of military pilots in the U.S. and all the aviation units were overfilled. Pilots were farmed out to fill many jobs as simply as a means to keep them busy. For instance, some worked in offices or did menial jobs such as stock inventory. One lucky 21 year old CW2 was put in charge of the post youth center where he simply met and dated all the college age girls. Another pilot worked at the golf course as a pro and golfed every day. During that timeframe, many great and experienced pilots simply found stateside flying boring and some had had enough of the of “joy” of being in the Army. They lived their dream, had enough excitement for a lifetime, and now just wanted to get out of the Army and move on with their lives.

I was originally assigned to Ft Knox, KY. However, upon arrival home I called and requested a location on the east coast to be nearer family and friends. To my surprise, I was offered a job working in that office at HQ Department of the Army Military Personnel Center (HQ DA MILPERCEN) as a personnel officer. After being offered the job, I requested an interview to see if I would like it (yea - pure Chutzpah, interviewing them). In spite of my interview, they still wanted me and I was assigned to the 6th Armored Cavalry Regiment at Ft Meade, MD with duty at a desk in DC. Having just returned from Vietnam, the fact I would be working in some leaky, poorly heated/air conditioned and badly maintained wooden WWII buildings was of little concern – it was certainly (not by much) better than a tent. I only accepted it because it was better than sitting around doing some other non-flying job each day.

Ironically, the primary reason I was picked for this somewhat highly competitive position was because of the good efficiency reports I had received from Vietnam with one that included the statement “*excellent pilot who only wants to fly and when given other duties does them reluctantly but always exceptionally well*”. The experience at MILPERCEN was a great education as to how Army Personnel worked at the top (hint -- it did not work well) as well as to how the Army staff worked at that high a level and a great decision on my part – in spite of a decision made for the wrong reasons and by fate only. Regretfully, it was also very boring for those of us who wanted to fly.

Like everyone else, I flew one Saturday each month to maintain my flight status and keep my flight pay. Other than work and flying, I was hanging out with mostly other single pilots and a couple of married guys who partied and went drinking together five or six nights a week at different locations. Looking back, I am sure we and others we partied with were probably all a bit messed up psychologically, obviously ill behaved, drank too much, long term relationships were not in our thoughts and, regrettably, some young ladies were not treated with the respect they deserved. Very simply, we spent most of our money that year on liquor and women -- the rest we just wasted.

One night each week ten or more of us would go to the Walter Reed Officer's Club to meet with friends who were still recovering from wounds. Some would even come over in their hospital gowns, in wheelchairs with Intra Venous (IV) tubes hooked to them, pushing a rolling stand with the IV bags hanging from it, still in a cast of some kind, or sporting a new prosthetic limb.

After a year behind a desk and flying part-time, I was sent to an Instructor Pilots Course and assigned to Ft Belvoir, VA. I flew each weekday as an instructor pilot in a formal curriculum upgrading pilots. As I was now flying each day at a new assignment with mostly married guys, I realized that going through like uneducated and having a good time was getting me nowhere. Therefore, I decided to get my life moving in a new and more positive direction. I started taking college courses four nights a week with the intention of getting a degree, leaving the Army, and then finding a civilian job. However, weekends were still for fun.

The time at Ft Belvoir was interesting. We flew VIP missions (I tried to avoid them), flew people to secret sites around the Washington Area (some have been disclosed since then), flew an armed security force for nuclear weapons movements, flew support of military personnel during the anti-war demonstrations in downtown DC, and generally had a good time flying around the Mid-Atlantic States. There were a number of other interesting classified things that went on which I do not think have been made public, so I will refrain from providing details here – so, let's just leave it as "it was an interesting assignment". Those were the days you could even borrow a military aircraft for the weekend to do "training" and fly places such as to the beach or to visit friends. We used that perk often and had a lot of fun doing so.

During the spring of 1972, I was on a routine training flight to McGuire

AFB, NJ with Vietnam now a memory. We were ready to pull pitch and return to Virginia and we called the tower for clearance. Tower told us to hold for incoming aircraft. We were annoyed as being a helicopter we could take off in any direction – but this was an AF base and we had to taxi to and use the runway.

All of a sudden, dozens of fire trucks, ambulances, police, and support vehicles streamed past us with emergency lights on heading for the runway. They positioned themselves strategically on both sides with hoses ready and fire suits on. We simply wondered what was going on. Then the call – "*McGuire Tower, MEDEVAC flight for landing*" and we watched as all twelve C-141 cargo aircraft landed in sequence and taxied to the ramp with fire trucks and ambulances escorting each aircraft. Once parked, the ramps dropped and our hearts sank as we watched the latest war casualties being carried off on litters to ambulances and then being whisked away to the hospital. Others were rolled off in wheelchairs and some were ambulatory. They were treated with care, respect, and dignity. Most of America had forgotten that their fellow Americans were still fighting and dying in Vietnam. We felt terrible and a bit depressed seeing all those men wounded in a war the public no longer remembered, cared about, or supported. I had a lump in my throat watching this – as we just sat there staring without speaking.

Once the final ambulance left, the tower called, apologized for the delay, and cleared us to taxi to the active. We told them it was not a problem and meant it. However, by this time we were now too low on fuel to meet our reserve fuel requirement and had to shut down and then refuel. The flight back was very quiet. Upon landing, we found the 50 foot long grounding cable still attached to the aircraft which the crew chief missed disconnecting after refueling. While this could have been catastrophic if caught in the main or tail rotor, we just forgot about reporting it because the crew chief had never been to Vietnam and still seemed so rattled from what he witnessed at McGuire there was no reason to beat him up. He was sorry and we accepted that and moved on.

By 1972 the Vietnam War was closing down and in the summer of 1972 the Army had a Reduction In Force (RIF) of both Commissioned and Warrant Aviators, which cut the overall Warrant Aviator force strength by almost 30%. A lot of good pilots elected to get out when offered a release but others were forcibly discharged to meet the number quota, especially

lower grade Commissioned Officers. Many of the best Commissioned pilots for years had been told to forego their branch qualification time as they were needed in Aviation assignments more. The Army repeatedly promised these Commissioned Aviators special consideration in the future. The special consideration came in the form of a promotion passover and/or a RIF (Reduction In Force – release from active duty) for virtually all of those who had not made their Branch qualification time.

In September 1972, I received orders sending me back to Vietnam with a reporting date of mid October. They apparently had an emergency requirement for instructor pilots and, as I was not identified in the RIF to be forced out, so I was available and at the top of the list. My feeling was simply ambivalence -- as I was still single and the war would be over soon and maybe before I was due to report. Additionally, the guys in personnel promised to bring me back to the same unit as thanks for going on short notice and not complaining. To me, it was no big deal.

# PART XVIII

## Tour Two

## F Troop 8th Cavalry
## 1st Aviation Brigade



**1st Aviation Brigade Patch**

# CHAPTER 1:

## THE RETURN -- BIEN HOA

The return to Vietnam was similar to my first deployment but we went by way of Travis AFB California, Alaska, and Japan to Cam Ranh Bay. Upon arrival in country, I gradually discovered that my second tour in Vietnam was completely different from my first.

At the repo depo, we filled out an assignment preference sheet as to where we wanted to be assigned. How nice I thought, we have a choice. I asked for II Corp as this was where I spent my last tour and knowing the terrain would make things easier. Another pilot with me asked for III Corp for the same reason. We were both equal in rank, aircraft type and qualifications so this was an easy sell. We got our assignments the opposite of what we asked for – he went to II Corp and me -- to III Corp. We were both assigned to Air Cavalry Troops in the 1st Aviation Brigade which was now reduced to only a few aviation units of the previous hundreds.

In typical Army fashion, the emergency Instructor Pilot (IP) requisition we filled was not needed at all and we were assigned as just pilot replacements. We just laughed as the Army had not changed and the assignment preference sheets seemed now more than ever like a joke. Logic and common sense sometimes had no place in making personnel assignments, or maybe they just wanted to know where we wanted to go so that they could make sure that we didn't get there. Having worked at HQ U.S. Army Military Personnel Center (MILPERCEN), I really found it comical – and some poetic justice.

Prior to leaving the repo depo, I was approached by a couple of Warrant Officers on their first tour who asked me to talk to a fellow classmate Warrant of theirs who was just out of flight school. I introduced myself to WO1 Talbot and asked him how he was doing. He looked forlorn and immediately said he knew he was going to die in Vietnam. Somewhat surprised, I did my best to convince him otherwise by pointing out the war was going to end shortly, the level of U.S. involvement had dropped, and the mission he would support and unit he would be flying with was not really bad at all. No matter what I said, he just kept repeating he was not going to live and he would be shipped home in a box. In all my time in Vietnam, I had never run across anyone who was so convinced he would die. I even

suggested he surrender his wings if he was so worried. He simply said he wanted to fly and was not afraid to fly but that he was going to die regardless – it was his fate and he knew it. After about thirty minutes, I could say no more and wished him well. He was a really nice guy, thanked me for talking to him, and then wished *me* luck.

I was flown the next day to Saigon and picked up by a Huey from my new unit and then flown to Bien Hoa Airbase. Upon arrival, I found the unit had the same typical hootches and layout of buildings next to the heliport as I had experienced in II Corp during my first tour. Once again, this unit had hootch maids, kitchen help, and Charlie-the-Shit Burner.

OK, I was back. Now what?

# CHAPTER 2:

## THE WAR AND UNIT MISSION

My first tour was during the height of U.S. involvement with over 500,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam. By 1972 virtually all American ground combat troops were gone from Vietnam and the whole atmosphere had changed. Very little U.S. Military presence remained (about 35,000 men) and the only U.S. personnel engaged in combat were the U.S. Aviation Units and Special Operations Units supporting the Vietnamese Army (ARVNs). What had been thousands of U.S. Army helicopters in country was now just a few hundred assigned to the 1st Aviation Brigade. Most former large and busy U.S. bases in Vietnam were now abandoned. Others had been taken over by Vietnamese forces in total or shared with the remaining U.S. Forces. Bien Hoa Air Base was now mostly a Vietnamese Air Force base with a small USAF contingent, two U.S. Army Air Cavalry Troops (F Troop/8th Cav and F Troop/9th Cav) and a few other small U.S. Army support units.



**Bien Hoa – Unit ramp and the living area cleaned up and deserted after the cease fire and ready to be turned over to the Vietnamese**

The Air Cavalry Troop I was assigned to had recently moved from I CORPS, had a new Commander assigned, and had been redesignated as F Troop 8th Cavalry with a unit callsign of BLUE GHOST.




This unit had the mission of collecting intelligence north of Saigon and engaging with the NVA if we found them. Instead of the American Infantry we had in my first tour, we now had Vietnamese Rangers assigned and sat alert with us for site exploitation or securing downed aircraft and crews. They were motivated, well trained and loyal. I never worried about them or their support for us.

As before, I in-processed with the personnel, finance, flight records and saw the flight surgeon. Supply issued my rifle, sidearm, chicken plate and other gear. Unlike my first tour, the Army now issued survival vests and survival radios to all pilots and co-pilots in Vietnam.

On my initial briefing I realized how much had changed. I was told the NVA were now using shoulder fired, heat seeking, anti-aircraft missiles. The Army had installed heat diffusers on each aircraft as a means to confuse the missile. This was not foolproof, so we had to fly lower, be more careful, and look for the smoke plume when they launched a missile so that we could try to take evasive action, if possible. Additionally, the NVA were also now using highly effective ZSU 23-4 anti-aircraft guns in addition to .51 anti-aircraft fire. This also required lower flight to minimize detection. However, lower flight altitudes put us in the range of small arms and Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs). Bottom line, Vietnam was an even more deadly environment for helicopter now than on my first tour.

Additionally, I was advised if I was shot down, I needed to evade as best I could and hope for the best, as there were no forces available for a search or rescue. Finally, I was advised to take care of my equipment as the supply train had dried up and replacement gear was in short supply. However, if I wanted to go downtown and buy gear from the Vietnamese who stole it from us I could. Making matters worse, we were advised not to “take” any stolen

things from the Vietnamese vendors as we would be charged with theft. I thought -- just how screwed up can a place get but I later found out that it was only going to get worse.

During my initial flights I realized this area of Vietnam (III CORPS) was considerably different from my previous tour. To the north it was hilly (not mountainous like II CORPS) and gradually became flatter closer to Saigon. Below Saigon it was completely flat in the Mekong Delta area. The really odd feature of this area was a mountain called Nui Ba Dinh which was to the west of Saigon and rose about 3000 feet out of a flat area of rice paddies. There was not even a hill near it for 20 miles. Also different about his area was that to the north of Saigon in many of the flatter terrain areas were numerous rubber plantations still operating as if the war did not exist. They were off limits to combat operations as both sides did not want the plantations harmed. The South Vietnamese Government wanted the revenue and the North Vietnamese would hide supplies and support centers in these plantations.

Being older now than I was in my first tour, with more maturity, more experience in the Army, and having been an Instructor Pilot, I approached this new assignment differently. As I looked around the unit I saw a real morale problem, racial problems, and a unit in trouble in many other ways. Worse, I expected and accepted the wild behavior from the 20 year old first tour Warrants; but, I was not prepared for what I saw as their poor aviation skills and lack of motivation to be good pilots by quite a few of them. Apparently, the flight school classes had decreased in size dramatically, the standards had dropped, and the Warrant pilots now graduating were a different breed from years before. Additionally, the unit itself was overrun with Vietnamese female civilians just hanging out who were explained to me as “private hootch maids”. Immediately outside the compound gate was a bordello where many of those who did not have “private hootch maids” were spending their evenings and time off.

With regard to unit leadership, the First Sergeant was an old infantry guy and straight shooter who did his best; but, it was a losing battle because the Commander, who was a nice guy, appeared overwhelmed and with what I viewed as odd priorities. For instance, the Commander spent most nights sitting in a Jeep observing who went to the bordello just outside the compound gate. Why? Very simply, I remember him stating “Any man who would cheat on his wife will cheat on his Commander”. Given the leadership

and morale problems of this unit, if this was a ship I had just boarded -- it would have been named the "Titanic".

On the “good” side, the one thing that kept this unit functioning was that about half of the Commissioned and Warrants were on a second tour. All of the second tour Warrants were very good pilots who got along well with each other – even better, most of the first and second tour Commissioned were good pilots, had a great attitude, and were easy to work with as well. It was obvious everyone knew the war would be over soon, we would be going home, and no one wanted to be the last casualty in a war everyone at home had forgotten about.

In spite of everyone expecting the war to end soon and morale being low, everyone shared the load. The aircrews were professional and risked their lives doing their reconnaissance job each day the best they could. Additionally, the maintenance personnel continued to work and do excellent work in spite of a shortage of parts.



**Cobras on the ground at Lai Khe for lunch break.** Photo courtesy of Denny Wiechman

The mission of the unit was to do reconnaissance north of Saigon from the Cambodian Border to the South China Sea. Each day, the unit launched aircraft to check out specific areas to collect intelligence or to verify what the intelligence folks had gathered from other sources. I was assigned to the Lift Platoon, so I was flying the Huey again doing a mission that was actually very boring. We just flew to a forward location near where the LOH and gunships would be working (normally Lai Khe) and waited in case something went wrong so we could then go to their rescue. Normally, there were no problems and late in the afternoon of each day we went home.

However, we did get to see some interesting things at different locations

like bomb craters so big that NVA tanks (Russian manufacture) were stuck and abandoned in them. Also, the town of An Loc had a fierce battle earlier that year and was in ruins. There was a lot of things to see as there were still NVA tanks stuck in the concertina wire from the assault, many tanks destroyed in the streets from the block to block fighting, and unexploded ordnance everywhere.



**Views of the destroyed town of An Loc**



**Russian built tank in bomb crater.** Photo courtesy of Denny Wiechman

Otherwise, it was dull and routine duty as a Huey pilot in this unit as standby at Lai Khe was long hours and flying was minimal. I asked to move to the LOH platoon, but they already had more pilots than they needed.

For a number of reasons, I was appointed an Aircraft Commander (AC) my third week in the unit with the callsign of "Blueghost 23" or simply "Ghost 23". This meant I was now responsible for flying with some of the

knuckleheads I had identified earlier as poor pilots. Most of the new Warrants and Commissioned were really good guys, who wanted to learn and I was able to mentor or help; but, for some, there was no hope. As the line in the movie "Sixteen Candles" goes – I was "*Kinda like the king of the dip shits*". I just laughed inside as this was obviously now my penance for past behavior.

One particular WO1 I flew with sulked, was uncooperative, and miserable to fly with all morning – so after when we landed for lunch I had had enough. I pulled him aside asked him in the ever so gentle Vietnam way *"You have been a pain in the ass all morning? Do you have a problem?"* He initially curtly said "No" but after I said "*Really, you could have f**king fooled me – so what is it?"* he bitterly complained he had been in country for over six months and was not an AC yet. He then whined that I was appointed as an AC in just three weeks and as he put it "*that was not fair*".

I tried explaining the rationale based on my experience, my map study of our area of operations (AOR) and other things, hoping to give him hints to success; but, he appeared unwilling to accept logic or facts. Finally, because he was being a complete narcissistic jerk, not listening, and simply whining (manly griping/bitching is OK, whining is not --- and any guy can tell the difference!), rather than continue the nice approach, I shifted gears and told him my observations. I specifically pointed out that after six months in country he could not navigate, knew no landmarks, could not compute simple time or distance problems, knew no common frequencies, and did not even know his aircraft operating limitations or emergency procedures. Very directly, I told him with his attitude he would probably *never* make AC and was an embarrassment as a Warrant. I finished this tongue lashing by telling him that if I was on Instructor Pilot (IP) orders I would recommend he be grounded for deficiency.

For some reason, he believed these things did not matter, this was a problem that was everyone's fault but his, and he never improved. He was mad at me and did not talk to me – a real blessing as I did not have to listen to any more of his whining. He ended up as one of the two criminals in the CHAPTER 3 section titled – **COFFEE, NO THANK YOU.**

# CHAPTER 3:

## BIEN HOA EXPERIENCES

Bien Hoa was located to the northeast of Saigon and had been a major USAF base with U.S. Army units also stationed there. By the time I arrived, virtually all the USAF was gone. The Vietnamese AF (VNAF) had taken over the main airfield and many of the buildings. The U.S. Army presence consisted primarily of two Air Cavalry Troops, one Army Security Agency unit, a communications unit, the Base Exchange, a U.S. Medical Facility with a Flight Surgeon and some smaller support organizations. .The USAF had only a small detachment and operated the tower, base operations (baseops), the fire station and some support functions for transient aircraft.

There was not a whole lot to do and even the old USAF Officer's Club was now the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) Officer's Club. The front of the club included a really great restaurant featuring French-Vietnamese Cuisine at excellent prices. However, typical of life in Vietnam, the bar area was now nothing more than a rip-off where guys would waste away their time and a lot of money buying "Saigon Teas" from the women and then end up in a brothel in one of the many back rooms. The Saigon Tea was nothing more than highly priced ice tea the women wanted the GIs to buy for the "privilege" of talking to them. Of course, the women got a cut of the money for each tea they sold and for the sex they provided there in the almost dark bar or back rooms.

Our Cavalry unit had its own private Officer's Club (converted hootch with all the elegance of a ghetto bar) where we gathered each evening for some camaraderie as there was not much else to do. However, the drinking and partying was much more sedate, and the wild times of my first tour were much fewer in number and only on those few occasions when a band was booked. We did have a great time on band nights. Mixed drinks were still less than 25 cents each. Things were somewhat boring and not as interesting as my first tour – especially evenings and on days off.

## NO INTELLIGENCE HERE

One morning we had our normal mission briefing without anything special being noted and then we went off to fly. On this day, the location for

reconnaissance was the Minh Thanh Rubber plantation. From past experience we knew it was an NVA safe area because this plantation and the Michelin Rubber Plantation had not been bombed for political reasons. All went well for most of the morning but then the LOH and Cobras came under very heavy fire. One Cobra was shot down. We launched our ready reaction force but the pilots were rescued by the LOH prior to our arrival.

Upon return to our the unit for a debriefing, Captain Derelict, the Intelligence Officer who gave us the morning briefing, was there to take the debrief. During the debriefing CPT Longo (who was flying one of the gunships) offhandedly said "*There must have been a company of NVA anti-aircraft there*" to which CPT Derelict said calmly "*No it was a regiment*". I looked at him and remarked that he had not mentioned anything about any anti-aircraft units during the morning briefing and I asked, "*How come?*" CPT Derelict said smugly "*If I would have told you what was really there, I did not think you would have looked close to confirm our intel*". CPT Longo yelled "*WHAT!*" then sprang out of his chair, flew across the table, hit CPT Derelict in the face, and knocked him out of his chair and to the floor. I pulled him back from going over the table for another hit. CPT Derelict got up and immediately claimed he was going to press charges. I could tell Longo was ready to finish him off, so I asked him to let me handle this. I calmly pointed out to Derelict that he could be charged with dereliction of duty, conduct unbecoming, and I stressed "*Bottom line, you were at fault*". He yelled "*What??*" I then explained to him, the way we saw it when Derelict screwed up and nearly got some crews killed by lying in the morning briefing, CPT Longo called him on it. At that point Derelict got enraged and took a swing at CPT Longo who just defended himself. I asked if any of the other three pilots in the room saw it differently and of course, they all saw Longo simply defending himself -- as I described it. One guy went so far as to strongly suggest that CPT Derelict never return again to our unit because of what he had done – as there was a lot of jungle and he could come up missing.

For some reason, CPT Derelict was pissed and considered that a threat. I assured him he misunderstood -- it was a promise and then we told him never to come back. We never saw or heard from CPT Derelict again.

## REVETMENTS ARE TOUGH

A revetment consisted of two sandbagged walls about 5 feet high and 40 feet long in the shape of an L or positioned parallel to each other with enough space between them that an aircraft could park. They were intended to protect the helicopter from fragmentation during a mortar attack. Getting an aircraft in and out of the parallel protective revetment was the hardest part of the job because the rotor wash swirled around in a revetment and caused a great deal of turbulence. Things could go wrong quickly and disastrously, for even the best pilot getting into out of a parallel revetment. Everyone was at their best entering or exiting a revetment!



**Parallel Revetments**

Each morning after breakfast we would get our daily briefing to include weather, intelligence, ARC LIGHT areas, and the day's assignments. Normally the copilot would do the preflight while the crew chief and gunner would mount the M-60s and do last minute maintenance. The copilot would then wait for the Aircraft Commander in the revetment and then start the aircraft as he saw the Aircraft Commander (AC) approaching or start it and sometimes move the aircraft closer to the briefing room if it was parked far out on the ramp.

One morning we were finishing up our briefing when we heard a tremendous noise which could only be an aircraft crashing. We ran outside to see a Huey destroyed in a revetment with pieces still moving and dust settling from the disaster. Luckily the crashworthy fuel system worked and there was no fire. Believing those in the destroyed helicopter were probably seriously injured or dead, we rushed to assist. To our amazement, we saw one body rise from the rubble and then a second. Without a great deal of effort, they climbed out of this wreckage and walked up to us with nothing more than cuts, bruises, and a dazed look. This was really miraculous. As

they walked closer and in an attempt to try to help him, I looked at the pilot and said "*Before you speak, think carefully about what you will say to explain this*". The pilot was apparently the dimwit of his class and immediately said "*What, it was not my fault, the god d**m crew chief was flying*!" Someone asked – "What? *The crew chief, why*?" He then completed slitting his own throat by saying "*Yeah, the crew chief told me he could do it better than me, so I let him fly to prove it*".

Rightfully so, he was grounded, faced a Flight Evaluation Board, and lost his wings. Not sure if he faced a Court Martial. I have seen dumb and dangerous things but this guy was the Aviation Gold Medal Winner for stupidity. Needless to say, it was no surprise to me as he was one of the pilots who I identified on arrival as a poor aviator with terrible judgment.

## HOOTCH MAID CLEANUP

Three weeks after getting to the unit I was getting bored, so I approached the Commander about what I perceived was a domestic hire problem. I had already talked to the First Sergeant and he was on-board but cautioned me about the Commander. Once I had the Commander's attention (which was a task), I outlined the security issue, the ongoing theft issue, the fact the workers had not been paid in three months, my belief the money collected for the civilians was being stolen, only 40% of those allowed on the compound actually worked, and a bunch of other problems relating to this issue. He was surprised and clueless -- so I asked to have the job of managing it and outlined my plan to fix all of this. All I asked him to do was get the company in formation, tell them I was in charge of civilian hires and then I would tell them how things were going to change under his authority. He agreed.

I did an assessment before addressing the unit formation to identify who worked and who needed to go. I went into every hootch and civilian work area to validate the workers – except for Charlie the Shit Burner as his position needed no validation. During this process, I went into one hootch and right away five black guys told me that I was in the black hootch and needed to get out -- as no one white was allowed in. Wow, this unit had a real racial problem that was worse than I thought. I was unfazed.

I informed them that I was the new hootch maid manager, an Officer, and doing a job regardless of anybody's color. They were still not receptive and one guy was somewhat hostile and objecting to me being there for the group.

So a new approach was needed. I went from nice to dogmatic. I then explained they had a choice -- let me in to come and go as I please to check on the hootch maids or I would pull their cleaning lady. I explained they would have to do their own clothes washing, boot shining, hootch cleaning, exterior cleanup, and be detailed for KP. I ended by laughing and comically telling them if they wanted to do their own laundry and cleaning or be known as the smelly black guys with the dirty uniforms in the dirty black hootch, that would now be their choice. They were a bit shocked and realized I was not kidding, but the same guy as before objected again and started to mouth off at me. At that point another guy had had enough and saw the light. He told the radical of the group to shut up and the others joined in and shouted him down. He then laughed, looked at me, and said *"Sir, you have a convincing way with words"*.

He decided to take my offer and the rest of the group quickly agreed. We had an understanding. From that point on, I would just stop by to check up on the hootch maid and her work. I showed them respect and they reciprocated. I would sit and talk with them from time to time, and we got along just fine. A lot of people wondered why I was the only white guy who came and went as I pleased in that hootch - I let them wonder. I ended up having to use the same approach in a couple of NCO hootches who simply wanted to keep their "private hootch maids". My answer was "*Nope, they work for me under my rules or not at all – no private hootchmaids!*" -- fair is fair, for all.

After my assessment and the briefing to the company, I ended up firing the head hootch maid for theft and incompetence and all the non-workers. I then took up a special collection ($15 dollars) from each man in the unit which gave all the remaining workers their back pay and a bonus. The end results were that the thefts stopped, the compound was cleaner, and the workers got treated decently, and were paid regularly.

On the downside, the "private hootch maids" could not get on-base because I had their access passes revoked and those who were fired supposedly put a contract out on me with the local cowboys. I was not concerned. Within the compound, a couple of the enlisted folks warned me that some GIs were apparently so upset they had threatened to "frag" (kill me with a fragmentation grenade) me for the loss of their paramours. Once again, I was unfazed and had no trouble – as threats were a dime a dozen and flying was more dangerous than those clowns.

In the end, things worked out great as the job filled my spare time and it was actually fun. I was like the Godfather of our little compound making sure the hootchmaids and other workers were treated right, got paid properly, and got the respect they deserved. For me it was very simple -- for anyone stronger, in a position of authority, or better educated to take advantage of people (especially abuse or mistreat women and/or children) who may have been poor and uneducated and just trying to make an honest living is just wrong. If a hootch maid complained of mistreatment by any GI in the unit, he was cut off from cleaning services -- but still had to pay or I required him to do KP. The word spread quickly and all problems ended after the first complaint. Doing what is right is sometimes more work and can be very painful; but, for me, it is normally well worth the time and effort in the end.

## SO WHAT IS THAT

One day while on standby at Lai Khe, we saw something we had never seen before. Across the ramp was an old UH-1C (Charlie Model Huey) configured as a gunship but with odd looking equipment hanging from it. Being ever so curious, I walked over and asked the two Warrant Pilots what it was. They simply called it the TOW System which stood for Tube Launched, Optically Tracked Wire-guided (TOW) missile system. In essence, it was the prototype system for future tank killing in Europe. Apparently, the NVA began a major offensive operation months earlier at An Loc using tanks. The TOW system was undergoing tests in California and in six days the test crews found themselves back in lovely Vietnam to help defeat the armor.

He gave me a complete tour of the system and even let me use the tracking system to see how it worked. This system was quite impressive as it was highly accurate, lethal, and had scored a number of tank kills from about a mile. The TOW system was later installed on Cobra gunships and widely deployed around the world as part of the Army Aviation force.



**Destroyed NVA Tank**

## COFFEE, NO THANK YOU

Unfortunately, not everyone who wears a uniform serves proudly or honorably. Little known to the general American public, the U.S. Military had a jail for American soldiers in Vietnam. It was located just outside Saigon in the town of Long Binh and humorously called LBJ (initials of President Johnson) for the Long Binh Jail. Vietnam was pretty lax as far discipline went and you had to commit a serious crime to face a Court Martial -- as most discipline was punished by an Article 15 monetary fine. So in this jail were two classes of prisoners – those awaiting trial such as murderers, deserters, black marketers, drug dealers, rapists, people convicted of assaulting NCOs or Officers, and other major criminal offenses. The second group were those already convicted of crimes but serving only a short sentence not requiring transfer back to the U.S. Obviously, this was a hell hole in a hell hole. Major criminals with long prison sentences were sent back to Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary upon conviction but those with short sentences served time at LBJ – which was also "bad time" -- as it did not count toward the year of duty in Vietnam. In essence, the clock stopped when you went in and started when you got out.

Prior to the final cease fire in early January 1973, we had our normal morning briefing in the HQ/Operations building. The briefing room had a coffee pot and most of the pilots drank coffee and enjoyed it sometimes as their breakfast. At the end of one particular briefing while on the way to their aircraft, the pilots who had had coffee experienced some kind of weird and unusual feelings. They all checked in with the Flight Surgeon who immediately grounded them and sent blood samples out as an emergency analysis request. Within a day, it was determined someone had spiked the

coffee pot with what we found out later were Quaaludes.

A quick investigation determined two of our more worthless WO1s had joked about doing just that to other pilots the week before and had left for the repo depo that morning on their way home. Apparently, their plan was to fly to the States where they already had orders to be released from active duty upon arrival. They figured they had plenty of time and would be out of the Army before anyone figured out they were responsible.

Those two made it through the repo depo and all the way back to Travis AFB. Upon getting off the aircraft they were met by four MPs on the ramp, put under arrest, and flown directly back to Vietnam on the next plane.

I did not drink coffee at that time in my life, but I can assure you had they returned to the unit they would have probably suffered a worse fate than a Court Martial, delivered by the hands of those they had drugged. These were despicable low-lifes and an embarrassment to the Warrant Officer Corps. I was told they went right to LBJ (Long Binh Jail) where they were held for trial. We never saw them again and I hope they were convicted and went to jail for a long time.

## FLARE BUNKER FIRE

Every night, one aircraft and crew was put on alert to support a flare mission, if one was needed. The flares were about four feet long and each had a parachute. A lanyard was held when they were tossed out of the aircraft. The lanyard deployed the chute and set off the magnesium inside the flare. Each night the flares were hand loaded on the aircraft and taken off in the morning if the aircraft was used for something else that day.

One evening, the ground personnel were loading the flares and one of the guys was not paying attention. He apparently snagged the lanyard from a flare still inside the bunker. The flare ignited which sequentially set off the other flares which provided us an amazing show of light and heat. The whole bunker melted as well as everything in and around it from the heat. Because we had our own sun glowing through most of the night, we brought out chairs, drank, laughed, and watched the show. The standby mission was canceled for two days until we could get a fresh supply of flares delivered. Thankfully, there were no injuries or damage other than to the storage area. As this was a careless mistake, no one ever got into trouble for the $100K debacle or a late night entertainment or illumination spectacle as some of us

viewed it.

## IG INSPECTION

The purpose of an Inspector General (IG) inspection is to make sure at least once a year everything is being done “right” in the unit and for combat units to ensure they are prepared to fight a war. During my first tour there were no IG Inspections as the assumption was – if we are prosecuting a war, obviously no one needed to ensure we were trained, equipped, and ready. By the time my second tour took place, things in Vietnam had become so routine, we now had IG inspections. To my astonishment, we cut back our war support for two weeks to prepare for an inspection and then shut down completely for a week to be inspected. An unbelievable hassle that only the Army could impose on itself in a war zone that resulted in findings everyone knew – supplies were slow to arrive, unit morale was low, and other very serious problems -- such as we were using pencils to fill out some forms instead of pens. At the end of this unnecessary farce, we were deemed to have met the minimum standard for combat operations – this was nice to know, as we had been conducting combat operations and would continue after they left regardless of the result!

# PART XIX

## The Final Cease Fire
## and the
## Long Road Home

# CHAPTER 1:

# THE FINAL CEASE FIRE

There had been many cease fires in Vietnam implemented during different holidays and we just finished a cease fire for a few days over Christmas. However, we all knew the cease fire to end the war was coming; but, day after day, the war continued on. We all felt it would have ended quicker if the negotiators had been living in Bangladesh instead of Paris.

The morning the "end of war" cease fire was announced it was a surprise to us in a number of ways. As soon as we showed up for the morning briefing we were told of the cease fire being in effect and had our side arms and M-16s immediately taken from us. Next, we were told all reconnaissance missions were cancelled and the only aircraft to fly were the Hueys -- which were assigned some resupply missions for the SOF detachments. Finally, we were told all U.S. Combat Troops must be out of Vietnam no later than 31 March 1973.

Upon arrival at the aircraft, we were surprised to see the gun mounts had already been taken off the Huey aircraft. Additionally, the LOHs and Cobras were already being de-armed and being prepared for shipment back to CONUS. When we asked why all of our personal weapons and aircraft defensive weapons (M-60 machine guns) had been taken from us, we were told – if there is a cease fire violation the USG (I.E. State Department) wanted to make sure we did not cause it. When asked how we would defend ourselves if attacked, the only reply was for us to fly and suck it up. So off we went continuing to be shot at from time to time until we departed country two months later -- but at least we were not being shot at as often as before the cease fire started.

Three days after the cease fire began, we learned that on the morning of the first day of the cease fire WO1 Talbot was flying a Huey when he spotted an NVA flag flying over a village below. WO1 Talbot was the pilot I spoke with in the repo depo who was convinced he would die in Vietnam. As the story goes from a guy in his unit, the Aircraft Commander wanted the NVA flag as a trophy so the Huey hovered next to the flag pole. The Huey and crew were unarmed and somehow foolishly believed the cease-fire would be respected. As the crew chief was ripping the flag off the pole as a souvenir, some NVA troops opened fire on the aircraft. WO1 Talbot was killed that

morning. His real name is located on the last panel of names on the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington, DC.

Two days after the cease fire, we had our first news reporters show up and slither around our compound. Apparently the folks at Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) or U.S. Army Vietnam (USARV) started talking about the cease fire support and personnel from our unit being tapped to provide it. Very interesting, and as they asked questions it became obvious they knew a lot – more than we did, as we were told nothing. I asked the Commander to have a unit call for all personnel and to provide guidance as to what we could or could not say so that no-one would get in trouble. He declined, so that night at the club I gave an impromptu briefing to the guys. Most guys heeded the warning and treated the press like the plague. Needless to say, two guys did not, talked to them, were misquoted badly, and attributed to saying things they had not. They were in some hot water for a short time. Although I prefer to learn from the mistakes of others, apparently some people have to learn the hard way.

## CHAPTER 2:

## MOVE TO THAN SON NHUT

After the cease fire began, the unit continued to pack up, turn in equipment and our personnel prepared to head home. About 14 of us were notified we would be moving to Saigon (Than Son Nhut Airport) for a special flying assignment mission. Our motley group initially consisted of three Captains, one lieutenant, four CW2s and 6 WO1s who had been Cobra, Huey and LOH pilots.

Upon arrival, we reported to Colonel Bullhorn who worked for the Commander MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam). He was an old school, sharp, no-nonsense, and direct Infantry Officer who we found out later was in-charge of the support for the cease fire. Bullhorn simply gave us a welcome aboard pep talk. He told us we had an important mission, he was proud to have us, he knew we would make the U.S. Army proud. As he and everyone around him on his staff looked more like they were back in CONUS, he then addressed our appearance. He directly and forcefully stated that everyone of us was to show up the next day with proper haircuts, no mustaches, clean uniforms, polished boots, and be in regular issued uniforms – NO CAVALRY hats, spurs or anything else non-regulation. No questions or discussion about what he said – he just dismissed us, very abruptly.

This one-way meeting was less than three minutes and when we left some of the guys were quite shocked and a bit bewildered, if not indignant and defiant. They had never dealt one-on-one with a senior Grunt before or been addressed in such a manner, so they asked me what I thought – apparently expecting me to lead some kind of revolt. Having sized him and the situation up, I laughed and said – "*I think I am going to buy a new hat, and suggest you guys each do exactly what he said*". They complained and got an attitude of rebellion, so I simply said "*The war is over guys, he is serious and I am trying to keep you out of trouble. Work with me on this and we can make the best out of a crappy deal*". Fortunately, they followed my lead and we all got off on the right foot with Colonel Bullhorn and he considered us his team. He was fair, treated us well and when we took a problem to him we could not handle, he listened and then in normal Army manner yelled at someone else and got the problem fixed. A few years later I read he became an Army four star General. As for us -- we did our job well, made the best of this deal and

had as much fun as possible until we left country.

The Paris Peace Accords required two groups to be formed at the end of the war to work out provisions for the cease fire and troop withdrawal. One was the Four Party Joint Military Commission (JMC) consisting of the U.S., North Vietnam, South Vietnam and the Viet Cong. The other was the International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS) which were representatives from four neutral countries to oversee the cease fire. I remember them as Poland Hungary, Indonesia, and The Philippines. Somehow Canada was also involved. The provisional unit I was assigned supported the JMC while the ICCS was flown in aircraft from another unit. The JMC aircraft had orange striping while the ICCS aircraft had a white ICCS marking on their tail boom for identification. Supposedly, this was to keep the NVA and VC from shooting at us – or so the folks in Paris promised. We just thought it gave the enemy better reference points to shoot at us.



**ICCS Huey markings**



**JMC markings**

I do not remember our provisional unit having a real Commander but a couple of senior Captains were tapped for coordination and management roles. The aircraft, crew chiefs, maintainers, and pilots were cobbled together from two former units. Joining us were some Commissioned and Warrants from the other Air Cavalry (F Troop 1/9 Cav) unit being disbanded at Bien Hoa. We now had about twenty pilots in our merry little band of pirates whose only goal was to make the best of the situation until we left.

We just worked together to get things done and all got along very well doing so without any real internal stress, problems, reliance on rank or organizational structure. One of our Captains coordinated missions on a daily basis as tasked by Colonel Bullhorn, became our somewhat reluctant "leader", and did a great job for us. We supported anything that the JMC needed with regard to the cease fire. A lot of the missions flown were really interesting and we actually had a lot of fun flying them and hanging out on the ground at different sites.

Our first real mission was to land at an NVA held location to establish the first on-the-ground cease fire talks. No one to date had successfully landed at an NVA occupied location. One previous attempt in II CORP four days before failed as the aircraft came under heavy fire trying to land, aircraft took hits, and the mission was aborted. Therefore, having absolutely no faith in the Paris U.S. delegation or the NVA and MACV showing no confidence in the success of this mission, we were obviously overjoyed at this unarmed opportunity to get shot, killed, or taken prisoner.

Regardless of our feelings, ten pilots and five crew chiefs volunteered to fly this mission to Loc Ninh. Mid morning three weeks into the cease fire off went our five Hueys with MACV personnel to Loc Ninh. Loc Ninh was in a Communist controlled area further north than we had been flying missions but it should be easy to find.

For this mission, our flight lead was a Cobra gunship pilot (CPT Longo). He was not used to formation flying but really wanted to be lead as the senior pilot to take the first rounds if it was a hostile landing. Normally there would have been some objection and someone else more experienced would have flown lead; but, because we all got along and his heart was in the right place, nobody cared or objected. However, flying flight lead is somewhat of an art and quite different from Cobra

flying. As a flight lead you have to think ahead in a different way, make all movements slowly and deliberately, and understand that anything you did

incorrectly would be worse incrementally for each of the aircraft behind you.

As we had a mix of Huey, LOH, and Cobra pilots flying without a lot of formation flying experience, I got everyone together for a short briefing. After giving lead and the others some formation flight reminders, I asked all to keep two times the distance than normal, and that I would be trail (last) to keep an eye on everything. Takeoff was rocky and our formation looked more like a gaggle -- but things smoothed out enroute and all went well until arrival.

Upon getting within visual distance of Loc Ninh, except for a couple of NVA with AK-47s on the landing strip, it looked deserted. Looking closer on short final, I could see a tank in the trees at one end of the strip, three ZSU 23-4 anti-aircraft guns camouflaged in the wood line and at least four .51 machine guns on tripods being manned.



On short final, the lead aircraft was too steep and fast on approach -- then unexpectedly and abruptly slowed. We all entered the dead-mans curve (too high and too slow for the flight conditions and power available) when someone called for a “go-around”. I keyed my mike and told flight lead disregard a “go-around” and to continue -- but to increase his ground speed and land long if he had to -- because not only could this group have a mid-air collision but it looked like if we did anything other than land the NVA could use it as an excuse to open fire on us. In spite of the approach and landing not being to the highest standards of Army Aviation, we landed on the airstrip on time in a designated area previously marked off with small flags. It was obvious we were parked in a kill zone where mortars had already been ranged that day and as we looked to the woods we could see numerous machine guns pointing in our direction.

After landing we immediately shut down. All of a sudden the airstrip

started filling with NVA running at us who were coming out of the woods and from holes in the ground. I swear these people were part mole. It was an uneasy feeling on our part, but what could we do? All I could think of was – now I know how George Armstrong Custer felt.



**Huey with NVA canopies in the right background at our second time landing at Loc Ninh**



**Me at Loc Ninh. ICCS aircraft in the background** – Photo courtesy of Denny Wiechman

Things calmed quickly and at last any crisis was over – for now. The funniest thing was that as we looked around – the NVA were all white! Apparently, the NVA had been living below ground for so long and only coming out at night when it was safe that they lost their "tans". After the MACV team went off with the NVA, the fifteen of us (ten pilots and 5 crew chiefs) waited while the NVA swarmed around our aircraft out of curiosity. We took a couple of pictures with our new found NVA "friends" and then waited. The team was to be gone only for an hour but after 1 ½ hours passed we started to get concerned. The MACV team finally returned and we immediately took off and flew back to Saigon without incident. The first landing at a Communist held location was completed successfully. We were

told MACV, the White House, and Paris negotiators (with their five star lodging and meals) were happy and celebrating *their* success – we could care less as it was just another day for us and we would have more of the same tomorrow. We just went off to our usual dinner and night at the Officer's Club with friends.



**NVA and their flag with us at Loc Ninh. From left in back: Me, Denny Wiechman, crew chief and Ken Pankey**

After the first successful landing, a second was scheduled for actual talks and negotiations for POW exchanges. This time we had six aircraft loaded with MACV team members to include Major General McGruff.

As on the first mission, CPT Longo was in the lead aircraft (and now more comfortable flying a Huey) and I was last. Once again, we had a set landing time. After landing, the U.S. team departed the Hueys and met with some NVA General. He demanded MG McGruff sign a statement acknowledging we were late arriving and responsible for any problems. There were a few tense words and a discussion for about three minutes -- then McGruff wadded the paper into a ball and threw it at the NVA General's chest stating "*No*". I was impressed as this guy was tough. Once they knew who they were dealing with and McGruff was not intimidated, the NVA immediately calmed down and their show of force ended. We then relaxed and waited under canopies they had set up while the two generals negotiated matters. The NVA were cordial and put out food and drink for us. We politely declined their offer of everything except a seat in the shade and sat talking among ourselves until we could leave.




**From left: Doug Madigan, me, and Denny Wiechman.**



**Under the canopies being hosted by our new "NVA friends".** Two photos above courtesy of Denny Wiechman



As part of our JMC duties we had to fly NVA and VC Officers and enlisted folks between certain designated locations on about four different occasions. Needless to say, after spending time trying to kill them and dodging their bullets, it was a big psychological shift -- we were not by any means happy, thrilled, or eager to be their chauffeurs.

The first of these flights was from Loc Ninh to Saigon a few days after our second landing at Loc Ninh. On that day, we flew into Loc Ninh with a flight of five and had some time -- so we flew to An Loc and looked at the sights from the battle the year before. Tanks in bomb craters, blown up tanks in the city streets, unexploded ordnance and bomb craters virtually everywhere, and a city destroyed from the siege. When we got back, we began loading the NVA.



CPT Longo and I were flying different aircraft that day and as the aircraft were being loaded, he was helping to strap an NVA into a seat belt.

Each time he reached up, one NVA soldier standing to his left would elbow him in the side. Longo being Longo took the first two hits. However, on the third hit he reached around, grabbed this guy by the neck lifted him off the ground and reeled one arm back to punch him. Seeing this, I was close enough to grab his arm as I asked "*What are you doing*?". He just said "*I'm gonna kill this little gook bastard!*".

This was obviously not a good situation -- a whole bunch of people with weapons who did not like us were now looking upset and we were in the middle of their location and unarmed. I simply said "*Randy, Look around, do you want to get us all killed*". He got this dismayed look on his face, then dropped the guy in a way to make him fall to the ground while glaring at him. I looked at him, told him I understood as we all wanted to kill them, and suggested he take a break. He said "*OK*" then just very dejectedly climbed into the cockpit mumbling "*I really want to kill that guy*" and sat there pissed until takeoff.



**NVA loaded in my Huey and ready to fly to Saigon**

Later he lamented that going from being a Cobra pilot and killing them to being their chauffeur was really tough. I told him I agreed; but, times have changed, we all got a raw deal, and have to adapt. At the bar that night, we laughed with him about the whole situation, voted him our worst diplomat and least likely to fly NVA in the future. He agreed, promised to do better but then simply declined those missions in the future. We understood – he was a fellow pilot and friend and we take care of our friends. Regardless.

## OUTHOUSES – WHY?

The NVA were constantly demanding things or changing things and then

blaming the Americans in what became ridiculous publicity stunts. One of the most comical episodes of the cease fire was the great outhouse episode. As part of an agreement, the U.S. promised to provide living accommodations and outhouses for the NVA at different locations. Chinooks were used to fly the palletized materials out to each location and we would then fly the engineers out and back each day to build the camp and outhouses. After a great deal of time, effort, and expense over a two week period, the camp was completed.

After inspection of the camp, the NVA complained the U.S. built outhouses (which were identical to the ones used by the U.S. forces) did not meet the appropriate construction, sanitary, and privacy standards required by the NVA. They also complained that they were insufficient for the number of people who needed to use them. Considering they never had any latrines themselves, had never seen a toilet seat, and had been squatting wherever they liked for years, this was quite a bit of chutzpah. The newly constructed camp and outhouses were never used as we could not meet the standards they insisted upon. These kinds of ludicrous frolics went on until the day we left to try to say the Americans were not living up to our side of the deal.



**The unused camp**

## CHAPTER 3:

## OUR FINAL MOVE – DOWNTOWN SAIGON

Three weeks before leaving Vietnam all U.S. facilities at Than Son Nhut Air Base (Saigon International) were closed and turned over to the South Vietnamese. This required us to move downtown to the last U.S. occupied billeting. We started to feel like squatters being evicted as we moved from one place to the next. However, it was a novel experience living in downtown Saigon and being the last of the GIs in country. The streets were no longer teaming with GIs, as most were gone and the rest would be leaving soon. The bars and brothels had little to no business. We would dine at excellent French/Vietnamese restaurants and not have to wait. Sometimes we would go out for walks on some nights just for the fun of seeing what was going on and to kill some time.



**Downtown Saigon**

I still found it odd that in a supposed War Zone we could not wear our jungle fatigues or flight suits to walk around town. Even though this was after the Cease Fire, apparently that rule had been in-place for a number of past years. GIs were forbidden for carrying weapons and had to wear Class A (Greens) or Class B (Kaki) uniforms. Not sure why or how this started – but it always seemed weird to me. The only openly armed personnel were the US Military Police and the Vietnamese Police (known as the “White Mice”

because of the white helmets they wore).

The things I remember most about Saigon were the cowboys, the swindlers, the black market, the expats/deserters, the downtown bars, and the Officer's Club. The cowboys were local criminals who usually rode around on motorcycles and would steal what they could and then speed away. They also apparently freelanced for contract jobs such as strong-arming individuals or extorting merchants. One evening we watched as two cowboys on a motorcycle passed by a GI and ripped the camera off his shoulder. As they sped away the victim yelled "*thief, stop them*" and pointed at them. Less than a block ahead, another GI heard this. With all the cool and accuracy of Roger Staubach, he stepped out into the street, launched a half filled glass beer bottle at the driver, hitting him in the face, and causing them to crash – in a spectacular manner!

We walked over to look at the carnage as the GI victim ran up, retrieved his camera then kicked each one of these two dazed criminals as hard as he could – twice in vital spots. The victim of this crime then offered to replace the beer of the bottle thrower who refused the offer -- as he was now happy to have witnesses and bragging rights for such a feat. Everyone went their merry way before the White Mice (Vietnamese Police with white helmets) showed up. We left the two cowboys lying in the street dazed and unable to get up as Vietnamese people walked by pointing and laughing at them without any compassion.

Swindlers came in all different flavors but the most prolific con was money exchange. We were not allowed to have greenbacks and only used Military Payment Certificate (MPC). One con worked this way - a Vietnamese would offer to exchange greenbacks for MPC at a four to one rate thereby turning $100.00 into $400.00. One of our pilots was duped into this and thought he was smarter than they were. In spite of our warnings about both the legalities, the danger of being lured into a trap, beaten up by cowboys, and sleight of hand tricks, he went ahead – but at least took a couple of friends for protection. In the end, he was truly amazed at how the con artist left him with only blank paper and kept both the $100.00 and the MPC. I think he is still trying to figure out how it happened. Sleight of hand is amazing.

The open air markets in Saigon were teeming with business and all kinds of local goods could be purchased. Some of the silk paintings and other hand-made items were beautiful. In formal shops, you could buy custom

made shoes, boots, art, and clothing. Obviously, there was also a plethora of stands and stores with meat, vegetables and fruit – raw and cooked..

Along with local goods, Black Market sales were flourishing in Saigon. Almost anything the U.S. brought into Vietnam of any value could be found in open display in the merchant booths in Saigon. Stolen goods included brand new products imported for the Post Exchanges such as toothpaste, detergents, bath soap, towels, etc. In addition, U.S. military equipment such as flight gear, uniforms, boots, ammo clips, C-Rations, dental and medical supplies, cleaning supplies, etc. was available. I am sure weapons, radios, and other sensitive equipment could be purchased, but they were not out in the open.



**Saigon Street Market**

As more and more GIs left Vietnam, it was obvious there were quite a few civilian Americans in Saigon. Other than those employed in some capacity by the U.S. Government, some of the civilians were previously discharged military who returned to live in Vietnam and opened businesses. Others were simply deserters who had blended into the massive military presence to come and go as they pleased – even shopping on base and eating at the mess halls. Now that the U.S. Forces were few, they could no longer blend in, hide in plain sight, or support themselves through illicit activities. They were not hard to identify. When we would walk down the street and they would see us, they would disappear from sight really fast. The military did not seem to have an interest in tracking them down or arresting them. They just left them behind when the last troops left country.

The once thriving bar districts, brothels, and massage parlors of Saigon were now devoid of clients and mostly ghost towns. The busiest and most famous was the Tu Do Street strip and it was now empty of customers. The

women would see us coming from a block away and be hanging out of the windows and doors tying to get us to come inside. We would stop from time to time and give them a taste of their own game after bilking so many GIs with Saigon teas and other scams. As cruel as it was – we would bargain them down to the lowest bidder for services, then walk away laughing after comparing who got the best deal. Many a deal sounded too good to pass up – but we did. No one wanted to take an unwelcome present home to their wife or girlfriend. Not only did we get cursed at in English with every foul word known to mankind, we also found out there were a lot more foul words in the Vietnamese language than we were aware.

The Officer's Club at Than So Nhut was still open and we would meet there on many evenings to party. There were about sixty of us pilots left at Than Son Nhut and needless to say -- we sort of took over the club/bar. It was not a wild time on most nights but there was always a bit of socializing with each other, sharing information, some drinking games, and doing what could only be deemed stupid guy things. It was also the only place left where groups or bands were being booked for entertainment. So on those few show nights we had a really rowdy time typical of my first tour. Unfortunately, some people had trouble with their liquor and four stories come to mind.

The first story was about Captain O'Hooligan. He was about 6 foot 4 and 230 lbs and a really competent, nice, and personable guy – when sober. He never got into a fight with friends nor did he normally pick one with others at the bar. He would just be so rowdy the MPs would be called. Given his Irish genes, he judged the success of the evening based on not only how much he drank but how many MPs it took to take him down. Being of Irish descent myself, I did understand the drinking tradition but never did understand his logic or glee over how many black and blue MP club marks he would point to on his head, neck and back the next morning.

Another was WO1 Ramirez who liked to drink and smoke – too much. One morning as we walked outside our hootch heading for breakfast, we looked down from the second story balcony and saw Ramirez's mattress lying on the ground all burnt up showing an outline of his body. We were a bit alarmed and banged on Ramirez's door. After a pregnant pause, Ramirez opened his door and came walking out of his room looking hung over and a little charred. Apparently, he went to bed drunk while smoking and set his mattress on fire. We asked if he was OK - he then very seriously and in a deadpan voice remarked *"Man, I woke up with flames and smoke around me*

*thought I died and was in hell"*. We roared in laughter. He was serious. Then he went on to say how happy he was that he was too drunk to take off his NOMEX flight suit before going to bed - a fact which saved him from bad burns. We laughed again. He told us he put out the fire and then threw the mattress over the balcony because it was still smoking and then went back to sleep on the floor. Ergo his stellar appearance, charred aroma, and stiff walk.

The third and most interesting character was CW2 Shiplet. Shiplet was a second tour scout pilot who had been shot down on a previous tour, sustaining a number of burns from the aircraft fire and scars he would have for life. He was an average social drinker (which equated to an AA member in the States) who would hoot, howl, and be a party unto himself. We could tell when it was time to take him back to hootch because he would pull out his girlfriend's/wife's panties from his pocket put them over his head with the crotch across his nose and look at us through the leg hole with one eye in a half-crazed grinning manner. At least he was a cooperative and happy drunk who was a lot of fun to be around. He was by far the one individual we voted who was really unique among this group of misfits.

The last and wildest story was regarding a missing Air Force Jeep the AF claimed was locked and someone stole it. Two Warrant Officers in our group were identified as the possible Jeep thieves and it was alleged they traded it for all the women and drink they could consume in one night. Given our less than sterling conduct and reputation to-date, how such an allegation could be made against two of our own choir boys had us obviously dumfounded!

A short investigation was conducted and a number of us made statements attesting to the fact that the two Warrants were never near the Jeep at the time it was stolen. The General read the statements and apparently did not believe us (imagine that!). Probably because we were so close to leaving and the Jeep would have been turned over to the Vietnamese, he had the alleged culprits brought to his office. He apparently yelled at them, told them if any of us (guilt by association – rightfully so in this case) stepped out of line again before leaving country he would have no mercy and sent them back to warn all of us. So everyone behaved (sort of – maybe mostly, not really) for the last ten days we were there.

## VIETNAMESE PEOPLE

Living at Than Son Nhut and then in Downtown Saigon gave me the first

real opportunity to meet and see the Vietnamese people on a large scale. Generally, I found them to be polite and courteous. There is no doubt in my mind that culturally they are hagglers who will negotiate over the price of everything. The street merchants liked selling to Americans – as we just pay the price they state and very seldom haggle, Therefore, the profit margin is always high. A couple of us liked to haggle for the fun of it – the merchants would make faces of pain, tell us they would lose money, sometimes call me cheap, and use any other means to get a sale at their price. Sometimes, we would walk away three times only to be called back each time. Finally, a sale would be made at a fair price and they would either laugh or moan the whole time at the end saying things like "*I make no money, you should pay more!*". Those who laughed and were fair, I usually gave some extra money to as I left --- it was worth the entertainment!!

In meeting a number of Vietnamese, I found out many of the successful merchants owning shops were of French or Chinese ancestry and/or Catholic. They normally had fair prices for Americans and haggled very little. While their size and build were normally Vietnamese, their facial features were normally a give-away. According to those I spoke with, Saigon had a larger presence of this mix of ancestry because they or their parents fled North Vietnam after the country was divided. This flight was because many were Roman Catholic and felt repressed by the Communists. Ergo, the much larger number of Catholics in South Vietnam as well as those of French and Chinese ancestry.

## VIETNAMESE POW EXCHANGE

One evening we were told we would be supporting the Vietnamese POW exchange the next day at a location within the Minh Thanh Rubber Plantation. Early the next morning, we flew the JMC mission consisting of USG and MACV personnel up to that site. At the same time, the ICCS crews flew personnel from the neutral observing nations to the same location in Hueys and the POWs in Chinooks. Once there, we then shut down, wandered around freely, and watched the show.

At that location under some temporary canopies the Red Cross set up interview stations where representatives of the JMC (U.S. Government, The South Vietnamese Government and The North Vietnamese Government and Viet Cong) as well as the ICCS international observers could watch.

Each side brought forth their prisoners who were then interviewed individually and in private by the International Red Cross. At the end of these interviews, the POWs were asked if they wished to be returned to their respective militaries or preferred to stay with their captors. They made a decision, notified the ICCS observers, and signed a written document attesting to it. They were then released only to the entity they designated. This process took a day, and I am sure it may have happened in I, II, and IV Corps also.









Most of the prisoners exchanged were from North Vietnam as the NVA claimed they did not have many prisoners to return to the South Vietnamese government. A number of NVA prisoners refused to be returned to North Vietnam causing some complaints from the North Vietnamese Government. However, since the International Red Cross was in charge and the observing nations verified the information, there was nothing they could do except to complain more and slow things up.

The most interesting aspect of this exchange was the condition of the prisoners. As each NVA was repatriated, he was escorted by one or two NVA soldiers for a photo op to make it appear they needed help walking. The problem was that all the prisoners were better fed and healthier than the NVA who were not POWs. Some were even fat from all the food. A big photo op failure for North Vietnam.

The last group to be repatriated was flown in on Chinooks and consisted primarily of amputees. They all were on litters and all had lost two or all of their limbs.



**CH-47s unloading NVA prisoners**

The Americans had been taking care of them and they were in good physical condition other than they were missing their limbs. They were all repatriated to the NVA. When we took off at the end of the day, we could hear gunshots and were advised to fly south as no one knew what was going

on in the back part of the plantation. Being me and ever so curious, I turned north and we looked down on a freshly dug long trench. Lying in it were all those recently repatriated POWs missing three or four limbs -- all were being shot and about to be buried by the North Vietnamese. The NVA apparently did not have the ability, manpower, or desire to care for them and their solution was simple – shoot (murder) and then bury them. From my experience in my first tour this did not surprise me, this was simply the typical Communist way of doing business.

The American POW exchange was held on a different date from that of the Vietnamese prisoners. None of us flying the dangerous or tough missions were tasked or asked to participate. All of the senior ranking pilots came out of the woodwork at HQ MACV and HQ USARV to fill the cockpits. They simply pushed us aside now that the danger had passed and the photo op would happen. Quite truthfully, we were initially really pissed as we had been doing all the dirty work and would have liked to be there for the U.S. POW release; but, such is life and rank has its privileges. We got a day off and made the best of it. I went out with the clan and we were very happy as a group sightseeing, shopping, and having dinner downtown.

## ONE PARTING SHOT

In aviation, aircraft center of gravity computations are critical to all aircraft design and performance. Some aircraft have very narrow limits while others are hardly affected. For instance, the Huey can have its battery installed in either the nose or the tail boom based on the weight and balance computation. Either location works during most flights but it can be critical if it is installed in the wrong location when carrying some internal loads loaded too far forward or a sling load. As part of the preflight, the weight and balance paperwork of every aircraft has to be checked, and if not present or appropriate to the mission configuration of the aircraft, it has to be recalculated before flight.

One morning I checked the paperwork on the aircraft and the battery was in the tail boom but should have been in the nose. The crew chief should have caught this and moved it -- but this was not critical and mistakes happen. I brought it to his attention and he complained bitterly about the work of moving it. I just said, please make it right and move it. As expected, he bitched the whole time during this five minute job and then we were ready

to go.

We flew all day and as the day ended we were on our last leg heading from Loc Ninh to Bien Hoa. This was now six weeks after the cease fire and two weeks until we were scheduled to leave for home. All of a sudden and out of nowhere a .51 Caliber anti-aircraft gun opened up on us. Our aircraft was hit and rocked from the hits, the instrument panel exploded, and the cockpit then filled with smoke and battery acid.

We ended up on the ground just north of Lai Khe. Getting out we checked the damage. One round went through the battery access panel, through the bulkhead and into the battery where it exploded blowing up the instrument panel and causing the smoke, fumes and acid to fill the cockpit. Except for inhaling a lot of fumes and some acid drops hitting my leg and giving me some minor burns, everyone was fine. Drawing a straight line through the damage, had the battery not been moved, the round would have continued and hit the center of my chest. My crew chief and co-pilot just looked at that, laughed and said – "*good call on moving the battery*".



**Lai Khe airfield, town and old base camp**

Photographers came out and took pictures of the hits on the aircraft to send them to Paris to protest the cease fire infraction. My finger was in one picture pointing to one bullet entry point and the resulting aircraft damage. A picture of my finger was the closest I got to Paris and the wonderful dining and lifestyle our State Department negotiators were enjoying. I am sure they protested the violation with great indignation – as long as it did not interrupt their wine tasting, appetizer, main course, or dessert! A Chinook had been shot down the week before and I believe I have the dubious distinction of being in command of the last U.S. combat helicopter shot down in the war.

## HQ MACV– WAR, WHAT WAR?

For some reason the MACV J3 (a three star General) wanted a debriefing from us directly on how we were shot down. I was told to meet with him at his office in what we called the Pentagon East (HQ MACV). Two of us flew to MACV and landed on its helipad. After shutting down we headed for the entrance. Enroute we noticed four little houses with nice shrubs and lawns around them on this very nicely landscaped Shangri-la of a compound. Obviously one house was for the Commander. Regardless, they were very nice and I estimate from the size each probably had two bedrooms, a living room, bathroom, a small kitchen and eating area. Nice to know they were suffering through the same war with us!



**Everyone has a favorite to fly or hang out with – for me on this tour, it was Denny Wiechman. An excellent pilot, easy going, and simply a great guy.**

When we got to the MACV entrance door we were stopped by two MPs in dress green uniforms. They told us flight suits and jungle fatigues were not allowed in the HQ building and we could not go in as we were not dressed appropriately. As we were in a war zone, I thought they were kidding and laughed. Nope – they were not. I advised them we had a meeting with the J3 at his request. Immediately, panic hit as the MPs made a flurry of calls to allow an exemption to the dress policy.

After about ten minutes we were escorted into the building. It was, for lack of a better term, surreal. The building interior was like a stateside structure, everyone wore Class A or B uniforms and the place was decorated and furnished like the states. I think it was even air conditioned. As we walked through the building, everyone stopped and looked at us with funny expressions on their faces – apparently because we were in flight suits,

looked like we were actually participating in a war, and might defile their pristine environment. It was sort of like walking into the middle of a wedding reception wearing a plumber's outfit after having fixed the toilet. The place and people appeared so far removed from the war, they might as well have been in CONUS. There were also a lot of women there – so now I knew where all the U.S. Amy female admin troops assigned to Vietnam were – Saigon. I now knew what a real REMF (underemployed support personnel were referred to as the "Rear Echelon Mother F**kers" or REMFs) was and how detached MACV and USARV were from the actual war. Apparently, Vietnam had not been a very bad war assignment for some.

As for the J3 debrief, it was a non-event. He just wanted a first-hand account of flying after the cease fire and what had happened to us. He was apparently not aware we were being shot at so often since the cease fire and was genuinely nice to us and thanked us for the work we were doing. After fifteen minutes we were ushered out. We had never been there before; and, I was happy to never go back.

## LAST PLANE OF COMBAT TROOPS

In Paris, 31 March 1973 was set as the final day for all U.S. combat troops to be out of Vietnam. On that day we had a late wake-up, breakfast, preflighted our aircraft, and then flew to a dozen field locations to pick up the last combat troops (who were also the first in Vietnam) – Special Forces. The really big difference was that we did not wear our flight suits or jungle fatigues – for the first time in our lives, we flew with Class B khaki uniforms and regular shoes to be ready for the plane ride home. We threw our duffle bags in a Jeep to be taken to the airplane and the crew chiefs stayed behind to shower, change, and meet us on the jet. At each of the designated camps, we picked up the remaining SOF personnel and made our last flight sortie to Than Son Nhut Airport for a scheduled departure. It was a great last flight as no one shot at us, the weather and visibility were both great, our passengers were all ready for pickup, we met our scheduled times, and our helicopter performed flawlessly.



**Last day and before the last flight – our crew chiefs Denny Wiechman and me at Than Son Nhut (Saigon International)**

Our Huey was the last to arrive and we landed right next to a Continental Airlines 707 and shut down by the other Hueys which had landed just minutes before us. We walked right from the helicopter directly to the airplane carrying our helmet bags only -- no tie-down, no post-flight, no repo depo, no out-processing, no customs, and no plane ticket - as we were the last to leave. The only military left in Vietnam were the Marine Embassy guards and a handful of logistics personnel assigned to finish the final turn-over of equipment to the Vietnamese Military. The B-707 with the last of the GIs and our crew chiefs had already loaded for a scheduled departure and now we were the final passengers to board.

Although we were 15 minutes early, the engines started as we walked to the aircraft. The stewardess waved to us, had a big smile, and gave us a really warm welcome at the top of the stairs. I stopped, took one more look around from the top of the platform, thanked her, and stepped inside. She closed the doors immediately behind me, taxi started as we sat in our seats, and takeoff was within five minutes. As the aircraft rotated and the wheels cleared the ground, a loud roar and applause broke out. Other aircraft had left that morning and, although we were the last plane of combat troops to leave Vietnam, nothing could have been better in our minds. The war was over, we were alive, soon safely out of ground fire and missile range, and we were going home. All I could think of was "*Thank God it was over for us and America*".

# PART XX

## Reflections on My Tours

During WWII the British had a saying that went "*there were only three things wrong with the Americans – they are overpaid, over sexed, and over here*". I think the Vietnamese could have said the same thing. The people and their culture, economy, and country took a terrible beating.

On my many flights during the two tours, I was able to take in the sights and imagine what Vietnam could be without war. The beaches were stunningly beautiful and could offer many ideal locations for hotels, golfing, and vacations. The countryside was magnificently colorful and scenic, The rubber plantations interesting, the temples and churches were historic and great for sightseeing.





**M**ost of the people were generally peaceful, nice, friendly, and respectful. When I left, I wished the people of Vietnam peace and a speedy recovery; but, I knew this was probably not possible. Historically, the U.S. did not lose any war, militarily (including Vietnam) -- but never seemed to win at any negotiating table.

With regard to the NVA, the majority were just doing their job trying to kill me as I was them – it was nothing personal. They were tough, resilient,

and tenacious fighters who earned my respect. Except for those who committed war crimes, I hold no animosity toward my former NVA enemy. However, with regard to the Viet Cong and hard core Communists, I still feel they were all heinous war criminals without morals, ethics, or honor who deserved to be hunted down like rabid animals and exterminated. Very simply, I am still sorry I did not get the opportunity to kill more -- or all of them.

Looking back on my two tours, I cannot help but smile when I think about all the wonderful experiences I had flying and on the ground with friends; but, I cringe when I think of some of the really dangerous and potentially deadly things we all did, as well as all the truly horrific things we saw and experienced on a routine basis. I have to admit, especially on my first tour, there were many times while flying that I thought I would die and days so bad I thought that any one of them could be my last. I understood the possibility of death or injury; but, I never lost a night of sleep or started my aircraft worrying about being killed or wounded. As I look at 19-21 year olds now who seem so young, I am amazed at how we were put into such positions of responsibility, made so many life/death decisions so quickly and so often, flew so remarkably well, had such great judgment in the air, and as a group performed so effectively, professionally, and heroically. If youthful ignorance and a feeling of invulnerability is truly bliss, I know I must have been the poster child.

Vietnam was the last war fought where political correctness had not entered the scene and it was virtually an all male event. Privacy was not a great concern with regard to latrines, showers, or living conditions. Language was always colorful with the F-bomb used in virtually all sentences. Feelings and sensitivity were of no great concern when talking to or yelling at others who messed up. Jokes made fun of everything and each other, and there was a lot of graveyard humor. Unlike today, nobody cared if you openly used slurs and insults when referring to the enemy you were expected to kill.

A uniform standard in Vietnam was more of a concept, than a reality. Handlebar mustaches, cowboy pistol belts, Cavalry hats, boots (and sometimes spurs), wearing fatigues while flying, and other non-standard dress were normal for aircrews. Most line units had and wore issued gear (Steel pots, ruck sacks, boots and uniforms). However, boonie hats and scarves served as headgear, enemy weapons and other gear were used by

many ground troops – some of whom, such as the LRRPs and SOF, looked more like pirates than soldiers.

As I reflect on the truly embarrassing, stupid, classless, or immature things I/we did or said, I shake my head with disbelief and have to laugh. It was the time, the circumstances, and the behavior which can be expected of those 18-21 years old under those circumstances in an all guy, high stress, and alcohol environment – nothing more or less. Except for someone I may have unintentionally treated poorly, I make no apologies, as it was what it was for that time and era.

I guess we could best be described as a bunch of guys who were a little rough around the edges with Type A, if not "Jeckle and Hyde" lifestyles. We would drink, curse, argue, make fun of each other, be ornery and be somewhat immature knuckleheads on the ground -- but in the air it was a different persona. We could fly, think, perform professionally and always be counted on as individuals or as a group to do the right thing under the worst conditions -- without hesitation in our cockpits to help the Grunts and each other out. Personalities being what they are, not everyone got along. However, we were a brotherhood who looked out after each other and somehow kept each other going. I am just glad most of us lived through it. For me, it was the proudest time in my life to have known and served with them.

Without being melodramatic, the fact is that Vietnam was truly a hellish place to be – especially as a Grunt or helicopter crew member. We used to joke that Vietnam was not much of a war size-wise; but, it would have to do. Regardless of the size of this war, it was grueling, brutal, savage, hot, dirty, and dangerous for those who participated. Depending upon the source, approximately 11,000 U.S. Army helicopters flew in Vietnam. About 5,100 were destroyed with the greatest losses being the Huey with over 3,300 destroyed, the LOH with 850, and the Cobra with 270. Unfortunately, over 2,200 Army helicopter pilots as well as over 2700 crew chiefs and gunners were killed. Additionally, many times that number were wounded, injured, missing in action, or taken prisoner.

Looking back, I, like many others, could and should have crashed, died from a catastrophic maintenance or parts failure at any time, been shot down and taken prisoner or been missing in the jungle, wounded, or killed on more occasions than I can count. Very simply, we all knew this was a high risk job with death or injury a real possibility. We simply tried to do it the best we

could, accepted the good and bad, and in many cases felt it might be our last day with luck being our only option left.

For me, I never felt as comfortable, enjoyed myself more, or felt a greater job satisfaction doing anything in life as much as I did in the cockpit of my aircraft in Vietnam supporting the Grunts on the ground -- regardless of what could be viewed as the terror, fear, mayhem, carnage, or the "fog of war" around me. After so many flying hours, my helicopter was for me, as with many others, no longer a machine. It was an extension of our body that responded instinctively as one with our thoughts and needs. To be truthful, on many occasions I was scared and, in retrospect, maybe could have even been terrified by what was happening around me. I realized that was OK – it was how you acted and what you did under those conditions that counted. As idiotic as it may sound to others, I truly loved and enjoyed what I did and would not have traded the experience for anything else.

During my first tour, there was always a legitimate urgency, an adrenaline rush, a feeling of accomplishment, and a lot of fun with friends. I flew 950 hours, and the things I learned about myself, aviation, people, management, and life could fill another book. My second tour was obviously much shorter with things less urgent. I only flew about 300 hours, it was not as exciting, and I did not even have to kill or rescue anyone – but, I guess those are good things. Regardless, both tours were dangerous. I thank God for looking after me, getting me through virtually undamaged, and giving me so many more days to enjoy my life. If it is true that God loves and looks after children and idiots, I must have been at the top of His list -- mostly because of the latter characteristic more so than the first. As the old aviation joke goes - Son: *"Mom, when I grow up I want to be a helicopter pilot.* Mother: *"That is nice, but you will have to choose -- you cannot do both"*.

I have never been asked why I and others sacrificed so much in a War with little public support, no apparent goal or purpose, and one that was so brutal; but, to me it was very simple -- most of my pilot peers volunteered because we were patriotic and wanted to fly. However, once in Vietnam, things became very basic and our service was not so much for any great goal, cause, or flag. In Vietnam, as individuals we supported our friends and as Americans we supported each other. To abandon a friend or fellow American by not doing our job because of inept politics, leadership challenges, protests at home, or danger was not an option for me, for those I knew, or those with whom I served. We simply did our best for each other

and the Grunts. Like most helicopter pilots, I feel I did my job the best I could and believe any other pilot who was put in the same situations I was would have done the same things and taken the same risks in support of other GIs as I did. For most of us, flying and supporting those in the field was nothing special or heroic; it was simply our job and we saw it as our duty to do the best we could. Although I did not work with them, from the comments made by others the helicopter pilots of other services (USAF, USMC, USN) and foreign counties (Aussies) who were smaller in number performed in a like manner and probably felt the same as those of us in the Army.

I am deeply appreciative of the help I received from others during my tours and especially the mentoring/chewing out and support some senior Officers gave me during my first tour. Likewise, I have to acknowledge the friendship and help I received from my Company Grade Officer friends and NCOs – especially the non-rated guys who had a whole different perspective of the Army, leadership, and mission. Very simply, they helped me grow up by being great role models for what was expected of me as an Officer – not just a pilot.

I think often about many of the people I met of all ranks and hope their lives also turned out well. To this day, I think from time to time about the classmates and others that I knew who were killed, wounded or injured. More so, I wonder how the dozens of wounded I flew to the hospitals and all of those who I met in the field who were around Agent Orange or suffered from Malaria or PTSD turned out. I hope they are all healthy and have had the fruitful and peaceful lives they so deserve.

Given all the good and bad experiences of the Vietnam War during my two tours, my only regret is not having expressed my thanks more often to not only my maintenance and operations personnel; but, to all the others with whom I served and who helped me personally and professionally. If I could turn back the clock now, I would not make that mistake again. If they should ever read this, I hope they will accept my heartfelt thanks.

Based on where you were, what your job was, what kind of unit you were with, and when you were in Vietnam, everyone has a different story and memory of Vietnam. This book has been my story and has covered some of my experiences and observations - there is always much more that I could have written about, such as my R&R, the Vietnamese people and cultural differences, latrine art and poetry, and the lessons I learned -- about people,

life, management, war, and myself; but, this book is now long enough. Hopefully this gives anyone who reads it a realistic perspective of the war, my experiences, and the selfless sacrifice so many great Americans made on the ground and in the air in what they truly believed was service to our Nation.

For me and very simply, I feel very lucky to be alive, have fulfilled my childhood dream of flying, to have been able to save the lives of the Grunts I supported, to have served with so many great patriots (Aircrew and Ground Troops) who put duty, honor, and country before self, and to have, in my mind, survived the greatest, most exciting, educational, and challenging job on earth – to have been a combat aviator, and especially a Vietnam helicopter pilot!

In conclusion, although this book has been about my experiences, I communicate with other Vietnam helicopter pilots and crew members. As a tribute to them, I would like to close with excerpts of the personal remarks they have made in passing, only between brothers-in-arms. War affects people in many ways. Without saying, each comment below involves a greater story and provides insight into the minds of really tough, courageous, and truly patriotic men I know who without hesitation put their visors down, pulled pitch, and flew into the unknown on each sortie to unselfishly support others – even if with great apprehension, fear, or possibly scared to death. I have respected them as friends for years and these comments show a small sampling how the Vietnam War impacted them and how some have silently suffered:

*#1: "I remember in TET of '68 coming to the realization that I would not survive the war and how freeing it was when I accepted that"*

*#2. "I have made a lot of mistakes in my life, Vietnam was not one, but ….. I sometimes wake up crying"*

*#3. "I would not give up my memories for a million dollars or do it again for a million dollars"*

*#4. "My almost 50-year struggle with PTSD …. a voluntary rescue mission of a Huey crew trapped behind their downed aircraft and under intense heavy weapons fire. That mission …. resulted in the total loss of my helicopter …….. the loss of three of my brave crew…..My psychological scars have kept me in multiple levels of medications and psychiatric care for decades." "….I attempted suicide…."*

*#5. "I see the rounds ripping through the aircraft around me, I put my*

*hand on my face and felt the blood from my wounds -- then bolted upright, opened my eyes and looked at my hand. I was in my chair, on a beach at home, sleeping, and it was just sweat I felt this time"*

*#6. "I honestly never thought I would live to see my 19th birthday, let alone grow old….. I have had bouts of PTSD but they have eased over the years….. It does help when you can talk about it. I find it is a lot easier to write about than talk in person……civilians just don't understand…".*

**God bless my friends and may He heal them and all the other vets of all wars who gave their best and suffer mentally or physically.**

# EPILOGUE

The years after Vietnam were particularly hard for the Nation with high unemployment, inflation, shortages of many things, and social unrest. For the U.S. military, every service took cuts and was downsized. These financially hard times and cuts included money promised to the South Vietnamese Government as part of the cease fire agreement. This funding problem and other factors eventually led to them being abandoned by the U.S. and overrun by the North Vietnamese -- culminating with the fall of Saigon and the South Vietnam Government in 1975.

There was so little money in the Army budget after the Vietnam War – especially during the Carter Administration years, individuals brought their own soap, toilet paper, pens and paper to work. If one-third of your unit equipment worked, your unit was in better shape than most.

As the most costly Army asset, U.S. Army Aviation took the largest cuts in the Army budget. Flying hours kept getting cut to the point where pilots were only flying four hours a month to get flight pay and remain current. At one point, the Army even waived that minimum for many units -- to no flying per month and grounded the aircraft. It was also during that timeframe the Army permanently eliminated the requirement for aviators in staff jobs to fly each month for proficiency.

As if the times were not tough enough, the Old Army senior leadership was back in charge now that what they thought of as the "sideshow" or "distraction" of Vietnam was over. They simply reverted back to the Cold War mentality and tried to make life like they remembered before Vietnam. However, the Army of pre-Vietnam was no more. What remained suffered from low morale, a lack of funds, racial, drug, and disciplinary problems, worn out equipment, and a continuous lowering of IQ and other fitness standards for new recruits.

For the Army Aviation community, senior leadership bias against aviators was openly displayed. At most locations, pilots were no longer allowed to wear flight suits into the Officer's Club or bars. At many locations, flight suits could be worn only on the airfield – not even driving to or from work. Other posts prohibited the wearing of a flight suit any day or time a pilot was not actively flying. It was obvious to most that senior military leadership really did view Vietnam as an unnecessary diversion from the Cold War. Worse, they confirmed our fears that the aviators who served so well were just overpaid drivers and an expendable temporary help in their minds. As one Army General Officer told a group of us "*You pilots are not worth a*

*damn, but at least you are not Air Force pilots*". Hard to believe, but true. The bias ran very deep with some.

Given the drug, racial, discipline and funding problems, the lack of flying hours, and the poor leadership in the Army during that era, many good non-rated Officers and pilots simply resigned and many of our most talented enlisted did not re-enlist. If that was not enough, promotion passovers (non-selects) and failures to pass flight physicals forced many of the seasoned and experienced pilots and maintenance personnel out the service. Those aviators who survived the Reduction In Force (RIF) in 1972 faced another in 1975. Adding to that misery was the extremely low promotion selection rate for Warrant pilots (one board promotion rate was 34% for pilots - 80% for non-pilots) resulting in many more pilots being forced off active duty – as two passovers was immediate release from active duty. As a result, the Warrant Officer Aviator numbers went from a high of over 16,000 during the Vietnam War to about 5,000 by 1977. In the end, my class from flight school was like so many others – out of the original 350 who started and 112 who graduated, only about 10 of us made it to retirement after 20 years of military service.

For those who got out of the Army after the War, the public and Congress simply turned their backs on virtually all of them, especially the Vietnam Veterans. Civilian helicopter flying jobs were very few and helicopter pilots did not qualify to be hired as airline jobs as they wanted fixed wing pilots – primarily from the Air Force and Navy. Sadly, the majority of Vietnam helicopter pilots never flew helicopters again. Additionally, most Vets faced a bad economy, poor job market and a public hostile to hiring veterans. Making matters worse was that U.S. Government institutions like the Veterans Administration did little to nothing for those with service related psychological, medical, or educational needs. What benefits were available (such as GI Bill Education) were from WWII and very generous at that time; but, inflation over the years made them almost worthless in the 1970s.

The 1980's provided a major turnaround for the Army. Additional funding coupled with new military leadership rising in the ranks resulted in the establishment of an Aviation Branch. This eventually led to an integration of aviation into the total Army and to a better understanding and appreciation for Army Aviation, its necessary role, and the skills it required. The talented and competent younger Commissioned Officers in the Army who remained during the bad years eventually were promoted to higher grades. They took control of the tattered remains and began making

changes. With extensive drug testing and a zero-tolerance policy for drug and alcohol abuse, a renewed emphasis on discipline, better training, and new equipment, the Army and Army Aviation was eventually rebuilt.

God bless America, and especially those of all the services in the past, present, and future who have, are, or will serve her honorably.

# 2017 Mooney Update

Forty-seven years later Mike and I are still on the sunny side of the dirt. Both of us have had great careers. Mike finished college and, given his personality and management skills, became a very successful flooring and carpeting distributor for the Mid-Atlantic States. Still the athlete, he is an avid golfer and for years served as a volunteer coach of a State Select Soccer Team. A few years ago he retired, built a house on the back bay of a resort town, and enjoys the ocean, his boat and time with his family and friends. Needless to say, his favorite hat to wear is the tattered one with the RANGER Tab sewn on it -- rightfully so, as he truly earned that honor.

As for me, in spite of my wayward start, a history of challenging the status quo, and using an unconventional approach over the years to resolve problems, I ended up staying in the Army and retired after 21 years. The Army ended up sending me back to finish my last two years of college while paying my salary, tuition, books, and fees. In spite of my early indifference to formal education, I now have more education, advanced degrees, and certifications than I know what to do with. With regard to aviation alone, I have lived the aviation dream and been an Airplane Pilot, Helicopter Pilot, Air Traffic Controller, Instructor Pilot, Instrument Flight Examiner, etc.

For the past 28 years I have been a Civil Servant working as a Program Manager for the USAF at the Pentagon. I have been lucky to work with dedicated professionals, accomplish truly meaningful work on many different important projects, and do things such as fly a fighter and the B-2 simulator. Yes, given my rocky start and a lifetime of questioning the status quo, how my life turned out has surprised me too!

Most important is that Mike and I are blessed with wives who have put up with us for over 42 years and wonderful families. Mike has two sons, two daughters and ten grandchildren while I have two daughters and four grandchildren.

This book is a memoir for our kids, their spouses, our grandchildren, and for those who will follow them. May they always enjoy freedom, prosperity, remain healthy, and live in peace.



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