

FEBRUARY THIRD

The Story of a Green Hornet



By
Donald W. Hickman

Colonel, USAF, Retired

Prologue

It is amazing how the mind starts buzzing when serious medical news is provided to it. On March 20, 1996, I was told that I needed to have surgery on my carotid artery on the right side of my neck. But first, since I had a history of heart disease (angioplasty in 1988) I would have to have an angiogram of the heart to make sure it was OK to go ahead with the neck surgery. This was accomplished on March 29, 1996, and the results knocked me for a loop. The doctor at the VA hospital told me and my wife Bonnie that all three arteries to the heart were blocked to a great extent and bypass surgery was needed. A double whammy in less than two weeks that made me stop and think about my life, my accomplishments, my failures, and how much I have to be thankful for.

Ironically, my brother Russ sent me a thank you letter for a card I sent him on his birthday which was March 17th. Included in the letter was an article about my uncle, Wallace Hickman, which was published in a Disabled American Veterans magazine in Denver, Colorado. Wally, as all of us used to call him, kept a journal of his B-24 flights over Europe during World War II. When I saw this article I was suddenly aware that very few if any of my family ever knew what happened to me during my tour in Vietnam in 1971 and 1972. Add to this my current medical situation and I felt the need to put down my thoughts, feelings, and events of this time period of my life. People rarely ask about my Vietnam experience; I suppose they fear what I might say or feel. Or maybe they just don't care. I hope it is the former because our country should never again involve its soldiers, sailors and airmen in this kind of conflict and people need to be aware of what really happened.

In this writing I remember the events of 25 years ago plus an earlier event to the best of my ability. Most of the memories are very vivid but some of the less important have faded with time. I have taken no literary license and relate only the facts as I remember them. Embellishment of these events is not necessary or desired. If no one ever reads this I will have still served my purpose in writing it. I have at least tried to explain why I react to things sometimes the way I do and just putting it down on paper is therapeutic.

I dedicate this effort to my wife Bonnie, who has stuck with me through 35 years of marriage that have not always been the easiest to tolerate. And to my children, Laurie and Jeff, who may now understand why Dad is the way he is.

Contents

Prologue	.....	2
Contents	.....	3
B-47 Stratojet	.....	4
Assignment Whop-Whop	.....	8
Training Unlimited	.....	12
In-Country	.....	18
Ban Me Thuit, RVN	.....	23
Mission One	.....	28
Action	.....	32
Cam Ranh AB	.....	35
Slick Duty	.....	38
The Gunships	.....	45
Downtown	.....	48
Plei Djerang	.....	50
The Big Day	.....	54
Aftermath	.....	62
Epilogue	.....	64

B-47 Stratojet

The B-47 bomber was my first operational aircraft after completing navigator and bombardier training at Harlingen AFB, Texas and Mather AFB, California (Sacramento). I completed upgrade training at McConnell AFB in Wichita, Kansas where my daughter Laurie was born. In September of 1962, I arrived at Lincoln AFB, Lincoln, Nebraska just about a month before the historic Cuban Missile Crisis. At 21 years of age I had no conception of the seriousness of that incident as President Kennedy put every single one of our Strategic Air Command bombers on alert with nuclear weapons. Today, I get the shivers just thinking about how close we came to nuclear war. What would the world be like today if we had launched all 110 bombers assigned to Lincoln?

On the day of the alert notification, I was flight planning for a check flight the following day that would have made me "combat ready". The Deputy Commander for Operations came into the flight planning room that was filled with crewmembers planning flights. A very serious tone was in his voice as he called off crew numbers and names. Everyone that was combat ready was called. They were told to go home and pack for alert duty that could last up to 30 days and return to the alert facility for a briefing. In the meantime, maintenance was "generating" every single B-47 capable of flying that day. They loaded each with nuclear weapons called Mark 36's, a huge single bomb that just barely fit into the bomb bay. As best I remember, that weapon was classified as a 20-megaton bomb. That afternoon, the bombers not on alert already at Lincoln were flown by the crews to civilian airfields at Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Duluth, Minnesota. The crews stayed in motels next to the airfields and gates were cut into fences to allow quick access to the aircraft parked next to the end of the runways.

On the very next day I was told that I would be assigned to the Plans Division helping draw maps for crew use into Russia. It was a highly classified building but at least I could keep informed about what was going on and not have to rely on television. That day, the klaxon blew and shook everyone up because practice alerts were discontinued and this had to be the real thing. Crews scrambled from the alert facility and B-47's and KC-97 refueling tankers fired up and taxied to the end of the runway. They stayed there for what seemed an eternity as we became more and more nervous. Then to our relief, they began to taxi back to their parking spots as they were recalled. The refueling trucks topped off the birds and they were ready to go again. My heart was pounding very hard and fast as I saw these warbirds waiting to accomplish the task they were designed for....total destruction of the enemy.

Hours faded into days and at least I got to go home every night to Bonnie and Laurie. I continued to work in Plans drawing maps but occasionally I was designated a courier.

One evening I was tasked to take a locked briefcase that was handcuffed to my wrist to Milwaukee. I have no idea what was in that briefcase but had the opportunity to ride in the back of a C-47 "Gooney Bird" all the way to Milwaukee and back to Lincoln. Rough ride and not something I looked forward to doing again anytime soon.

The crisis ended and all the 47's returned home to Lincoln. I got a couple of practice rides and then I passed my checkride. My Aircraft Commander was Captain Paul Canney and the co-pilot was Capt Dick West. We were given a ground evaluation by the Wing Commander and certified on a specific nuclear mission target in Russia. We got to know each other fairly well during alert tours that lasted seven days but Dick West always seemed to be a bit of a loner. Paul was married with five kids and Dick was also married and had six kids. Paul had a house and Dick lived in a trailer. How Dick handled all those kids in a trailer, I will never know. He had been an enlisted gunner in B-36 bombers before becoming an officer and going to pilot training.

After several "alert tours" at Lincoln we were tasked to make our first Atlantic Ocean crossing and pull a "Reflex" alert tour at Greenham Common AB near London, England. This was to be a three-week tour pulling one week of alert, one week of R&R (rest and recuperation), and one last week of alert before returning to Lincoln. It was a typically cold day in Lincoln on February 1, 1963, as I said goodbye to Bonnie and Laurie. They were flying to Tucson, Arizona while I was gone so they could be with Bonnie's mother and sister. On February 2nd I packed my gear and was picked up by Paul Canney to go to the base. We launched with two other B-47's also headed for England. We were in the #3 position. Paul was the Aircraft Commander, Dick was the Co-pilot, and we had a crew chief riding along with us using the "fourth man seat" which was below and to the left of the co-pilot. Bobby Odom was his name. My apprehension was pretty high as we refueled behind a KC-135 tanker just east of Labrador over the Atlantic. It was night and the air was a bit turbulent. All three of the 47's filled up and we proceeded in darkness across the ocean. I spent most of the time putting my radar crosshairs on ships to take "wind-runs" in an attempt to keep up with our position. Dick West shot some celestial for me, which was normal for B-47 crews. He had difficulty finding some of the stars even with my coaching so I took a few star shots myself using my nose compartment sextant port. We flew at around 35,000 feet and about 400 knots as I recall and watched the sun come up fast as we proceeded east. It seemed as if we went from dark to full daylight in just a minute or two.

As I picked up the coast of Britain on my radar I remember my pulse quickened again. This was the first time I had been anywhere outside the United States except for brief border crossings into Mexico. The weather at Greenham Common was good with only scattered clouds but the wind was blowing directly across the runway at 22 knots. Not usually a problem for the B-47 but England was having a terrible winter that year and snow had been piled up to six feet deep on either side of the runway. The wind was blowing loose snow across the runway making things a bit tricky as far as depth perception was concerned for Paul. I remember the sunlight streaming in through the blast curtains that always covered my two small windows in the nose. As Paul turned to

final approach the light beam moved around my little home and gave me a warm feeling. Little did I know what was going to happen next.

Dick was calling out airspeed deviations from our computed approach speed as "...plus 5, plus 10, plus 5, on speed" and it felt very normal. The B-47 was a handful on final for the pilot on a calm day, much less a 22 knot crosswind, jockeying six throttles and keeping everything going good, so I wasn't surprised that Paul said nothing. All checklists were complete and as my radar indicated that we were passing 400 feet above the ground I began to pack up my navigation gear in preparation for stepping foot on British soil. I put in the safety pins in my ejection seat, which by this time had gotten quite hard after the 11 hour flight, since it ejected downward and needed at least 400 feet to deploy the chute. I sat back, very relaxed but with a lot of anticipation.

Then all hell broke loose. What I didn't realize was that Paul had decided to go-around and try another landing because in the "white out" of the blowing snow he had lost depth perception and could not determine how high above the runway we were. As he added power to all six engines, number six, the most outboard on the right wing, went into a compressor stall and would not accelerate. This had the effect of rolling the aircraft to the right and Paul used full left aileron and full left rudder to try to bring it up. The right wingtip began dragging on the runway and Paul pulled back the number one throttle in an attempt to eliminate the asymmetric thrust. About this time the right wingtip hit the snowbank on the right side of the runway and kicked up the wing. Simultaneously, the number six engine now comes to life and starts putting out thrust again. Our heading is now to the right of runway centerline and we are headed for some hangers. At this point, Dick West looked down at the Sgt Odom, gave a crossing signal with his arms and EJECTED! The canopy blew off as Dick left the bird, which activated the alarm bell. This was the first indication I had that anything was wrong. Dick's seat malfunctioned and before it left the cockpit, it cut the rudder and elevator cables below the floor. The nose gear came down, hit hard and bounced followed by the aft main gear. We then hit a mobile snackbar truck that struck the number two and three engine pods as well as the forward main gear left door. This started a spinning action and we came down again going sideways. After scissoring around the GCA (Ground Controlled Approach) shed we finally came to a stop in the snow between the runway and the parallel taxiway. All I remember during the crash was the alarm bell ringing continuously, terribly loud crashing noises, my legs being thrown around, and the nose compartment seemed to go black. I could not seem to see anything except the blackness and a vision of skull and crossbones like pirate flags had. I remember yelling a prayer "Oh God, NOT NOW!!!". When we stopped my adrenaline was pumping as I opened the emergency hatch, which included the left window.

I looked out to see that we were still supported by the main gear, a couple of engines and a 12,000-pound fuel tank were lying on the ground under the left wing. Sgt. Odom had gone out the open canopy area and was on the outside hanging onto my open escape hatch area. I lowered him down as far as I could and he jumped to the ground. He hit hard and I determined that I would not exit that way. Paul finally got the remaining engine

shut down, happened to be that bad number six, and everything got quiet. He and I exited the aircraft through the canopy area and slid down the right wing to the ground.

An ambulance took all three of us to the hospital and we kept asking about Dick West. No one would tell us until finally a doctor came to us and told us that Dick did not make it. He had separated from the seat, his chute had come out, but due to the malfunction of his seat he was too low and the chute never deployed. They were able to get a couple of beats out of his heart but that was all. The doctor said it was probably for the best because almost every single bone in his body was smashed or broken. We were told that we would spend the night in the hospital for observation and they offered all of us a bottle of scotch whiskey. What a way to arrive in Britain for the first time! Paul told me that he and Dick had gone to the Squadron Commander just before the trip. Dick wanted to quit flying; he was scared of the B-47 and wanted to go into Maintenance. The commander told him that he would arrange it but needed Dick to complete this one last tour of alert in England. I cried for Dick and especially his wife and kids. Later I was able to call Bonnie in Tucson using a phone in the Command Post with a very bad connection and again cried as I told her about Dick. She seemed to have a hard time believing that I was OK.

As I hung up the phone with Bonnie I saw a calendar on the wall of the Command Post and someone had made X's on the dates. I asked one of the controllers what time did the accident happen. He replied "about 10:00 AM." I then asked what date it was in Britain and he replied, "February Third." I had no idea how significant this date and time would be later in my life!

Assignment Whop-Whop

It was October 1970. I was flying a two-ship formation flight in the T-38 and during recovery back to the base I started thinking about my next assignment. I was number two on the list for an assignment to Vietnam. A lot had happened since the accident in England seven years earlier. We had moved to Plattsburgh, New York where I closed out the B-47 wing and waited for an assignment. Initially, I was slated to go to B-52's at Grand Forks, North Dakota, but I had always wanted to go to pilot training. The Squadron Commander called me into his office early one morning and asked me if I still wanted to go to pilot training. I naturally said "Absolutely, sir!" He then said "Hickman, if you can get to Selma, Alabama by the end of the month, you have a pilot training slot." I replied, "Sir, if I need to, I could be there tomorrow!" It was April 1966 and Jeff was only 2 months old but proved to be a great traveler, especially with Laurie's help. I completed pilot training in June of 1967, went to instructor training at Randolph AFB in San Antonio, Texas, instructed in the T-38 Talon, became a flight examiner, a Runway Supervisory Unit controller and finally a Flight Commander. I got lots of great flying in a fabulous new aircraft. Craig AFB at Selma was one of the last bases to get T-38's so they were brand new from the factory. I felt by 1970 that I was a great pilot with lots of experience and knew that I would be a great fighter pilot during an assignment to Vietnam. We came in on initial, pitched out, and landed safely. Another mission complete. No close calls today which was a bit unusual flying a high performance aircraft with students.

As we shut down the whining engines of the "White Rocket" I noticed one of my lieutenants came running from the Flight building toward the aircraft. This didn't usually happen so I started thinking the worst, Bonnie or one of the kids is hurt, a problem with my folks in Iowa, or maybe a problem in the Flight, maybe an accident involving one of my instructors. He jumped up on the ladder and as I took off my helmet he yelled, "Captain, your assignment is in, don't know what it is, but you need to go to Squadron Operations right away!" What could it be? An F-4 or a F-105? My heart started pumping so hard I could almost hear it. I was ready for anything. I was ready for combat! Let's get it on!

Lieutenant Colonel John G. Schmitt, Jr., our T-38 Squadron Commander, was a real veteran. He had flown in the Korean Conflict, had later ejected from a F-100 in Okinawa that crashed into a village and several people were killed. He had to be reassigned quickly because the people of Okinawa thought he should have steered the crippled Super Sabre away from their people. He was of average height, lean, and had a very receding hairline. He always wore the Air Force issue sunglasses, even inside, and normally had a thin cigar with a plastic tip in his mouth. He was one of those "do as I say, not as I do" type of commanders and most of the instructor pilots feared him as he frequently "shot from the hip" on decisions. For some reason he liked me and even asked for me by name on a later assignment after my tour in Vietnam.

As I entered the Squadron building Colonel Schmitt spotted me and asked me to come into his office. I entered, saluted smartly, and he told me to sit down. He handed me a sheet of paper that I instantly recognized as an assignment alert notification letter from Personnel. "Read it," he sputtered as he cleared his throat. I could not believe my eyes. I had a sinking feeling and felt a little shocked. The notification had two names on it including mine, and both of them said "TRANSPORT/HELICOPTER". How could this be! I was a terrific "stick" with an aircraft. I had gotten nothing but rave comments on my OER's (Officer Effectiveness Report) and had been given the best and most demanding jobs in the Wing. I just could not believe it! I could feel Colonel Schmitt's eyes watching me. I was silent and just stared at the paper in my hand. He broke the silence, "I don't know what is going on with this assignment. Tomorrow, I think you should fly to Randolph, go to MPC, and talk with them. You should be going to a fighter. I'd call them myself but right now I'm not in very good graces with the personnel folks." He continued to chomp on his cigar as I replied, "What are we going to use for a reason for the flight? Will I take a student with me?" "No," he said, "I'm sure we probably need some part for maintenance that Randolph has....I'll arrange it. Now, get out of here and get back to work!" I could tell that he was sharing in my disappointment as I stood, saluted, and departed his office. All the way back to the Flight building I kept saying to myself as well as out loud, "I can't believe it, I can't believe it." I debriefed my student on his formation flight and left for the RSU to pull a three-hour tour as a controller. I was really "down" but had hope that my visit to Randolph the next day would bring good results.

The drive home that day was not pleasant. Fortunately, we lived on Craig AFB in base housing and it was very short. Our tan 1967 VW Beetle made the trip with no fuss but I couldn't help noticing that the engine sounded like the engines on one of those propeller driven transports. Bonnie was very supportive, as usual, and when she heard the news she tried to show the bright side. I think she was probably a little relieved since compared to fighters, the transports were fairly safe in the war zone. I sat down with her at the kitchen table and started a list, just in case my Randolph trip was unsuccessful, of all the possible transports I could be assigned to. Jets first, EB-66, then C-130 and C-123, finally the C-7. Thinking further, I decided to list the helicopters. At least I could be involved in saving the pilots shot down. The H-53 Super Jolly Green Giant would be first followed by the H-3 Jolly Green. H-43's were used only for local base rescue so that wasn't very appealing. Armed with my list, hoping I would not need it, I went to bed and didn't sleep very well. "I can't believe it!"

The weather was beautiful the next day, clear blue skies and only a gentle breeze. After filing a flight plan, I walked out to my assigned T-38 that had a new coat of white paint. What a beautiful machine! I loved flying the T-38 and couldn't wait to get airborne. The non-stop flight to San Antonio where Randolph AFB is located was uneventful but a little long. Above 40,000 feet I started picking up some heavy headwinds and it was a good thing the weather was good at Randolph also. I landed there with only 600# of fuel remaining after an enroute descent at idle power to a straight-in approach. I logged 2.0 hours for the trip, a record flight for me as usually we would only fly about 1.7 hours on cross-country flights. I parked in front of Base Operations and was met by maintenance

with a small box to take back to Craig AFB. I had called ahead for some ground transportation and a base taxi was waiting for me.

The ride to MPC (Military Personnel Center) was about 10 minutes. The blue taxi pulled up to the front door and dropped me off. The building was massive compared to anything we had at Craig and seemed a little intimidating. I asked a receptionist for the fighter assignment branch and arrived in a surprisingly small office area shared by three or four officers. A major and three captains were all on the phones obviously talking to pilots about assignments. The major motioned for me to sit down as he finished his call. "How can I help you, captain?" I responded, "Get me a fighter, any fighter, I'll even take a recce bird if available (RF-4), and as a last resort, I'd even take a FAC (Forward Air Controller) slot." I explained my situation, my credentials, and my obvious disappointment in the assignment notification I had gotten. He explained that due to the President Nixon Vietnamization program where South Vietnam was assuming a lot of the responsibility for the war, the fighter transition classes were being cut in half. Since pilots had been alerted six months in advance, rather than change their assignments, they would be stretched out over the next year. There would be NO fighter, FAC, or Recce assignments for at least nine months. I asked to talk to the chief of the branch and was introduced to a Lieutenant Colonel who gave me the same story and could only say "Sorry, Captain." He did offer to put my name on a list of prospects for his team in case anything changed. I was being patronized and I knew it. I asked for directions to the Transport/Helicopter office and left feeling that I had just wasted a trip. "I can't believe it!".

I stood at the door to the office that would determine my future and watched a captain and a major as they talked on the phones. The office was smaller than the fighter guys but seemed much neater and more organized. The major waved me in, hung up the phone and read my name tag on my flight suit. "Hickman, we just sent out the assignment on you yesterday." I responded, "Yes sir, and as you can imagine....". He interrupted, "Yeah, I'll bet you thought you would get a fighter, huh?" He seemed nice enough but quickly turned to conversation about my choices. I pulled out the list I had made up the night before. He saw the EB-66 and quickly stated that they were all coming home in just a few months....no way. "If I'm going to be flying transports, I think the C-130 would be my first choice." I stated. He explained that as a senior captain that couldn't happen. I would not be eligible to be an aircraft commander and would be flying co-pilot for junior officers.....sorry, can't have that either. Same story for the C-123's. "So in summary, we can put you into a C-7 Caribou." Then he asked, "Have you given any consideration to helicopters?" I told him that I had but was not at all thrilled about it. I gave him my order of preference....H-53, H-3, and H-43. "We could put you into any of those but there's one thing missing from your list," he said. "You don't have the gunship down." I was a bit taken aback. "Gunships, I thought the Army had all of the helicopter gunships." He explained that the Air Force had one outfit flying out of Cam Ranh Bay known as the 20th Special Operations Squadron "Green Hornets". They flew the UH-1N, twin-engine Huey with rocket pods and mini-guns. They were also testing a 40MM gun on one of the door mounts. My brain began racing as I thought of the pictures and video I had seen on helicopter gunships. At least I would be able to shoot back and this was probably as close

to getting a fighter as I was going to get. I asked, "What's their mission?" "Can't tell you, it's classified, but let me say this.....IF you get back, you will probably have a chest full of medals." Those last words hit home as I realized that this was serious business he was talking about. (It was also not true about the medals since after sanitizing recommendations for awards for all classified material, most of the missions would seem rather routine.) I thought for a moment and then blurted out, "I'll take it! At least I'll be able to shoot back!" He shook my hand and said he would make it happen and I left feeling more nervous than ever. What had I just done. My entire future could rest on the snap decision that I had just made. Oh well, at least I can go down shooting! That would turn out to be a very prophetic thought.

The flight home to Selma was uneventful as I climbed above 40,000 feet to take advantage of those strong winds. By the time I landed at Craig AFB I was actually becoming excited about the prospect of shooting rockets and mini-guns. What would it be like, I wondered. The next six months would be spent trying to find out as much as I could about helicopter flying and what the Green Hornets really were doing over there. No one I talked to seemed to know anything about the Hornets, even that they really existed. Time would reveal the reasons why.

Training Unlimited

Daleville, Alabama, located next to Ft. Rucker Army Post, was not the garden spot of the South. We had put most of our belongings into storage as this was just a temporary stop enroute to my assignment in Vietnam. Bonnie, Laurie, and Jeff would be staying in Tucson, Arizona while I was gone but would be with me for my transition training into helicopters. It was early March 1971 when we rolled into Daleville driving our dark green 1970 Oldsmobile 98 and our trusty VW Beetle. Both were loaded with everything we could get into them with just enough space for the four of us. Laurie was now eight years old, almost nine, and Jeff had just turned five. We decided that for our short stay we probably would have to settle for life in a mobile home. Hundreds of mobile homes almost outnumbered the houses it seemed. We found one that looked good to us and rented it on a month to month basis. Ironically, the person we rented from was named Don Hickman. We had fun with that one!

The skies around Ft. Rucker were almost constantly filled with the sounds of helicopters, the whine of turbines and the whop-whop of rotor blades. Jeff became very interested in these funny sounding machines and could identify the "Huey" every time one appeared. I discovered that I was in the first class of Air Force personnel to go through helicopter conversion training provided by the Army. This turned out to be a real benefit as my instructors were all combat veterans and the training was excellent. I had one instructor who was a warrant officer with two Vietnam tours behind him and was scheduled for a third.

We began training with academics that enlightened me as to the differences between fixed wing and rotary wing aerodynamics. Not too tough but a real revelation on how the helicopter "beats the air into submission." I will never forget my first ride in a helicopter! What a humbling experience! I had trouble in the beginning understanding that a push forward on the stick (cyclic) made the bird go forward faster, and a pull back made it either slow down, stop, or back up. To gain altitude, I had to pull up on the collective to the left of the seat. But then it really depended on what phase of flight I was in, hover or forward flight. The controls worked a bit differently. The flight was in the OH-58 or Bell Jet Ranger as it is know in the civilian world. I guess it was a good training and screening device but I never felt comfortable in that machine. It seemed to have a mind of it's own especially in a hover. I felt totally wiped out after a flight and so tense my muscles shook. And those pedals on the floor were not even called rudder pedals, they were anti-torque pedals. I hardly ever used the pedals in the T-38 except for taxiing and now I had to learn that in a helicopter they were essential. They could make the machine go around in 360 degree turns on the ground and in forward flight the tail would weave from side to side as power was added if you did not use them properly. Wow, what a concept! Here I was, God's gift to the flying community, golden hands capable of doing most anything in a T-38, and I cannot even hover this beast.

After three or four weeks, I finally got to the point that I felt somewhat safe in the '58 and they moved us to the UH-1 Huey. Compared to the OH-58, the Huey felt like I had just moved from a VW to a Cadillac. It felt so stable by comparison and I was able to hold a hover in perfect position on the first ride. Whew, maybe I do have some skill! We spent hours and hours practicing approaches and landings, hovering, low level flying both in daylight and at night. I thought flying a T-38 at low level of 500 to 1000 feet was exciting at 300 to 400 knots. That was nothing compared to flying a Huey with the skids brushing the treetops at 120 knots. We spent considerable time practicing malfunctions such as engine failure, a lot of those in Vietnam, and tail rotor frozen or gone. Auto rotations were practiced all the way to touchdown by the Army, which gave us a lot of confidence in landing safely with an engine failure. (The Air Force always had us recover to a hover without actually touching the ground that was probably the most dangerous part of the maneuver. Guess they were trying to save money on skid replacement.) For the tail rotor failure we would make skid landings on concrete runways that were quite spectacular, especially at night when you could see all of the sparks.

One mission was especially memorable. I was in the right seat, the aircraft commander's seat in a helicopter, and we were practicing landings and approaches to tight LZ's (landing zones). As I was climbing almost straight up out of a LZ the instructor told me to stop my climb even with the tops of the tall pine trees which were probably 100 to 150 feet tall. He asked me, "If the engine failed right now, what would you do?" I replied, "Probably pray a lot!" He then said, "I have the aircraft" and immediately rolled off the throttle to idle. We began descending at a very rapid rate and he pulled back on the cyclic moving us backward. He then pressed hard on the left pedal and the bird swung around 180 degrees. As we approached the ground he pulled up on the collective and we then slowed our rate of descent touching down like a feather. "That's what you do, a backward auto rotation.....any questions??" I was impressed, I mean really impressed! We went back up to the tops of the trees again and I surprised myself. I was able to do the exact same thing and I filed it away for future reference. You never know when I might need that maneuver.

To finish our training at Ft. Rucker, we received about 30 hours of flying in simulated instrument conditions. Most of these flights were at night with the front windscreen blocked out as well as the nose bubble glass. The instructor would hover taxi the bird to the launch pad, set it down and then give control to me. Looking out the right side door, I would bring it up to a hover, hold it steady, and then look at the gauges and make a takeoff totally on instruments. It was tough initially to force myself to put the nose down on the attitude indicator for these takeoffs. Just the opposite of a fixed wing aircraft. Once airborne, something would always be taken away, such as the attitude indicator or the heading gyro. Making timed turns on a magnetic compass at night was not a lot of fun but these flights sure made a good instrument pilot out of me. By the end of June 1971 the training was over at Ft. Rucker. Quite an experience for the golden handed pilot who thought he knew what flying was all about!

I now had to complete Air Force training in the "N" model Huey at Hill AFB, Ogden, Utah. I was to receive transition training (the Army had no two engine Huey's) and

gunnery range training to learn how to shoot the rockets and mini-guns. Bonnie, the kids and I loaded up the Olds and the VW again and we made our way in convoy to Tucson, Arizona. We decided that we should get Bonnie and the kids settled someplace because we had no idea how much time I would have after training before I would have to leave for Vietnam. We contacted some friends we knew from Craig AFB and they knew someone who would be leaving shortly that had a nice townhouse. We checked it out, liked it and made arrangements to take it. Only problem, they were not leaving for a couple of weeks. So I had to head for Hill AFB while Bonnie and the kids stayed in Tucson waiting for the townhouse to become vacant. I took the VW and headed north to Utah. It was only 107 degrees in Tucson the day I left and the Beetle had no air conditioning. "But it's a dry heat" was the phrase I kept hearing. Yeah, right, I don't care if it's dry or not, it was HOT! Course now we live in Tucson and think it's great. Amazing how the body can adjust.

Ogden and Hill AFB were very scenic, nestled between mountains to the East and the Great Salt Lake to the West. I checked in to the squadron and met a couple of guys that had been looking for quarters off base. The quarters on the base were full and we had no choice. We found an apartment complex that had room for us so we rented. One of my roommates, Dave Vesely, was also headed for the 20th Special Operations Squadron so he and I carpoled to the base each day. The other guy was going into H-43's so he had a different schedule.

The training here was pretty good considering that they had just moved to Hill AFB the previous month. The Air Force trained H-53, H-3, H-43, and UH-1 pilots here and due to the mountains close by, we had tremendously scenic flights. Academic classes were a snap and concentrated mostly on the differences between the "N" and other single engine Huey's. They also gave us academic instruction on the rockets and mini-guns. Flying the "N" was a big step up from the UH-1's I had flown at Ft. Rucker. First of all, they were very new with the latest avionics. The power available out of the twin engine pack was terrific and it was comforting to know that the bird could still fly if one of the engines got shot up. Dave Vesely and I teamed up to fly together and our instructor was a former Green Hornet. We spent a lot of time up in the mountain areas practicing low level and insertion tactics. Vectors from another helicopter above directed us to LZ's where we would pop in, simulate dropping off troops, and pop right back out again. The range across the lake was used for the rocket and mini-gun training. Some old tanks, half-tracks, and trucks were used as targets and I had a ball shooting at them. The 2.75 inch rockets were not very accurate and rarely went exactly where I aimed. But then I had to remember that I was not shooting them from a very stable platform. The gunsight was pretty basic and not too reliable. I had to remember to not only put the crosshairs on the target, but to make sure the power was steady and the ball in the turn and slip indicator was centered. I felt like the guy trying his best to walk and chew gum at the same time. Difficult!!

On one eventful day, the range was closed and the mountains had some bad weather forecast, so Dave and I along with our instructor decided to practice some patterns, landings, and auto rotations at Hill AFB. I was in the right seat practicing approaches to a

square piece of concrete out beside the runway. As I mentioned earlier, the Air Force would not allow auto rotations to touchdown and I was having some difficulty judging just when to add power and then the torque developed by that twin engine pack was difficult to handle. I seemed to overshoot the pad just slightly each time but then because we never touched down, how did we know for sure. So my "experienced" instructor, Captain Lou Glass took the bird and proceeded to demonstrate the proper way to auto rotate to this pad. He rolled off power and started down on what seemed to me to be exactly the same path that I had been taking. As we approached the pad he suddenly pulled way back on the cyclic as he was adding power. The nose came way up and then proceeded to drop rapidly to the ground where we hit very hard. We bounced back into the air and the bird began to rotate very fast. After about a turn and a half, Lou regained control and came to a hover. He looked over at me with a sheepish look and said, "I think we better set this bird down and look her over." After I got my heart back down into my chest where it belonged, I replied, "Good idea." As the warbird was lowered to the pad I knew we had a problem. We were going much lower than usual. I opened the right door and stepped immediately on the ground without having to use the leading edge of the skid as a step. The skid assembly was spread out so far that the bottom of the fuselage was almost touching the ground. Of even more concern was the smell of fuel that was leaking from the bottom of the bird onto the pad. I signaled to Lou to cut the engines as I reentered the bird and hooked back up to the intercom. "We're leaking fuel and the skids are spread wide.....better leave her right here, Lou." I felt like saying, "Nice landing" but thought better of it. That incident gave me some real respect for the "N" model and taught me to never get complacent with her or too comfortable, she will turn around and bite you!

I completed the course at Hill and drove back to Tucson. I had to be at Travis AFB, California in about a week but had to drop off the VW and spend as much time with Bonnie and the kids as possible before I left. They took me to the airport the first part of September 1971 and it had to be one of the toughest farewells that I have ever experienced. I kept thinking that I might never see Bonnie and those two great kids again.

I had tears in my eyes as the airliner lifted off from Tucson. I was headed for the war zone! But first a stop at Travis AFB, California. It was a huge terminal with what seemed like hundreds of soldiers and airmen waiting for the call to board a westbound airliner. I was finally called and walked out to a dark green Boeing 707 with Braniff painted on her fuselage. It was a contract airliner that was used to help Military Airlift Command in getting all of the troops to and from Vietnam. It was soon packed with every seat filled. This was not going to be a fun trip. I lucked out with a window seat and watched all of the troops climb aboard and get settled. Most were very serious but a few were joking and laughing very loud. I had the feeling that the loud ones were just hiding their apprehension. I fell asleep shortly after takeoff.

The flight was a long one, about 13 hours, as we flew through the night and landed at Guam for fuel. We were able to get off the aircraft for about 2 hours and stretch our legs. Then we loaded again and proceeded to Clark AB in the Philippines. All of the troops on the bird were much more serious as we deplaned at Clark. We were taken by bus to

billeting and checked into quarters. I was assigned to a trailer with two other guys and we unpacked for a week stay. Training was not over yet, we still had to complete Jungle Survival School. I wondered if training would ever stop.

Jungle Survival School was no joke. The instructors were good and provided a lot of good tips on what we could eat if necessary, animals and bugs to watch out for, and some excellent escape and evasion (E & E) techniques. The highlight of the school was the E & E exercise. Each of us was given three poker chips and told that we would have about 40 minutes to hide in the jungle. If found, we were to give up a single poker chip and hide again. A very large area was available to us as I headed off into the jungle. I showered that morning but on the advice of our instructors I did not use soap, deodorant, or any aftershave lotion. I even brushed my teeth without toothpaste. All of these items put out a smell that the simulated "bad guys" could smell. I found a low area under a tree that had a lot of brush and carefully dug myself under the heaviest without disturbing the surface. I was sure that nothing was visible to indicate I was there and relaxed as I waited. I heard the signal horn blow to indicate that the "bad guys" were headed out to find us.

The "bad guys" were actually local native indians that were hired by the school to play the part. They spoke no English and were paid with food depending on how many poker chips they brought back. They were very motivated! I thought I heard some footsteps as I lay there in the hole I had built for myself. As the footsteps got closer I even held my breath to avoid even the slightest movement. The footsteps stopped and it was terribly quiet. I was tempted to peek out through the debris but resisted and kept perfectly still. Then I heard a voice that I will never forget saying, "Give me chip!" He's just trying to get someone to move I thought. But he repeated the command in a louder voice, "Give me chip!!". I still resisted any movement until he finally brushed away some of the brush that was hiding my face and now yelled, "GIVE ME CHIP!!!!". I had been found, who knows how, but these guys were motivated and probably knew every potential hiding place in the country. I politely gave him a poker chip and began to brush myself off as he walked away. He turned and looked back at me momentarily, grunted, and then disappeared into the jungle. I was supposed to find another hiding place within about 15 minutes so I started walking in another direction.

I found a path and decided to follow it up the side of a hill. In the distance I could hear "bad guys" shouting "Give me chip". Every five to ten minutes I could hear them as they found yet another poor soul who thought he was well hidden. I decided that this was ridiculous and there was only one way to outsmart these natives. There was a large rock next to the path I was on. It was slightly up the hill from the path but in full view. I climbed up on the rock and sat down to watch the action. At least ten of the natives passed by me, each looking at me as they passed, and I just waved at them. Half of them waved back with a big smile and pressed on down the path. Some passed by and did not even acknowledge that I was there. One did stop and say, "Chip?". I just put up my hands like I didn't understand and he left thinking that I had no more chips. I felt pretty proud of myself as I had outsmarted the smart. After a couple of hours, the "all clear" horn sounded and I proceeded to the starting point. All of the troops were talking about how smart the natives were and trying to determine how they had managed to get all of their

chips. I later learned that because I had on a relatively new flight suit, it had an odor of fresh Nomex that the natives could detect. The lesson was to not wear new flight suits if you are going to get shot down! I was the only one who had two poker chips left and one other guy had one. The instructors were very surprised that I still had two chips but when asked how I did it, I just said that I was lucky and a good student!

All of my pre-Vietnam training was finally over. I was supposedly now ready to face the enemy but as I later learned, training continued forever, it was unlimited. Each day I learned another lesson about flying and survival and most importantly, about myself. Each person reacts differently to combat and I was no exception. Hollywood movies tend to explore the personalities of three or four individuals and we start thinking that all people will react in one of those four ways. Not necessarily true. My reactions were different from what I expected and I believe were very personal and singular. The next morning, my bird that would take me to Vietnam was waiting on the ramp. I was really nervous after a sleepless night.

In-Country

Flying Tiger Airlines was the charter for my trip to Vietnam. The flight wasn't too long, a couple of hours as I remember. What I do remember is that we had to circle for about 20 minutes while the runway was checked for damage from a rocket attack that had just occurred. We finally started our descent and approach. As I looked out the small window, I was impressed with the beauty of this place. The hills to the west were lush with green foliage and the airfield was surrounded with desert looking sand and brush. During the approach I could see the beach and it seemed to look very much like the beaches on the East Coast of Florida. Don't know what I expected but this place was beautiful, at least from the air.

I was met in the terminal on the West Side of the field by three Green Hornets, pilots from the 20th. The only name I remember is Jim Pizzorno. He was the senior captain among them and each one shook my hand vigorously. "Welcome to Nam!" We loaded up my gear in the back of a six-passenger pickup, a big Dodge with a camper shell on the back. On each side of the shell was a white placard with a very large green hornet logo stenciled on it. We drove around the perimeter road to the East Side of the field and pulled into the Green Hornet officer quarters area. The quarters consisted of two long Quonset huts made of aluminum separated by a shower and latrine area and a party room and bar area. The buildings formed an "H" and didn't seem too bad at first. I was put up in a room temporarily with a pilot that was about to go back to the states. It was dark and dingy with only a single window air conditioner and no window. The pilot headed for home didn't talk very much and only wanted to sleep all the time. After all my gear was brought in, Jim said he and the guys would take me to the club for dinner that night. "Better get into a flight suit, Don. You don't want to look like a 'rookie'." Suddenly, I was alone. In a very strange place. I knew no one and felt very lonely.

The Officers Club looked very much like the clubs I had seen in the States. The biggest difference was that everyone was either in flight suits or camouflaged fatigues. It was only about 4:30 PM and very few people were there. Jim Pizzorno and I sat at a table and were joined by a couple of Hornets. I was offered a beer and out of politeness I accepted even though I didn't really like beer. I sipped that beer until it became very warm while everyone else had two or three. The conversation was obviously meant to make me feel at home as they asked lots of questions about me. I was the first Hornet to arrive at the squadron with fighter or trainer experience. Everyone else came from multi-engine aircraft such as KC-135's, B-52's, and C-141's. No one was qualified in just helicopters.

After they had searched my past experiences the talk turned to their experiences with the Hornets. They made it seem very routine except for some of the action. The Hornets had just returned from a special mission at Da Nang where they were inserting US. Army

Rangers to knock out a 51 caliber site on a hill overlooking the base. The Hornets had configured the "N" models as "slicks", (no mini-guns, no rocket pods, just M60 machine guns on the doors) to insert the troops. The missions were successful after convincing the Army not to use the typical Army tactics of mass landings and use Hornet tactics. I was briefed on the normal mission of the Hornets and all of the "hush-hush" I had experienced stateside disappeared. The security seemed very lax since all of the help at the club was Vietnamese. I was told that I would get a couple of local area rides for familiarization and then be riding the left seat (the CO-pilot seat) for awhile until turnover would warrant a right seat checkout. Our mission was to provide gunship cover for Vietnamese Huey's as they inserted and extracted long range reconnaissance teams composed of native indians. These teams were mercenaries who would try to capture Viet Cong (VC) or North Vietnamese Regular (NVA) soldiers and bring them back as prisoners. They would also bring back information about troop movements and other additional information. I was told that over half of the "exfils" were "hot" since these indians were very motivated and would stir up "Charlie" (the bad guys) enough to usually pin them down while they waited for us to get them out. These mercenaries were paid with bags of rice. One bag for good information, two bags for a prisoner, and if they brought back an ear from a bad guy soldier, they also got two bags. It was a little gross to hear about the ear business.

Our primary staging base or Forward Operation Location (FOL) was Ban Me Thuit located in the highlands near the Cambodian border. The Hornets normally had at least four crews for "Guns" there along with one crew for a "Slick". The Slick tagged along for potential rescue effort in case a Gun was shot down. Jim related that I would be sent to the FOL first on the Slick mission for orientation and would be there for about a week before returning to Cam Ranh. The Hornets would launch from Ban Me Thuit at daybreak (first light) and go to another FOL closer to the border. There we would join up with the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) helicopters and the teams to insert. We would spend all day at this FOL and return to Ban Me Thuit just before dark. No night missions were flown. Jim then warned, "Occasionally, we will be sent on special missions like the Da Nang thing we just finished. They are the hot ones."

The club was filling up rapidly by this time as I learned that a USO band was performing that night. I choked down a sandwich with a Coke and just sat there and watched. There was a big rivalry between the C-7 Caribou drivers, also stationed at Cam Ranh, and the Hornets. C-7 pilots did not like the Hornets and the feeling was obviously mutual. No one knows how it started, but the fact that the Wing Commander had no control over the Hornets was a big thorn in his side. He was not even allowed to know what we did on a daily basis. We were tenants and a rowdy bunch at that. He liked to wear a stateside type uniform and was all spit and polish, not what you would expect in a war zone. After most of the Hornets who were not out on the mission had arrived, I was formally introduced to all of them. They were drinking a lot and soon I received my official welcome song, "Don's going home in a body bag, do-dah, do-dah! Don's going home in a body bag, all the do-dah day....." What a way to become a member of the team.

The USO band began playing stateside songs with an oriental accent, THEY WERE VIETNAMESE! Only one of them spoke any English, a guitar player that was obviously the leader. I learned that the way they learn songs is to buy the cassette tapes of songs we liked and then play them over and over to get the words memorized. The singer didn't have a clue what she was saying with those words. This was also the night that I learned the current Hornet theme song, "Red, Red Wine!" All the Hornets stood up and sang it with the band and I was pulled from my chair to join them. I walked back to my room alone that night, excusing myself from the Hornets saying that the trip had made me very tired, which was not a lie. As I walked back I looked up at the clear sky and millions of stars and noticed that they were the same ones I had seen at home. It made me feel a little more comfortable. I fell asleep without much trouble in the dark room to the sound of that window air conditioner.

The next day was spent checking in at the squadron, meeting the commander, getting issued all my gear including a .38 caliber pistol and ammo. I went to supply and got several sets of fatigues, and even paid a visit to the BX (base exchange). It was not exactly like stateside but had a lot more electronic gear for sale and the prices were terrific. Also picked up a catalog that I could use to order merchandise which was the way most of the guys did it. I found out that because of my date of rank, I was going to be a Flight Commander that entitled me to a room without a roommate. I moved my stuff to the larger room across the hall from where I had slept the first night and started getting settled. Ate lunch at the dining hall and returned to the squadron for the afternoon. There I learned that I was going to be a scheduler. Jim Pizzorno began checking me out on the boards and how it was done. It was kind of like scheduling at Craig AFB except a lot easier and a slower pace. I was scheduled to fly a local training mission the next day. Here would be my chance to impress someone with my flying skills.

Before leaving the squadron that day, I walked out to an "N" sitting on the ramp. I walked around her, touched her, and sat in the cockpit. I met some of the maintenance troops and one said to me, "Captain, if one of these gets shot up too bad, please leave it in the jungle. We are a little tired of patching holes!" He showed me some of the repairs they had just completed on one of the birds. In the hanger, another crew was replacing rotor blades. "How often do you have to replace them?" I asked. "Depends on how aggressive the pilot is, sometimes once a week if the action has been hot," he replied. As I looked at the blades they were removing I noticed no holes but numerous gouges in the skin down through the honeycomb section. "That's caused by hitting tree limbs," one of them commented. "The faster and lower you fly, the less exposure to "Charlie." That's what they tell us anyway!" I walked back out to the ramp and noticed a wrecked Huey behind one of the revetments. It looked as if it had been dropped from a thousand feet and then a giant foot had stepped on it. When I returned to the hanger I asked what had happened to it. "They lost a tail rotor and engine between here and Saigon over the China Sea. Did an auto rotation into the water and we recovered it." "What about the crew," I asked. "Some cuts and bumps, but everyone got out OK." I returned to my room with some very sobering thoughts. "This is the real thing, this is not a game, this is dangerous, I really don't know what I'm doing here, I miss Bonnie, Laurie, Jeff, and even Samantha, our silver poodle, I'm in this alone, it's me against the bad guys, will I survive this?" I ate

in the room alone that night, munching on goodies I had gotten from the BX. I began studying the "N" model flight manual and fell asleep.

My first mission was to be a local area orientation ride in a "slick." We all collected our gear and headed for the bird. I did a walk around inspection with my IP and he then briefed the gunners on emergency procedures as well as reminding them about the "rules of engagement." We could not fire on anyone unless they fired at us first. He sat in the co-pilot seat and read the checklist to me. He let me run through the start sequence and showed me the radio calls. When all the checks were complete he called out, "Let's go!" and I brought the bird to a hover. It felt good to be flying again as I hover-taxied to the parallel taxiway. We switched to tower and were cleared for takeoff. I made the takeoff and held it down to about five to ten feet off the taxiway as we headed for the beach. Once we got to the beach it was a left turn heading north and under the takeoff path of fixed wing aircraft. (The entire time I was in Vietnam the active runway was toward the water.) Once we were clear of the airport area the IP took control and said, "I want to show you the "pop" we do over here. It may be different than you've seen." Lou Glass had just come from Vietnam so I felt that I probably already been taught how to do the maneuver but I said nothing, figured he wanted to get some "stick" time anyway. We were at about 120 knots as he lowered the nose a little further and picked up as much airspeed as we could. At a little over 130 knots he pulled back rapidly on the cyclic and kept full power on the collective. We were quickly at 1500 feet above the beach and about 100 knots. "A fully loaded gunship won't do it quite that fast due to its weight, but you want to reduce your exposure as much as possible," he informed. We flew in Vietnam at two different altitudes, on the deck hugging the ground or at 1500 feet above the ground. At 1500 feet we could lose altitude quickly by rolling in as much bank as we could stand and diving for the ground in case we were fired upon by heavy weapons. At 1500 we were just out of small arms fire range. Being "on the trees" presented some difficult navigation problems but was designed to cut exposure time to the absolute minimum. The IP then demonstrated the dive. He rolled into about 60 to 70 degrees of bank and simultaneously dropped the collective to the floor. We rapidly approached the ground and he smoothly rolled level as he added power and we were again just above the beach at about 130 knots. He was good and as he gave control back to me I prepared to dazzle him with my skill. I did a couple of "pop" maneuvers followed by the dives. He liked what he saw and we then proceeded to an area where we could do auto-rotations. I did some from 1500 feet but spent most of the time doing them from low level at 130 knots. These were fun to do but could "bite" you if you were not careful. He showed me around the area the Hornets used for practice and we headed back to Cam Ranh. We flew south down the beach at low level, past the end of the runway again and then "popped" up for a downwind leg. Base and final to the taxiway followed by permission to do some taxiway maneuvers. We hovered around, left, right, 180 degree turns, 360 degree turns, backwards and forwards. It was like being at Ft. Rucker again. The IP seemed pleased with my performance and we taxied to the ramp and put the bird into a revetment. I made a nice smooth touchdown and we went through the shutdown checklist. I had completed my first mission in Vietnam and when I went inside we debriefed at a corner table. The gunners who had gone with us walked by and both said, "Good flying, Captain. See you on the Blackbird." I asked my IP, "What is the Blackbird?". He replied, "It'll either be a

C-123 or a C-130. They are assigned to the 1st SOW (Special Operations Wing) and transport us back and forth to Ban Me Thuit. Their operation is really hush-hush." I got another ride about two days later and was told I was ready for the real mission. Ban Me Thuit was next.

Ban Me Thuit, RVN

I didn't sleep well the night before that first trip to Ban Me Thuit, RVN (that stands for the Republic of Vietnam). I was scheduled to fly co-pilot for an experienced pilot on the slick. Two crews were flying gunships from Cam Ranh Bay to Ban Me Thuit and the rest of us would be riding in a "blackbird". We would be on "the mission" for a week and then be replaced by new crews. I packed as much as I could before going to bed but the nerves had a grip on me and I must have gone to the bathroom down the hall at least a dozen times. On one trip back from the "john" at about 2:00 AM I met one of the "old heads" (translated means somebody who's been in-country longer than six months) and he looked knowingly at me and asked, "Going on the 'mission' tomorrow?". "How'd you guess?" I replied. He just smiled slightly then turned very serious, gave me a look that I will never forget, and walked away. We didn't have to say any more. He knew what I was going through and I knew that he wished me well. We also knew that we might never see each other again.

I love breakfast, but powdered eggs and very hard toast didn't set too well with me the next morning. The orange juice was great though. I was nearly alone in the dining hall but as usual for me I was early. I walked back to the hooch and gathered up my gear, extra flight suits, a flight jacket, two pair of jungle boots, green underwear (white wasn't allowed or too smart even if it was allowed), a floppy jungle hat, and of course all my toiletries. The Dodge pickup was outside waiting and I loaded my stuff in the back. Within about 15 minutes the rest of the guys had their stuff loaded and we proceeded to the squadron. We picked up our mesh vests with all their goodies, a .38 caliber S&W with extra ammo, and an AR-15 with two extra clips. I talked with the enlisted guy who was in charge of the personal equipment shop and convinced him that I should have three 30 round clips for my AR-15 instead of the usual 15 round clips. I found some tape and taped all three clips together, one pointing up and the other two pointing down on either side of the first one. I had seen this done in one of the war movies I saw as a kid and decided that I wanted to carry as much ammo as I could and by taping the clips together I could change clips very quickly. Some of the "old heads" laughed at me but I continued to carry my clips that way for the whole time I was in Vietnam.

We waited outside the squadron building on the flight line side for about 30 minutes. It was just getting light and a lot of clouds were already forming getting ready for an afternoon shower. Then the crews that were flying gunships loaded up and took off. I then spotted a C-130 on final. It looked pretty normal, like a lot of other C-130's I had seen except this one was painted all black. The bird taxied up right in front of the squadron building and the rear ramp was already lowered. About ten of us walked briskly to the waiting ramp, tossed our gear in and climbed aboard. The loadmaster tied down our stuff and began closing the door as we made our way to some side facing paratrooper canvas seats. We began taxiing before the door was closed and I began to look around. I suddenly noticed that the loadmaster was oriental wearing a green flight suit with no

markings on it. Across from me was another oriental man at a radio tapping out Morse code. I asked another Hornet who they were and he replied that the whole crew consisted of Chinese nationals. There was one American major sitting in the jump seat between the pilot and co-pilot. I asked, "What do these guys do?". The guy sitting next to me said, "Who knows? They just come in and pick us up and then go on about their business, whatever that is!" I was feeling a bit spooked but the "old heads" seemed to be comfortable so I tried to hide my feelings by just looking out the window. I asked no further questions on that flight. The loadmaster and radio operator never spoke to us but did speak to each other in Chinese.

The flight to Ban Me Thuit lasted a little over 40 minutes and we landed without incident. I was looking out the window as we taxied to the ramp and saw a big stakebed truck waiting for us. We all grabbed our gear and headed for the truck as the black C-130 taxied back to the runway. He was airborne again before we even got everything loaded into the truck. Suddenly it was very quiet as the drone of the 130 subsided. The truck took us inside the compound, which had high fencing and a ditch all the way around it. At the top of the fencing were rolls of razor wire. As we came in the gate which was guarded by Vietnamese in two watchtowers. I noticed the Claymor mines facing outward away from the fencing. The land had been cleared for probably 100 yards from the fencing, which gave the guards full view. The roads in the compound were all dirt, red dirt, and were very dusty. I saw a water truck spraying on one of the roads and learned that this was a daily occurrence unless the rain was very heavy. I was now smack dab in the middle of the war zone and it looked like everyone was ready to fight "Charlie" at a moment's notice. I wondered if it really was dangerous. I would soon find out!

The truck pulled up to a long, one-story building that looked like an abandoned motel from the 1940's. The light green paint was peeling off and some of the doors wouldn't fully close. My assigned aircraft commander, Jim, and I hauled our gear into one of the rooms that I initially thought was just for storage. Nope, this was to be my home for the next week. The room was about 12 feet by 15 feet with a concrete floor. Two bunks with thin mattresses were against opposite walls and there were two metal lockers. A very rustic table was between the two beds, which had two traditional Army helmets on it. Hanging on the corner post of each head rail of the beds was a flak vest. Jim showed me how to adjust the flak vest and the helmet liner. He then told me that we were supposed to put our weapons, the AR15 and the .38 in something called a CONEX, nothing more than a big olive drab dumpster with a door. He preferred to keep his weapons locked in the room wall locker so I did too.

He then showed me the latrine. I was totally grossed out when I saw it. It was a nightmare! Four or five of the hooch maids were washing clothes in the shower area, beating clothing with round rocks and using old fashioned scrub boards. There were about six sinks against one wall and half of the mirrors above them were cracked or totally broken. There was a long urinal on one wall just in front of six commodes which were the only private area in the place. Graffiti was everywhere on the moldy light green walls. The smell was beyond description. It was somewhere between an outdoor toilet and a sewage plant. I was convinced that if I could, I would never take a shower or go to

the bathroom in that place. But nature calls and we adapt. Jim chided that as soon as my name was put up on the wall somewhere I would know that I had been accepted by the Hornets.

As we walked out of the latrine we headed to the East Side of the compound and Jim showed me our bunker. "If the siren goes off, grab your helmet, flak vest, .38, AR15 and run for cover in this bunker. Remember, shoot away from the compound, not into it!" I felt a little sheepish and wondered why Jim would think I would shoot anywhere else. "We had a guy a few weeks ago who ran out here just shooting everywhere. He went absolutely nuts! The ARVN folks here didn't appreciate it much". The point was made and I filed it away for future reference. The so-called bunker was nothing more than a covered ditch with a pile of dirt between it and the fence. "And remember to keep your head DOWN if you are seeing muzzle flashes in those trees out there!" Jim seemed pretty serious about all of this so I paid very close attention. Later I would be glad that I did.

Squadron Ops was next. As we walked past the ramp area just south of the quarters, I noticed very small revetments where the Hornet's Hueys would park. The birds that had flown from Cam Ranh were sitting there with their blades tied down and maintenance troops were in the process of checking them over. I wondered how they got them parked in such tight quarters. Guess I would find out later. No sense showing my stupidity now. A major from the squadron was sitting at a radio as we walked into Operations and gave us a wave as we entered. Jim showed me the small briefing room which we would use each morning to brief the day's activity. Rustic and run down best describes the building. As we came back out to the office area we could hear the major talking to the flight of Hornets who were about 40 miles from us. All five birds, four gunships and one slick, were in good shape and would require only normal maintenance when they landed. I was introduced and the major welcomed me to Ban Me Thuit. "Hope you have a good week," he said with little enthusiasm and no emotion. As we left I asked Jim about the major. "He's not too happy about being stuck up here. "He's been here three weeks and just learned this morning that he has to stay another week. Not very good duty, no flying!" Jim responded. "Let me show you our wonderful Officers Club"! The club was directly west and across the street from our quarters but as we tried to open the door, it was locked and we couldn't get in. "Not open yet, too early, let's go to the other club down the street toward the gate. It's primarily for the enlisted but anyone can use it." Jim explained.

I could hear the unmistakable whine of combining gearboxes and the whop whop of rotor blades as we walked north along the main dirt road. Then above our heads I saw one gunship flying in the opposite direction right at treetop level. The gunners were standing on the skids on each side and one of them waved at us as they passed. That first one was followed closely by three more gunships and a slick. Jim pointed up at the slick and yelled, "There's our bird"! The noise was tremendous as all five of the Hueys made their way to the parking ramp. "Can we stop for a minute and watch them?" I asked. Jim nodded OK and I was about to find out how they parked those birds. Lead came to a hover near the center of the ramp, which had parking slots left and right. He immediately started moving sideways to the right and positioned that gunship neatly into the revetment. He had all of two to three feet of clearance in front and in back with maybe

the same amount to the right side of the gunner's door. I was impressed and wondered if I could do that so well my first try. The rest of the Hueys followed suit and all but one of them parked with no difficulty. Even Jim got a little anxious as one of the gunships jumped above the revetment to avoid hitting it. "Damn!!" he shouted. The bird settled back down and finally after a couple more attempts, landed safely. We found out later that a co-pilot was flying it who was due to start his aircraft commander upgrade the following week. I thought to myself that at least someone else has problems flying these things.

As we walked into the club we saw several guys sitting at the bar drinking and eating. A couple of guys were sitting at a table eating cheeseburgers and french fries. We walked to the end of the bar and placed our order. Seemed like everybody was eating cheeseburgers so I figured they must be OK. The bartender was a Vietnamese girl but seemed pleasant enough and smiled at everyone. Her English was very broken and I was soon convinced from the conversation that the only words she knew were the names of drinks and the items on the menu. I was right about the cheeseburger, it was delicious but the grease level was almost more than I could take, even at age 30 with good arteries. By the time I had finished, my paper plate was drenched in a brownish-gray grease that looked to be 1/4" deep. As I looked around this place, I couldn't help but notice how old everything looked and how dirty it was. The floor was again concrete and the place smelled very musty. The humidity had to be close to 80% and they only had fans for cooling. I noticed a VERY large cockroach walking along the baseboard across the room and pointed to it as I nudged Jim. He just said, "Yeh, they're all over the place. Sometimes the gunners have contests to see who can eat the most. At least they bite off the heads and spit them out"! The thought of seeing that nearly made me sick.

Jim said he was going to stay and have a few drinks since it was now after 1200 and alcohol was served after that time. I decided to walk back down to Ops and see if I could meet up with Dave Vesely, my roommate from training at Hill AFB. Dave was there and would be flying back to Cam Ranh after his bird was refueled. I asked Dave how he liked the mission. He replied, "You'll see. OK, I guess". This was not like Dave at all. Normally he was very vocal and full of life and energy. He seemed very subdued. Dave and I crossed paths very little for the remainder of our time in Vietnam. He was normally at Cam Ranh while I was on the "mission" and vice versa. He went to FB-111's after Nam and we have never seen each other since. No one else was familiar to me but most at least introduced themselves and shook my hand as a welcome. I watched Dave and the others launch in two of the Hueys while the others got in the truck for the trip down to the runway to meet another "Blackbird". I went to the hooch and unpacked the few things that I had brought. A hooch maid came in and merely pointed to my now very dusty boots. "Daw Wee want shine?" she asked. I handed her the other pair that I had brought with me and she proceeded to put a great spit shine on them. I watched her out of one corner of my eye while I sat on the bed and read an old magazine. She then brought in an old broom and swept the floor. She left the room without saying a word and closed the door. It was quiet and I laid on the bed looking at the ceiling. The loneliness set in again as I thought of being at home. Sleep saved me from getting too depressed.

I woke up in a terrible sweat and sat up. It was almost 1600 hrs so went to that awful latrine and rinsed off my face. As I looked in the broken mirror I saw a very young guy who had been tossed at this war as a body to fill a square. I longed for the days when I could fly that T-38 two or three times a day teaching student pilots how to perfect their skills. Oh well, this was only supposed to last a year. I dropped off my towel back at the room and began to walk around the compound. Over half the place had Vietnamese soldiers and the ones I saw didn't seem to be very enthusiastic about what they were doing. I stumbled across a dining hall that had just opened and decided to try to soak up some of the grease from that cheeseburger with some real food. Powdered potatoes, a couple of dry pork chops, some beans, a piece of bread (almost fresh), and a glass of powdered milk would go a long way. That accomplished, I headed for the Officers Club to see what was going on there. A couple of Hornets were at the bar and I joined them mainly to listen to the conversation to see what I could learn. As I listened, I looked around the place and saw an old pool table, some vinyl couches, metal chairs, and back by the pool table was a small latrine. In addition to the maybe 15 foot long bar, that was it! Others joined us before long and the pool table became active. Soon I was invited to join in for a game and realized how long it had been since I had played any pool. Not too good but it was a diversion. At 1900 hr the 16mm movie projector came out of the closet and we got to see an old movie. After the movie I was ready for rest. I found out that the briefing would be at 0530 in the morning and was reminded to not be late.

I didn't fall asleep very quickly that night for some reason even though I felt tired. Soon after I did, I heard a ruckus at the door. Jim bolted in, turned on the light, slammed the door shut and began rummaging through his stuff. He left the room and headed for the latrine. I got up, turned off the light and tried to get back to sleep. He returned just in time to wake me again and began cursing at the light that had gone out without his permission I guess. He stumbled around the room and finally got into bed. The smell of alcohol was heavy in the room as he began to snore loudly. He was drunk as a skunk and I knew that I would have to be on my toes in the morning.

It was 0100 hr as I sat straight up in bed. I then heard again what had woke me up. KABOOM!!!! About 30 seconds to a minute later.....KABOOM!!!! Jim stopped snoring long enough to say, "It's just the mortar going off. The ARVN do it every night". Gee thanks, Jim. I found out later that they sent mortar shells out every night at random to keep "Charlie" guessing. No particular pattern, just lob some shells out there and scare the monkeys. Did a job on ME that night. I never did get used to hearing them each night. Sleep finally came again as my thoughts focused on mission number one for me in the morning. I wonder how Jim flies with a hangover?

Mission One

I woke up early, about 0430 and lay in bed wondering what the day would bring. Finally, my anticipation couldn't be controlled and I got up, dressed in my flight suit, and went to the latrine to shave and brush my teeth. After dropping off my toiletries in the room I went to the chow hall and had breakfast. When I returned to the room Jim was up and getting dressed. Nothing was said except we confirmed that the briefing was at 0600. I went over to the Ops building with my kneeboard and map and just hung out drinking coffee until the crews began arriving. The mood of the crews seemed very somber.

Everyone sat in silence in the briefing room. Only the pilots attended these briefings as the gunners loaded up the gunships and the slick. An Army captain was introduced and he proceeded to show us where the "teams" were located over in Cambodia. The captain was a West Point graduate and acted like he was God's gift to the Army. His camouflaged uniform was starched crisp and he carried himself like he was marching in a parade. No exfils (pickups) or infils (drop-offs) were scheduled for the day but one of the teams had reported to the Forward Air Controller (FAC) that a lot of activity was going on in their area. He used a map of the area propped on a stand and a grease pencil to outline suspected enemy activity. When the captain finished our senior major in charge of Ops got up and said a few words and wished us well. Then the GUN #1 gunship pilot stood up and briefed us on departure, enroute, and arrival tactics to get to the Forward Operating Location (FOL). Jim turned to me and said, "Another boring day at the war"! We all left the Ops building together and headed for the latrine for one last pit stop.

Jim and I arrived at the Huey together and the gunners had the bird loaded and ready. Our slicks had M60 machine guns mounted on each door and the gunners carried backup weapons but that was it for armament. Jim gave the gunners a quick brief and did a quick walkaround inspection. I followed him as he explained the things he liked to check very closely. He said, "Tomorrow you can do the walkaround and I'll just get the cockpit ready for start". We climbed in and I began to read the checklist to him. He interrupted saying, "Just watch me to make sure I don't forget anything, we don't need to read that thing out loud". I thought OK but I watched him very closely. He didn't miss anything but I had trouble keeping up with where he was in the sequence. The lead gunship called for engine start using a rotating hand signal and his gunners repeated it making sure that all five birds started at the same time. The two turbine engines came to life and we completed our checks. My heart seemed to be pumping at double the normal rate and I could feel the adrenaline moving throughout my body. Each Huey lifted up in turn, moved to the center of the ramp and tookoff. It all seemed to be very well orchestrated as each one started the takeoff. All four gunships got off and we followed them out. The birds in front of us went south about a half of a city block from the ramp staying 20 to 30 feet above the ground and then made hard right turns in sequence. After about a mile at low altitude, lead suddenly popped up to the standard 1500 AGL (above ground level) and was followed by the rest of us. No one climbed in exactly the same direction and we were well scattered

by the time we reached our enroute altitude. Our bird's engines seemed to be doing great and the loudest noise was the whine of the combining gearbox at the back of the engine pod. I began to relax and do a little sightseeing. It was beautiful country and as I looked down I wondered why these people couldn't get along and enjoy the country they were living in.

As we approached Thui Atar, which was our FOL, the lead gunship started his rapid descent followed by the rest of us in turn. When it came time for our descent Jim calmly stated, "Hang on". I shortly knew why. He simultaneously dropped collective and rolled the Huey to almost 90 degrees of bank as we started down. As we approached the tops of the trees I instinctively put my hands on the controls. He rolled out of the bank and pulled up on the collective just in time to allow the skids to barely touch the treetops. I felt he had done these gyrations for my benefit but later learned that most of the pilots flew this way to reduce exposure time to "Charlie's" small caliber weapons. I would do my flying exactly the same way later. Flying on the treetops, I had absolutely no idea where the FOL was but suddenly I saw lead drop out of sight followed by the other three gunships. We were at Thui Atar!

Thui Atar was nothing more than a dirt strip next to a small special forces camp occupied by the ARVN. Tall trees surrounded the cleared out area and a narrow river ran close by. There was also a village nearby. We hover taxied to a set of rubber bladders laying on the ground which contained our fuel. Each of the birds topped off their fuel before moving to a parking slot beside the runway. We got our fuel with the engines running (hot refueling), and moved to a parking slot beside the gunships. Engine shutdown was uneventful as the gunners tied down the rotor. I had now officially logged my first combat flying time, a big 30 minutes.

I noticed a rather large dog running around the choppers begging for food. He looked like a mix of German Shepherd and Golden Retriever plus probably seven other breeds. A very friendly pooch and knew from experience what suckers we Americans were for a big eyed blonde. He had learned to sit up, lay down, rollover, or just sit and look for pity from us. The Hornets called him Klaus and he would respond immediately when called. He was sort of a mascot and no one knew where he came from. Probably the village nearby but whenever we landed at Thui Atar, he was waiting. He seemed to know when we were leaving also and would get this very sad look. I came to love that dog. He was a lot of company when there was nothing to do.

I asked Jim if we could go up to the camp and check it out. He told me that they would not allow the Hornets to come in and we had to park our choppers as far away as possible. When I asked why he replied that they thought the Green Hornets were too much of a target for "Charlie" and didn't want to get attacked because of us. Supposedly, there was a contract out on destroying any Hornet helicopter or killing or capturing any crewmember. It really made me feel good to be so wanted!!

I watched as the crewmembers began settling in for the day. Some of the guys climbed up on top of helicopters and were sun bathing. Others pulled out books and were reading.

One group pulled out a deck of cards and began playing "Hearts" while two others got out a chessboard and began playing. A couple of the gunners took their backup weapons, a M60 machine gun and a 40mm grenade launcher down to an area close to the runway that was kind of a crude firing range. They test fired the weapons as I followed them and watched. One of them turned to me and asked, "Want to try it, Captain"? Naturally I wanted to so he handed me the M60 and instructed me on its operation. "Put it against your hip, not your shoulder." I complied and when I fired off the first burst, I knew why. It had one heck of a kick and would have bruised any shoulder. I used to think that in the movies the hero was just acting "cool" firing from the hip. Now I knew there was a bigger reason. I fired several long bursts and got so I could even hit some of the cans that had been set up for targets. Then I was given the 40mm grenade launcher. It had a circular magazine with about 12 rounds in it. I tried single fire first and actually saw the round arcing to the ground. I then went full automatic for about five rounds. It was fun to do and I built some rapport with the gunners by being interested.

I walked back to the choppers and as I approached I noticed several young Vietnamese children around one of the Huey's. They spoke no English but were watching one of the gunners as he opened his box lunch, which we always took with us each day. The oldest one was probably about six years old but was hard to tell. The others ranged from about three to five years old. The older ones were wearing some American style shirts and short pants but the youngest was wearing only some short pants. None of them had any shoes on. He gave them each a piece of a Hershey bar and shared the bag of chips he had. They hung around for awhile and then all by the oldest disappeared into the jungle again. I overheard him say to the gunner, "Cigarettes?" The gunner pulled out the small pack that was in each lunch and handed them to the kid who bowed politely and then ran into the jungle following the others. The gunner told me that they lived in the village nearby and always stopped by around 11:00 to beg for some food. If they didn't show up, we went on a sort of alert watching for trouble cause the kids knew if "Charlie" was close by. I went over to my Slick and retrieved my lunch. I was like a picnic as everyone began to chow down on sandwiches, chips, and Hershey bars. Except this was no picnic. It was very dirty, very dusty, and we were supposed to be at war. I wondered when the real action would start.

I was a little startled and dropped my sandwich as I heard some fairly loud "booms" in the distance to the west of us. Jim had been sitting next to me in the door of the chopper when it happened. "It's a B-52 strike." he explained without missing a bite. We were very close to Cambodia and the Ho Chi Minh trail was not far away. "They're over there killing some more monkeys." he quipped. The explosions seemed to go on for quite awhile but having seen movies of B-52 strikes, I knew how long it took for all those bombs to be dropped. The sound made the war situation seem a bit more real.

The lead gunship pilot came walking up from a tent beside the east end of the runway and announced that the teams were dug in for the rest of the day and we could return to Ban Me Thuit. Jim replied, "But what about Hickman? He hasn't been "hung" yet. Our leader said, "We'll have to do it later, let's go." I had no idea what they were talking about but began getting ready to go. After we started engines and were waiting for everyone to

be ready I asked Jim, "What did you mean about being "hung"? He just looked at me with a weak smile and said, "You'll see!" I turned around and looked at the right door gunner and he was just smiling. All four gunships launched with us following in trail but staggered to each side of lead. A mile or two from the field we all "popped" to 1500'AGL and headed back to Ban Me Thuit. We dropped back down to treetop about three to four miles away from the base and as we swung around for the approach we saw an A-1 laying upside down off the end of the runway. I never learned what happened but the pilot was Vietnamese and was OK. It looked like he had either landed long or had no brakes and when he hit the soft red dirt at the end it just flipped over.

We flew over the camp and started our descent to the ramp and revetment area but the number four gunship was a little slow clearing the area and Jim was very tight behind him. "Are we going to have to go around?" I asked on the inter phone. Jim was cursing at #4 and never answered me. "Bastard!!" he shouted as he pulled collective and we came to a very dangerously high hover right above #4 as he was moving sideways. Our left door gunner announced, "Clear down left," followed by the right door gunner, "Clear down right." We descended and hover taxied sideways to the right to our revetment. Jim never said a word but shut down the engines, unstrapped, and then walked briskly over to where #4 was parked. I'm sure the discussion was a little heated but I never heard any more about the incident. As I reflected on what had happened, I felt that both of them were at fault. It certainly was the most exciting thing that happened to me on mission one!

I spent the rest of the day walking around the camp, playing pool, eating some supper at the dining hall, and then watching another 16mm movie at the club. As I walked back to my room I couldn't help feeling a bit disappointed that I hadn't seen any action that day. I should have enjoyed the quiet because later I would crave it. Sleep came easily that night and I rested well except for the 0100 hrs mortar blasts again.

Action

The next morning was a carbon copy of the first. Same briefing, same departure, same arrival at Thui Atar. Everyone had settled into their normal routine down to the same guys playing cards and chess. Today however I saw a single engine D model Huey approaching and as they hover taxied close to us I could see that the crew was Vietnamese. They landed and tied the rotor down as some of us went over to say hello. They spoke very little English and seemed somewhat distant toward us. I felt a little put off by their attitude. We were over there to help them and they acted like we hardly existed. Not at all what I had expected.

After about two hours I became very bored with the whole waiting game and nearly fell asleep laying on one of the canvas bench seats next to the transmission tunnel in our bird. Suddenly I heard shouting and saw everyone scrambling to untie rotors as pilots were putting on their flight suits over sweaty skin and shorts. I jumped into the left seat as Jim ran to the right side. Our gunners were releasing the rotor and as Jim hopped in he hit the battery switch and got set for engine start. Our bird came to life quickly and we were ready. Gunship lead came to a hover and began his takeoff run followed by #2. Gun #3 and Gun #4 stayed behind as we followed the two Hornets down the runway. The ARVN Huey was right behind us. The plan was normally for #3 and #4 to launch only if needed because of low fuel or ammunition on the first two or the need for more firepower. At least in the slick I would be involved in all of it.

Apparently, one of the teams on the ground had called by FM radio to the FAC saying they were ready for a pickup and we were just going to cover the ARVN Huey while that was accomplished. Lead called for a frequency change on our VHF and we began talking to the FAC. He was flying a Cessna O-2, which was a twin engine light aircraft but was configured with a pusher prop and the normal nose prop. A twin boom tail identified these birds that were used extensively. The FAC had a Vietnamese officer flying with him also to interpret the calls from the ground team as well as to give instructions to the ARVN Huey. The radio chatter in two different languages could be a real problem so we kept transmissions to an absolute minimum. The FAC carried no armament except some white phosphorous rockets used to mark the ground for us. Since the team was on the ground already he merely used landmarks to get us to the area for pickup and the team on the ground used a signal mirror to show us their exact location. I spotted the mirror and called "Shiny at 2 o'clock next to that open area!" Jim replied, "Good call, guess we're going to have to give you a nickname." One of the gunners said, "How about 'Hawkeye'. I hear you're from Iowa captain, that right?" As it happened, I had been using Hawkeye as my CB handle back in the states also and the handle stuck. From that point on I was known as either Hawkeye or just Hawk for short.

The gunships picked up the "shiny" also and descended to the trees setting up in a figure eight pattern passing over the team. The ARVN slick approached the clearing and

descended into the area slowly. I could see from our vantagepoint at 1500 feet five figures walking out of the treeline toward the pickup point. Suddenly the ARVN Huey nosed over and started to depart the landing zone. I could see muzzle flashes from the right side of the Huey as well as muzzle flashes from the ground team. **They were shooting at each other!!** I couldn't believe what I was seeing and shouted on intercom, "They're firing at each other!" The radio suddenly became a mix of Vietnamese and English as everyone seemed to talk at once. The five-team members on the ground were now running back to the treeline as the two gunships began firing mini-guns. I saw two of the five drop to the ground and never move again while the other three disappeared in the trees. The FAC cleared the gunships to "hose" the trees, which they did immediately. I saw a couple of muzzle flashes from the trees but after about five minutes the gunships pulled off and climbed back to our altitude. We learned from the FAC that the team was actually "Charlie" and had probably captured the real team. I asked "Do we have a chance of getting the real guys out somehow?" Jim replied very somberly, "Not likely."

The trip back to Thui Atar was very quiet. No one in our bird said a thing and nothing broke the silence on the radio. After we refueled and parked the bird I went over to the ARVN Huey and saw oil leaking from the right side of the engine and several bullet holes in the windows and skin of the bird. No one had been hurt but it could have been very bad. I learned that on a "cold exfil" like that the team was supposed to carry their weapons in a certain hand depending on the day of the week and a certain colored scarf was also supposed to be worn. "Charlie" hadn't broken this code so the ARVN knew the guys walking toward them was not the real team. (Later that week a big CH47 was brought in and it hooked onto the Huey and took it away.)

The remainder of the week was fairly uneventful and actually very boring. We made no "infiles" and the second ground team remained in the Cambodian jungle somewhere. It was time to go back to Cam Ranh. I guess no one remembered that I hadn't been "hung" and I sure wasn't going to bring it up to anyone. I still didn't have a clue what it meant but wasn't too excited about finding out.

Ops told us that we would need to fly the slick back to Cam Ranh for maintenance so after breakfast we loaded up and followed two gunships to the east. We stayed low and "popped" a couple of miles out. We flew down a valley after we cleared the highlands which led us to the city of Nha Trang. As we passed over the city Jim pointed out a huge Buddha sitting on top of one of the hills. It was pure white and looked beautiful. Nha Trang sat right on the ocean and would make a great resort city.....except for the war going on. Too bad. Just south of Nha Trang we dropped down to the beach and followed it toward Cam Ranh. As we approached the base some GI's were waving their arms at us so we came to a hover near them. One airman ran up and hollered that a guy had been swimming with them and got caught in the undertow. They hadn't seen him since. We pulled up, radioed the other choppers and began to fly a search pattern over the water. After about 30 minutes with no luck we again saw the troops on the beach waving. As we approached them they gave us the "thumbs up" and pointed to a guy sitting on the sand. We hovered and were told by one of the guys that their buddy had been pulled down the

beach by the tow and he finally swam in to the beach. Lucky guy, and I filed away the idea that swimming in this water was probably not the smartest thing to do.

We then landed without incident and took our gear into Ops. Pizzorno briefed me on the scheduling situation and told me to take the rest of the afternoon off. I certainly didn't object and headed for quarters along with the rest of the crewmembers. My first week on "the mission" was complete and I wondered if it was always this tame....almost boring. It wasn't. I discovered that later. On the ride back to our rooms Jim asked, "Want to check out the BX?" "Of course," I said.

Cam Ranh AB

As Jim and I entered the Base Exchange (BX) at Cam Ranh I felt like I was back in the states at any BX then in existence. Nothing was quite as pretty and well displayed but all the same kind of stuff was there. The big exception was in the electronics area, which was filled with TV equipment and stereo components. In the electronics area there seemed to be a feeding frenzy around stacks of boxes. GI's were hauling off these boxes like they were candy of some sort. Sony was printed on the outside and I then saw what all the fuss was about. They were 21-inch color television sets. Since we could get nothing but black and white signals at Cam Ranh I couldn't figure out why they were going so fast until I saw the price.....\$125. What a deal! Being new, I didn't want to blow money on something I couldn't use so just watched the action to see how it went. Within four hours of arrival, all of the Sony TV's were gone according to one of the clerks. I probably should have bought one since they never got them in again. Lesson learned.....if they get a hot item in and you might want it.....buy it!

I looked over all the stereo components but needed time to study what was available before making a choice. Everyone at the Hornet hooches had stereo since it was very cheap compared to stateside prices. As I was about to leave I noticed a stack of catalogs near the door. They were new PACEX catalogs for mail-order items out of Japan. I picked one up as Jim and I left and we headed for the post office. I checked my box to find the first letter from Bonnie as well as one from my folks. Couldn't wait to read them so stopped right on the spot and read both letters. Those damn tears came to my eyes again as I read Bonnie's letter relating how they were doing and they really missed me. Boy, did I miss them too. The folk's letter was less emotional but they had heard from someone about the PACEX catalog and wondered if I could send them one to order some things. Jim headed back for the hooch as I made a second pass by the BX to pick up another catalog.

Back in my room I re-read the letters I had gotten and browsed through the PACEX catalog. I then wandered around the hooch and talked with some of the guys about stereo equipment that they had gotten. I found the sun deck above the bar area and went back to change into a swimsuit. A little tan would probably feel good. With a towel and the catalog in hand I stayed up there for probably an hour. Too long.....I burned my skin pretty bad. From that point on, never more than 30 minutes!

Cam Ranh had a movie theater that showed a new movie every couple of days. That night after some food at the chow hall I went with a couple of Hornets to the movie. Again, it was like being stateside with good popcorn and soda pop. Can't remember what the movie was but at least they were close to "first run" and were full sized instead of the 16mm we saw at Ban Me Thuit. I think I saw every movie they showed the entire time I spent at Cam Ranh.

Another "hot spot" at Cam Ranh was a place called "Mario's". To get to it, we had to take the truck outside the Air Force portion of the base and drive to the Army base just to the south. It was like an Italian restaurant and served some of the best pizza I had ever had. We would go there a couple of times a week just to do something different.

The officers club provided a nice place to relax but mostly people went there for the cheap drinks. Every couple of weeks entertainment would come in courtesy of the USO and make us all act obnoxious as we tried to forget what we were doing. It was a bit embarrassing at first but as time went on I better understood why grown men acted that way. It was a release from stress and homesickness.

Many evenings were spent just hanging around the hooch. On one evening I was in my room trying to decide what stereo equipment to order from PACEX and heard an awful loud banging on the walls down the hall. As I stepped out of my room I saw six or seven Hornets pounding the walls in unison shouting "It's time for a Hornet Horror Show". I just watched and made my way down toward our lounge area passing the latrine. In the latrine I saw three or four more Hornets spraying green paint on their chests through a Hornet stencil. They grabbed my arm, helped me get off my T-shirt and proceeded to spray a Hornet on my chest. Then a couple of Hornets ran through the latrine saying that one of the pilots refused to come out of his room and they were going to get the "cannon". The cannon was nothing more than eight soda cans taped together. Seven of them had both tops and bottoms cut out. The eighth one had a small hole in one end and four "churchkey" openings in the other. (This was the combustion chamber). They would squirt a bit of lighter fluid into the chamber and filled the tube part with shaving cream, crushed crackers, and anything else they could think of. They kept pounding on this poor pilot's door and finally pushed it open. The pilot was half laying on his bed as the cannon was leveled at him. A quick swish and a lighter held to the small hole. "Kaboom" went the cannon and the pilot was now covered head to toe with shaving cream and crackers. Needless to say, he joined the party without further resistance. The party went on for a couple of hours as most got drunk and passed out within that time. It was again hard to believe that grown men would act this way but they did. I had just witnessed a Hornet Horror Show!

On another occasion, I heard that the gunners got a bunch of green spray paint and painted Hornet stencils on almost every building on the base. This was supposedly in retaliation for the wing commander's displeasure with the appearance of our gunners.

Most of the gunners felt that they were beyond the standards of dress and appearance dictated by the Air Force. They were in Vietnam to kill "Charlie" and not to worry about how they looked. I agreed with them in some respects but even if the wing commander was a "butt head", he should still be respected for his rank and position. Most of the officers complied but the gunners tried to stay away from Cam Ranh and stay on "the mission" as much as possible. Nobody bothered them while they were at Ban Me Thuit.

I finally ordered a complete set of stereo components through PACEX and spent considerable time in the evenings recording music borrowed from other Hornets. It was a

great system for the early 70's and today I still have the speakers and two tape decks. I haven't found a good reason to replace them. I also got orders from my folks for dishes, silverware, lamps, and other goodies for all the relatives. Not sure it was completely legal but I spent a lot of money buying gifts! I got a small 12" black and white TV (the good Sony's were gone) and even bought a 12 string guitar. That was a mistake as I never learned how to play it and sold it to another pilot for what I had paid for it.

My days at Cam Ranh were spent at the squadron handling scheduling and flying training missions. I rapidly went through the required training missions to check out as aircraft commander on the slicks. The check was to be a week at Ban Me Thuit with a check pilot. My check pilot was Captain Frank Wade who I was stationed with again while I was at the Instrument Flight Center at Randolph AFB in San Antonio in 1974. There was a special mission coming up while we were there that week so it should be interesting.

That night I was a little apprehensive for two reasons. First, I was thinking about the check scheduled for the next week. Second, all of the hooch maids on the base left earlier than normal. The rest of the Hornets stayed pretty close to the hooch that evening and for good reason. When ever the hooch maids leave early we were told to expect an attack by "Charlie". They didn't let us down! At about 10:00 that evening the base was hit by about seven rockets with one of them landing no more than 50 yards from my room in the street. I grabbed my flak vest and helmet and wrapped my arms around my stereo equipment to prevent them from falling on the floor. It was really stupid but at the time it seemed very important. After it was over, the sirens went off to warn us of an attack. Great timing! About 15 minutes later the all clear was sounded and we all met in the lounge. I headed for the squadron and met the commander and ops officer there. Maintenance reported that one of the rockets did hit inside a revetment and damaged one of the choppers but the rest were OK. It was amazing to see how little damage was caused by the rocket to the "N Model". Most of the force was absorbed by the revetment and just a few holes in the tailboom were visible. The chopper happened to be the slick I was to take to Ban Me Thuit the next day but we had a spare so no problem.

Slick Duty

As has been well documented, many of our troops did not come home from Vietnam and have never been accounted for. They are still listed as Missing In Action (MIA). The mission I was assigned to was an attempt to recover some remains, teeth, bones, or at least some dogtags, to change some poor souls from MIA to Killed In Action (KIA). This was to be a slick mission where we would take some Army Rangers to a crash site that was known and see what they could find. Four Rangers met us at Ban Me Thuit and briefed us on the mission. Captain Frank Wade acted my co-pilot and check pilot. I was in charge but he was there if I needed him.

The briefing was conducted jointly by the Army captain who would be in charge of the ground troops and I would brief the air operation. Two gunships would accompany us to the site. The Army troops were tough looking but nothing special to indicate that these were the best the Army had to offer. The Army captain explained that the crash site involved an Army Huey shot down about three years prior and the area had been too dangerous to try to get to until now. He suspected that "Charlie" was still in the area but no action had been reported for about two or three months. Four crewmembers were in the Huey and nothing had been seen of them since they went down. I briefed on our tactics and instructed the gunships to stay at 1500' AGL unless needed. With the briefing complete we loaded up and departed to the Northwest.

The area where the crash site was located was overgrown with jungle and visibility of the ground was very limited. We found the hill which was a landmark and tried to find a suitable landing zone (LZ). We could find no clear areas so we decided to use the rope ladders on our chopper to get them to the ground. We hovered over a tall bamboo area and dropped the ladders. The Rangers climbed out and proceeded to lower themselves toward the ground. They were talking to us using an FM radio and when they got to the end of the ladders they told us that we would have to go lower. I started lowering collective and we went down into the bamboo. We had bamboo brushing the windshield and sides of our chopper as we descended. The Ranger captain called up, "We've got to get at least another 15 feet down." We descended more and the rotor blades began to chop up the tops of the bamboo. We continued to make our own "hole" in the bamboo until the Army captain shouted, "We're on the ground. Get out of here!" We pulled collective up and came straight up out of the hole that we had just made. I looked at Frank and said, "Very interesting!" He smiled and replied, "Makes a good lawnmower, huh?" "Yeah, man!" We climbed back to 1500 feet and set up an orbit away from the ground troops with the gunships following us.

It wasn't more than 15 minutes later that we got a call from the ground troops. The captain announced that they were moving to the South because they could hear voices coming up the hill toward them. In the background as he was speaking we could hear a couple of bursts being fired from automatic weapons. I called back to check on them and

the captain again just said, "Moving south, moving south, get us out of here!" The jungle was so thick that we couldn't begin to see them so we just started looking for some place to get down into to pick them up. The hole we had made was to the West of the hill so that was out as an option. About one-half mile to the South we spotted what looked like a hole that we could get down into and headed that way. We descended to the tops of the jungle and stopped over the hole. It was not nearly as big as it first appeared but about that time the Army captain called again saying, "I've got you in sight, get down here and get us out!" We started down into the hole as the gunners dropped the ladders again and guided us down. "Clear Down Left." "Clear Down Right." "Stop, Left!" "Stop, Right!" "Turn Tail Left." "Clear Left." "Stop Tail Left!" "Clear Down Left." "Clear Down Right." The calls from the gunners came fast and furious as we descended. This was the tightest hole I had ever been down and the whole crew helped to guide us. Frank watched the nose and warned me as we nearly hit a tall branch with the nose bubble. Tree limbs began flying everywhere as the rotors cut them down. I could tell Frank was getting nervous as he called, "How much further?" The Army captain yelled back, "We need about 10 more feet. Hurry!!!" In the background we could hear automatic weapons firing. We didn't know from where but the guys on the ground were in trouble for sure.

The next thing we heard as we continued to descend was the Army captain again yelling on his radio, "We're on the ladders, pull out, pull out, pull out!!!" Again we could hear automatic weapons firing now much more intensely. I started to climb back up out of the hole and asked Frank, "See any BIG limbs directly above us?" "They all look pretty small, go for it, Hawk!" I pulled collective and we shot straight up making our own hole where none existed. Branches of trees flew everywhere as we made our ascent with the four Rangers hanging on for dear life on those rope ladders. We cleared the treetops and continued up until the ropes were also clear. Then without hesitation I moved away from the hole as fast as our bird could go. Once well clear, I slowed down again and the Rangers climbed up the ladders to be assisted by the door gunners in getting in our bird.

As we headed back for Ban Me Thuit the Army captain got on the intercom and explained that they had gotten two sets of teeth and a dogtag before they heard "Charlie" coming up the hill. The bad guys were initially just shooting at random to see if they could get our guys to fire. "Charlie" obviously knew where the crash site was and were headed that way. Our Rangers spotted "Charlie" as they left the site and started returning fire as they moved south. It was another close call. We were lucky. I turned to Frank and said, "Good job, partner. At least now a couple of families back home won't have to wait and wonder anymore." When we got back to the base we discovered that our bird had two bullet holes in the rotor blades and one in the tail boom. It really was a close call. Frank said, "Well captain, unless you really screw up sometime this week you just passed your checkride!" I didn't and when we returned to Cam Ranh Frank filled out all of the paperwork and I was now a fully qualified slick aircraft commander.

Occasionally the 20th SOS was tapped to perform special missions that frequently involved slicks. One day a special mission came down involving a slick to fly the Secretary of the Air Force the following day. Supposedly he wanted to see the tri-border area from the air. I would fly the slick with two gunships for escort.

The flight to Pleiku was uneventful. We landed in front of base operations and as the gunners tied down the birds the pilots walked across the ramp to the ops building. This was obviously a big deal since there were four full colonels waiting for us. I was briefed by the Wing Commander that the Secretary would be arriving in about one hour and he showed me a room we could use to give the Secretary a briefing. They had a map set up on a tripod of the local area and he related that he had been told that the Secretary was interested in seeing the tri-border area where Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam joined. I didn't have the heart to tell him that I already knew this. The tri-border area was a typically "hot" area and today would be no different.

As advertised, a C-140 four engine business jet arrived about an hour later. He was dressed in civilian clothes and as he exited the jet was greeted by the colonels at the bottom of the stairs. The Wing Commander escorted him to ops where he was ushered to a room to change into a flight suit. When he emerged he looked just like the rest of us except he wore no rank or patches. The thought crossed my mind that "Charlie" would be thrilled to capture this dignitary. The colonel ushered him to the room that I would use for a briefing. I was introduced to him and he identified himself as the **Undersecretary of the Air Force**. Turned out that this wasn't Dr. Seamans after all, just one of his henchmen. He apologized for the Secretary's absence and said that he would come another time. Oh well, an undersecretary was almost as important as the Secretary. I found out later that Dr. Seamans was advised not to come due to the action happening in the tri-border area that week.

Everyone left the briefing room except the Wing Commander, the Undersecretary, and me. I explained the route we would fly and our tactics of 1500 AGL or treetop level including the reasons why. He listened very attentively and became a bit nervous when I explained how we dove for the trees if descending. The Wing Commander said nothing but winced as I explained the more exciting parts of our flight. I asked, "Is there anything in particular you want to see?" He replied, "No, let's just go take a look and we'll play it by ear. I would like to see some low level flying however." With the briefing complete we left the room and headed for a latrine. I told the other crews to get ready and by the time we exited the latrine the two gunships were already running.

We climbed in and by inter phone I introduced the rest of the crew. The gunners took care of our passenger along with one of the other colonels who would ride along. We made our normal taxi and takeoff and headed northwest riding the tops of the trees. A couple of miles from Pleiku we did our normal "pop" to 1500' AGL. I warned the undersecretary over inter phone that the "pop" was coming but he was still a bit surprised by the steepness of the climb. His comment was, "Boy, these things can really climb, can't they?" "For a short time, yes sir," I replied. We were now at altitude following the road to the Northwest. About halfway there, we got a call on the radio that artillery was in use in the tri-border area and to be careful. I informed the undersecretary since he was only on intercom and did not hear the transmission. He asked, "How close can we get?" I answered, "I'll get you as close as I can without putting us in danger." I thought that was a good safe answer that would give me a lot of leeway.

The undersecretary was looking out the door and noticed that there were a lot of people walking down the road away from the tri-border area. When he commented on this I pointed out a convoy of tanks and armored personnel carriers headed toward the border. As I looked out over the nose I could see some artillery explosions hitting the hills on either side of the road. I pointed these out about the time that one of the gunship pilots called them to my attention also. It was definitely time to turn around and head back. We made a 180-degree turn to the right and as we did, the undersecretary had a clear view of the road looking out the right door. He asked, "Can we go down and take a closer look?" You asked for it, you get it! I made a quick radio call to the gunships following us and rolled to nearly 90 degrees as I dropped the collective. I realized that I had passengers that probably weren't used to this maneuver so eased up on the bank as we descended. I rolled out over the treetops and began crossing the road at random intervals. Roads were something that we never wanted to fly straight down if we didn't have to. The people we had seen turned out to be Vietnamese peasants escaping from the action further north. The armor was being sent up to support the ground troops who were fighting "Charlie." As we crisscrossed the road it got very quiet in the back. I was using about 60 degrees of bank in each turn I made and thought it was pretty tame. Apparently the colonel riding with us didn't. My left door gunner called out, "Boss, we might want to climb back up for the rest of the flight." The colonel had brought a plastic bag with him in case the undersecretary got sick but he ended up using it himself. "I'm probably in trouble now," I thought. We did a pop back to 1500 and stayed there for the return flight to Pleiku.

After we landed, the passengers climbed out before I had a chance to shutdown. The undersecretary came to my window and shook my hand saying, "Thanks for the ride, that was fun." A cool guy although I couldn't say the same for the colonel. He headed for base operations without saying a word carrying his little plastic bag and trying to hide it in his flight suit as he walked. Another day at the office for me. Wonder if anyone will complain to the squadron.

We refueled and then headed back to Cam Ranh that afternoon after having some lunch. I was met as we landed by our Operations Officer who informed me that the colonel from Pleiku had complained about my flying and thought I was just showing off. He had failed to mention that he got sick. The Ops Officer said that I needed to be a little more gentle on VIP flights to which I agreed with tongue in cheek. A week later we got to do the same type of flight for the real Secretary of the Air Force but this time I was in a gunship following the slick. My thoughts about the colonel were not pleasant ones something like, "If they can't take a joke.....".

Most of my "slick" missions were very uneventful. The gunships were seeing all the action "up close and personal." I felt like the tail of the dragon just hanging on as the rest of the beast did the job. Fortunately, no one had to be picked up by us and I was just the insurance policy for the gunship crews. I tried to train my co-pilots the best I knew how and hoped they would upgrade soon so I could move on to my gunship checkout. Back and forth to Ban Me Thuit from Cam Ranh, out to Thui Atar and back, fly support behind the gunships as they covered the Vietnamese slick inserting and extracting the teams.

On one day at Ban Me Thuit we had a new gunner show up for one of the gunships to replace one who had gotten sick. I was told that we had to make sure this new guy got his "hanging" that day if possible. As we were refueling at Thui Atar his gunship pilot called me on the radio and said, "Make sure you park over the ditch, Hawk!" I responded, "Sure!" not knowing exactly would take place since I had successfully avoided this ritual on myself. After refueling I parked our slick and with the help of my gunners I was directed to place the tailskid directly over a small ditch next to the runway. We said nothing and after getting briefed that everything was quiet in the field a couple of other gunners grabbed the new guy and proceeded to tie a parachute strap around his waist. The gunship pilot called to me, "Hey Hawk, start her up!" I got into the cockpit after one of my gunners untied the blades and as the new gunner was lifted to the tailskid and left hanging there I just touched the start switch with no ignition on and the blade began to rotate slowly. At the same time a bucket of water was thrown on the poor guy as he struggled to get off the skid and several colored smoke grenades were activated right below him. I shut everything down and let the blade slowly continue to rotate as the new gunner tore his shirt and pants getting off the skid. It was all over in a matter of minutes but the new guy had now been properly "hung". Everyone shook his hand as he walked away wet and covered with the colors of the smoke grenades. Quite a sight! But still not something that I relished having done to me.

That same day we set up a volleyball net at the end of the dirt runway and played volleyball for a couple of hours. A C-7 Caribou circled overhead and landed as we played. He taxied to the road leading to the special forces camp, dumped his cargo and immediately taxied out for takeoff from the end opposite our game. The C-7 was from Cam Ranh and their crew knew who we were. He lifted off and flew low right toward us. One of the pilots yelled, "Moon time!!", and everyone lined up quickly facing away from the approaching transport. "NOW!!" someone yelled and the whole bunch of us dropped our pants and leaned over. The C-7 had been properly "moonied" and made a couple of low passes before leaving the area. We found out later that these guys on the C-7 were awarded Air Medals for this mission as they said they took "ground fire" while taking off from Thui Atar. We all knew what the ground fire was and laughed about it for several months.

Boredom at Thui Atar was something that all of us dealt with in our own ways. Unfortunately, the lunches always contained a small pack of Marlboro cigarettes that we now know were spiked by the manufacturer to hook new smokers. I had never smoked before and always felt they were extremely unhealthy. But a lot of smoking was going on as we sat around waiting for a call to go and get shot at. I started smoking and before long I was smoking at least a pack a day. By the time I left Vietnam I was smoking over two packs a day. Today as I suffer from ill health focused primarily on my arteries and heart, I wonder how healthy I would be if I had never picked up the habit.

We spent a lot of time just sitting on the ground at Thui Atar but tried to entertain ourselves as much as possible. We would shoot our weapons on the range for play and to keep up our accuracy skills. We would even take walking trips to the river close by.

Walking through the jungle to the river was a little scary since "Charlie" could be anywhere. On one trip to the river a gunner waded in after taking all of his clothes off. Not too smart but then some of our gunners acted a bit weird. At the same time I noticed several of the women and children from the village wading into the river 50 yards or so up stream from us. They began washing clothes and bathing the children. A primitive sight but interesting. All of a sudden we heard gunfire from across the river and the gunner almost walked on the water to get out. We all ducked behind trees and waited. I never saw any muzzle flashes or heard bullets hitting close by and within a minute or two the shooting stopped. When I looked up toward the women and children they were gone. We never did find out the source of the firing but suspect that "Charlie" was just letting us know that they were around. We made our way back to the camp and stayed closer for the remainder of that week.

On one day, one of the gunship pilots decided to give all the gunners an opportunity to fly his Huey. He was an instructor and put each gunner in the left seat for the contest. The rest of us sat on the ground next to the runway and used some large cards that someone had made up to provide scores for their hovering ability. The contest began and each gunner was given an opportunity to attempt to hover the gunship. I saw some pretty wild gyrations and at one point when the third gunner was flying the nose came way up to about a 20 to 30 degree pitch angle and the tailskid struck the dirt. We all held up the cards saying "1" but all of us were a little concerned that maybe this had gone too far. As the gunship landed I went over to the pilot and said, "I think we better stop the 'contest.' Either somebody is going to get hurt or at the very least, you may bend the bird." The pilot agreed and we didn't ever do that again. Good plan!

A few weeks later we were joined at Thui Atar by some Cobra pilots from the Army and we had some good conversations about tactics and this stupid war we were involved with. I got a ride in one of the Cobras and had some fun but wasn't all that impressed with the simulated rocket passes. They followed us back to Ban Me Thuit as they and some ground maintenance types were staying there. Space was limited for sleeping so I found myself in an upper bunk bed that night in a room with about eight Hornet pilots. The "all ranks club" was very busy that night with all the extra Army troops there and it seemed like way too much alcohol was being consumed. At about 10:00 I headed for quarters and went to sleep. I vaguely remember other pilots entering the room and by midnight all was quiet. It was about 1:00 AM when I awoke to the sound of the door bursting open. I then heard a metal sound as something hit the concrete floor followed by a hissing sound. I rolled over and looked to see sparks coming from a canister lying on the floor between my bunk and the door. Almost immediately I smelled the horrible stench of what smelled like vomit and my eyes began to burn. I jumped out of the bunk and yelled, "CS!!!! GET OUT OF HERE,.....NOW!!!!!" All the pilots jumped out of bed and ran from the room. When we got outside we got away from the building and began to cough terribly. CS is a combination tear gas and coughing gas. I must have coughed for over 30 minutes as I tried to clear my lungs of that terrible stuff. The medics came over to us and checked our eyes as they gave us some fluid to drink. We could not possibly return to that room and everything in it smelled like vomit. We slept in other rooms after retrieving our gear. It was a horrible experience and the bad part was that they never determined who did it. I

learned later that one of the pilots in our room had gotten into a verbal altercation with one of the Army maintenance troops and several of our gunners got into it with the Army guys also. We suspected that one of them had tossed the CS grenade into our room but could never prove it. They all left the next day without further incident.

As I became comfortable with the slick mission and tired of the boredom, I began to schedule myself for co-pilot duty on the gunships. We now had plenty of slick qualified pilots and it was time for me to start thinking about a gunship upgrade.

The Gunships

Back at Cam Ranh I flew a couple of training flights in gunships. The gunships were fairly formidable with their seven shot rocket pods mounted on either side and the mini-guns in the doors with 14,000 rounds of ammo available to them. Each mini-gun had two triggers and pulling one gave a rate of 2000 rounds a minute while both triggers yielded 4000 rounds a minute. Every seventh round was a tracer so when fired it looked like a solid stream. It was kind of fun to be back in the gunship mode again. Within a week I headed back to Ban Me Thuit as a gunship co-pilot. On the second day at Thui Atar we got a call that the only team we had in the field was ready for a pickup. The team reported that they had two prisoners with them and "Charlie" was definitely in the area looking for them. This could be very interesting (another way the Hornets had of saying "dangerous").

Two gunships and our ever-present slick took off followed by the ARVN slick. I was in the lead gunship and made contact with the O-2 FAC as we approached the area. The landing zone was fairly open and presented no real problem for the ARVN slick. Since "Charlie" was reported in the area we decided to shake him up a bit as well as check the immediate area around the team. I spotted the signal mirror and pointed it out to the pilot and the gunners. We began a straight-ahead descent rolling off the power in simulated auto rotation fashion. About halfway down to the trees we rolled on the power and pulled up collective as we nosed over. The pilot called, "Give me left rockets. As I positioned the switches on the center pedestal I responded, "You've got left rockets." He fired two rockets from the left rocket pod to help cover our descent and immediately went back into auto rotation. I watched the rockets on their way to the ground and couldn't believe my eyes. Running across an open area where the rockets were headed I saw two of "Charlie's" finest. "LOOK WHERE THE ROCKETS ARE GOING TO HIT!" I yelled. The rockets hit within ten feet of each other and exploded right on top of the two guys in black pajamas. My pilot responded, "Wow!!" and said no more.

We turned over the team at treetop level and the pilot called, "Right gun, clear to fire!" Our right door gunner put out three short bursts with his mini-gun and we broke into a hard left turn as we passed over the team. As we swung around to the right and approached the team again the number two gunship was just completing his pass over the team. My pilot called, "Left gun, clear to fire!" and the left door gunner fired off a couple of bursts. The pilot told me to clear in the slick so I called up to the FAC and radioed, "Clear in the slick, area is currently cold." meaning that we had not received any ground fire. The ARVN slick came in, picked up the team and their prisoners and pulled out. As the ARVN slick started his climb we followed him up and headed back to Thui Atar. But the FAC had some other plans for us.

The FAC radioed that he had a target for us. "What is it?" I asked. He called back, "About four clicks south is a large pond of water, that's where we're headed." (A "click"

was the term we used to represent 1000 meters.) "Sounds like he's got something strange for us," I commented to the crew. The radio crackled, "Set up a spooky pattern on the vehicles at the pond." Vehicles, what vehicles, the only thing at that pond was a very large number of water buffalo. My pilot called out, "OK, Gun 2, let's go into a left spooky pattern, left gun, cleared to fire!" We started circling the pond at 1500'AGL and Gun 2 did the same. The deafening sound of the mini-gun only added to the sick feeling I had in my stomach. We were killing helpless animals by the dozens as the pond began turning blood red. The poor buffalo were dropping like flies. I knew why we were doing it, but I didn't have to like it. "Charlie" hauled supplies including rockets, ammo, and mortar rounds down the "trail" using water buffalo when trucks were not available. No Cambodian farmer ever had that many buffalo and it was obvious that they had been turned loose to graze and water during the daylight so that at night they could load up again and move south. Our right door gunner called out on the intercom, "Boss, can't we go around to the right for awhile so I get a chance?" There was no response from our pilot but he called to Gun 2, "Gun 2, break it off, let's set up for a right spooky for a couple of turns." We turned right and set up our pattern around the pond once again. It was actually better for me since I was on the left side, I couldn't see the pond anymore. But I still cringed every time the right gunner set off a burst. Thankfully it was all over in about 5 minutes and we headed back to the FOL. The FAC came on the radio with a laugh, "Hey, I'll give you guys about 75 KIA's for that action, good job!" "Don't bother," my pilot replied. I could tell by his voice he wasn't a happy camper either.

After refueling and re-arming we parked the bird and were curious about the prisoners the team had captured. The Vietnamese had them in a tent and were questioning them. I really wanted to go and see them but everyone said to stay away. My pilot said, "You wouldn't like what you would see." Then I heard the sounds of slapping and hitting along with yells of pain coming from the tent. I then heard a woman's scream as she was hit by one of the ARVN officers. This war stunk and it was about to get worse. The ARVN captain came out of the tent and called for a gunship to escort the ARVN slick. The two prisoners, an old man and a young woman, were taken from the tent and led to the ARVN Huey. We were lead gunship so we fired up again and followed the slick to the west. We followed off to the side and back of the slick and I asked, "Are they taking them back?" "Don't know," was the reply. Then we discovered what was really happening. Without any warning the old man came out the side of the helicopter and fell to his death 1500 feet below. We pulled up closer since we didn't know if it was an accident or not. We saw the ARVN officer slapping the girl on the face and pointing out the door. It was no accident. They had thrown out the old man in order to scare the girl into talking. She looked like she was talking a lot now and the ARVN officer was writing on a pad. As we started to drop back again two of the crew members on the slick grabbed the girl and threw her out. I watched her as she fell through the trees and could only hope that by some miracle she would survive. She probably was Viet Cong but the brutality of what had just happened sickened me. All I wanted to do was go back to the United States and forget about these cruel people. We followed the slick back to Thui Atar without saying a word to each other. I think we all felt the same way and nobody wanted to talk about it.

I smoked a lot that day, probably more than two packs, and when we got back to Ban Me Thuit I couldn't wait for the bar to open at the club. I got really drunk that night and by 10:00 I had fallen sound asleep. It was the turning point for me as far as my thoughts about trying to help the Vietnamese fight communism. Forget it. Let's go home!

Downtown

During the following weeks I alternated between flying a slick as aircraft commander and co-pilot on a gunship. While at Cam Ranh I flew training flights for my upgrade to gunship aircraft commander. My attitude toward the entire situation had changed and I now wanted to get back home as soon as possible. A couple more Hornet Horror Shows broke the feeling as did a New Year celebration at Ban Me Thuit. We all got out our weapons and fired full automatic into the air at the stroke of midnight. "Charlie" must have thought we were nuts. I even got the opportunity to go to downtown Ban Me Thuit.

We were sent back from Thui Atar early one day and six of us decided to head downtown. We borrowed a 1 1/2 ton stakebed truck and headed out with four gunners and two pilots including me. We all carried sidearms, mostly .38 caliber revolvers and drove about four miles to town. While there we got split up but it shouldn't have been a problem since we had agreed on a time to meet back at the truck.

The other pilot and I browsed through the marketplace, walked the streets looking at the sights, and hit one bar for a drink. The city seemed like a lot of cities I had seen along the border to Mexico. Not very clean and a lot of poverty. Children would beg for food and one young lad even tried to steal my watch. We had to be back to the base before dark when they locked the gate but we had plenty of time.

It got late fast and we headed for the truck about 20 minutes before the agreed upon time. We waited at the truck and shortly, three of the four gunners showed up. "What happened to your buddy?" I asked. "Don't know, he went into a store down the road and we haven't seen him since." I started to get worried and asked the three gunners to spread out and search for 15 minutes and then get back to the truck. Thirty minutes later the other pilot and I were the only ones at the truck and I was really worried. Then all four gunners could be seen running up the street toward us. "Let's go!" I said to the other pilot. He fired up the truck and as we started to pull away the gunners hopped into the back.

We drove as fast as we could back to the base as it got darker and darker but as we turned up the road toward the gate we could see that the gate was already closed. The sun had just set and the Vietnamese were very specific that no one would be allowed through the gate after that time. As we approached the gate we slowed down and noticed that the guards in the watchtowers on either side of the gate were pointing their 50 caliber machine guns directly at us. About 50 yards from the gate we stopped. I looked at the other pilot and said, "What do you think?" He replied, "Well, we sure don't want to spend the night out here or back in town."

My adrenaline was pumping hard as I stepped out of the truck and put my hands in the air. These guys in the watchtowers don't speak English but surely they can see who we

are. I walked slowly toward the gate keeping my hands in the air. I then heard a terrible sound break the silence.....the sound of one of the guards cocking his weapon inserting the first round into the chamber. The two guards were talking in Vietnamese to each other as I stopped in my tracks. It felt like I stood there for ten minutes but it was probably only a minute or two. Then one of the watch tower guards called down and a guard on the ground opened the gate. I breathed a sigh of relief and waved the truck forward. They stopped momentarily to let me in and we drove through the gate waving to the guards. It took a little while to get my heart rate back to normal after that one.

Other than one trip to Saigon I never visited any of the cities or villages in Viet Nam. It always spooked me and I never felt safe outside of the military posts. It must have been true for all the other guys too since we all stayed pretty close. So Cam Ranh, Ban Me Thuit, and Thui Atar became my home. I couldn't wait to get back home. This place sucks.

Plei Djerang

Saigon was getting a little nervous about the support from the United States and the growing support from the people of South Viet Nam for the communists in the North. My impression was that the typical Vietnamese didn't care at all who was in power. The Vietnamese people were tired of war and all the killing. As long as they had a roof over their head, a full stomach, and a way to provide for the family, they would be very, very happy. The North Vietnamese were very patient while the Americans were very impatient. This war had gone on for much too long and the North was beginning to flex muscle as they saw the American presence diminish. To meet this potential threat, in January of 1972 we started flying north out of Ban Me Thuit to a special forces camp to the Southwest of Pleiku called Plei Djerang. It was located in the high plains portion and didn't have much jungle at all nearby. The village that was just to the North of the runway consisted of thatched huts built on stilts. No trees to speak of anywhere and it reminded me of the plains of Nebraska. Between Ban Me Thuit and Plei Djerang we located a winding river that made an outstanding place to test fire our rockets and mini-guns.

I was getting a practice gunship mission week that January so I was riding the right seat. An instructor was in the left acting as my co-pilot. We had a couple of good gunners on board that made me feel pretty good about facing the week. One morning after the briefing our gunners came to me and said they had gotten an inner tube from the "motor pool" the night before. They had patched it up and painted white on one side of it. "Where is it?" I asked. One of them replied, "The slick gunners have it so they can drop it in the river for a target." What a great idea. This could be fun. I walked over to the other pilots and told them what we were going to do today for test firing and all of them got excited about doing something different. Not much was happening at the FOL that week so it would break the monotony.

Approaching the river I cleared the slick to move ahead of us. As he descended to the river we all watched and when the tube was in the water we saw him pull off as he announced, "Target in the water!" Since gunships three and four were delayed due to maintenance we would only have two of us "attacking" the "tube". "Follow me in, Two," I announced as I rolled left toward the target. My left door gunner called, "Roll out, target at 12 o'clock." I rolled out calling, "Roger." When the angle was right, I rolled off power, entered the auto rotation mode, and called, "Gun lead descending" on the radio. Half way down I rolled the power back on again, pulled collective, and pitched the nose over. The grease mark "pipper" on the windscreen came down right on the "tube" as I let go with two rockets. I pulled off to the left and called, "Gun lead, clear!" As we turned, I watched the rockets hit the water within a foot or two of the "tube." "I GOT IT!" I yelled on the radio. "Look again, Hawk," someone responded. I turned over my right shoulder and looked as the large water splash made by my two rockets diminished and saw that "tube" bouncing on the waves. Gun two called, "I'll get her, Hawk. Watch this"! We were climbing back to altitude as two dropped toward the target. He went much lower than we

did and fired off two rockets. As he banked left the rockets hit very close to the tube and I thought for sure that the target was history. The water splash cleared and this time the slick pilot announced, "Zero for 2 guys. Do I have to show you how it's done"? "No thanks, slick. Watch this pass," I replied. We rolled in again and this time I went much lower with a shallower approach. "Give me both guns, fixed forward!" I was about to strafe the heck out of this old inner tube and put it out of it's misery. "You've got both guns, fixed forward!" my trusty co-pilot announced. I put the pipper just below the target and squeezed the trigger. The sound was deafening as each mini-gun lit off with 2,000 rounds a minute rate of fire. As the rounds began hitting the water it was awesome to see the sprouts of water bounce up what looked to be 8 to 10 feet in the air. I "walked" the firing pattern up the river right through the "tube." As I pulled off I was tempted to make some smart remark on the radio but decided to let my shooting do the talking. Good thing I kept my mouth shut. The slick pilot called, "Nice shooting, Hawk. Too bad you didn't hit the tube"!

Two more passes by Gun two and another one by us with my instructor flying the bird were to no avail. This inner tube had more lives than any cat in the world. As we departed the river area the slick went low and hovered over the tube. One of the gunners fired his M-16 at the tube and after three rounds finally got it to start the sinking process. We never heard the end of that for the rest of our time in Viet Nam. However, I have to admit that it was fun!

On my first trip to Plei Djerang I was really impressed by the clean look of the high country terrain, the orderly rows of huts and the lack of cover for "Charlie." I felt more safe here than any other place I had been. The children from the village still came by after we landed to check on handouts that we gave willingly. They didn't speak English and didn't seem interested in learning except for "Hershey!" or of all things "cigarette"! I was a bit shocked to see these 5 to 7 year old kids smoking cigarettes. They would hang around us for an hour or two and then disappear back to the village. We had a small firing range to blast away at. I always enjoyed hip shooting the M-60 machine gun. It was generally cooler than Thui Atar and the best part was no trees for "Charlie" to hide in. I did miss having a dog around. Klaus stayed behind with the kids at Thui Atar. I thought I might get a chance to see him again before my tour in Viet Nam was over but it never happened. He was great company and I missed him.

One day we had put a team in the field and were sitting alert. We were all eating our box lunches and of course the "kids" were there to get their share. All of us were just lounging around the choppers and I noticed the kids had gone to the firing range. Shortly, they returned and sat down in the shade next to my chopper. They had collected about 100 rounds of empty shell casings and began laying them out on the ground. I looked at one of the gunners and asked, "What do you suppose they are doing?" "Not a clue," he replied. We continued to watch them and we began to see a pattern emerge. They stood the shells on end and made a miniature fort. Inside the play fort they had shells lying in T's with the hole pointed out from the center of the fort. Then two other kids started laying shells in T's outside the fort with the holes pointed toward the fort. It was now obvious...these kids were playing 'war.' The psychology of this whole thing was

fascinating and sad at the same time. They were very detailed in what they did with one "gun" on the outside of the fort sneaking around a rock and beginning to shoot at the fort. They used small pebbles to simulate the rockets or mortars flying through the air. The 'war' was over in a matter of two or three minutes which was quite short compared to the 20 minutes or so that it took them to set up the battlefield. The sad part was that these kids knew a lot about war, they had lived it since birth, and this was their favorite game. What a shame!

On one trip from Ban Me Thuit, Gun 2 called, "Gun Lead, Gun Two." "Go ahead." "We just spotted a deer on the ground. Mind if we go get him and have him for lunch?" "Aah, slick, this is Gun Lead." "Go ahead, this is slick." "Do you see the deer that Two is talking about?" "Sure do if it's the one about 2 o'clock standing under that tree." "OK, Gun 2, stay put, slick go get him and don't miss! We'll do a couple of 360's and wait for you." "Roger boss, we're on our way!"

The slick dropped to the deck as the other four choppers outfitted as gunships circled overhead. The deer took off running as the Huey approached but the right door gunner used his M-16 and with two shots, put him down. We saw the slick hover next to the downed deer and the two gunners dragged the deer into the back of the chopper. As they started their climb we again headed north toward Plei Djerang. I wondered how this wild animal from Viet Nam would taste. I would soon find out.

After landing the slick crew sent one of the kids to the village to tell them we had a deer for them. They ran and shortly a group of villagers returned and took the deer away. They were obviously going to cook it and after seeing from close range this scraggly, skin and bones, filthy looking animal I had lost my taste for any kind of meat that day. I would be very satisfied with my box lunch, thank you!

About two hours later a couple of the villagers came to us and pulled at our flight suits. They wanted us to come with them back to the village. Half of us had to stay with the choppers anyway and I quickly volunteered. Soon, four of the crew members returned and told us that everyone had to go the village and get some of the deer meat or the villagers would be very offended. So I grit my teeth and with three others, proceeded to the village. Everyone in the village was happier than I had ever seen before. They were absolutely thrilled that we had given them this horrible looking deer and were waiting to eat on it until all of the Hornets had eaten first. A Vietnamese man who appeared to be somebody important, maybe the top dog chief or something, offered each of us a large green leaf and led us to the open fire in the center of the village. The carcass of the deer was lying off to the side and with a stick we were given meat from the grating over the fire. I was given about five pieces and as I looked at the meat and smelled it, I almost gagged. It smelled horrible and didn't look much better. We all gave half bows to our new friends and proceeded to take small bites as the entire village watched. Then we were saved. We heard the sound of one of the choppers starting engines and politely excused ourselves. We all ran toward the runway and for some reason, none of the meat made it all the way back. We accidentally dropped our remaining portions on the ground as we ran. Too bad! Thank goodness! I found out later that the reason this meat smelled so bad

was because the Vietnamese don't cut out the scent glands right away and the smell gets into every bit of the meat. Wow, what an experience.

Our squadron commander occasionally flew on the mission to keep his hand in the pot and I guess, make the troops feel that they weren't doing anything he wouldn't do. He was a tall lanky guy with a balding head. He had come from MAC flying C-141's I think but don't know for sure cause he rarely talked about past flying experiences. One night at Ban Me Thuit he and I were sitting at the bar after the movie talking about this and that. We were both smoking and he looked at me and said, "You and I both should stop smoking." "You're right," I replied, "but it's tough with all the freebies they give us." "Tell you what, let's both put up \$20 and the first one to smoke another cigarette after tonight has to tell the other one and he will take the money, OK?" he asked. "You're on, colonel!" I agreed. I stopped smoking that night and threw away the remaining pack that I had. I felt better but it sure was tough with so many of the Hornets still smoking. About a week later back at Cam Ranh he saw me in the squadron and handed me a \$20. "Couldn't take it any more. Congratulations!" I had made the break and remained without cigarettes for quite awhile.

Plei Djerang wasn't too bad. I actually liked it better than Thui Atar. In early February, I would be getting my aircraft commander checkride week from there. I was a little nervous about it since I'd only been there a couple of times. Oh well, think positive and just do what seems right and everything will turn out OK. The optimist in me was showing again. I had put in for leave in March and couldn't wait to see Bonnie and the kids again. Get the checkride taken care of and then I can relax while I'm in Tucson. When will this stupid war be over? I want to go home for good.

The Big Day

The checkride week was scheduled for the last of January through the first part of February 1972. I felt pretty lucky to get Capt. Bruce Knapp as the evaluator. He was a straight kind of guy and very friendly. I was also pleased to have a couple of very experienced gunners flying with us also. Sgt. Bob Hall and Sgt. Jon McDaniel had been around for a while and both seemed to be very professional yet aggressive. We rode a Blackbird C-123 to Ban Me Thuit and settled into quarters as usual. The Hornets were still going to Plei Djerang supporting teams across the border in Cambodia and we were briefed by the outgoing crew when they landed. Not too much going on with only a couple of "hot" exfils that week. I went out to check on our Huey and asked the maintenance troops how healthy she was. "She's in great shape, Captain, don't break her!" was the only comment I got. I climbed in and noticed that she did look good. Tail number 621 would be my bird for the coming week.

The club was quiet that night with the normal drinking and a lousy movie. I went back to the room and Bruce and I talked about tactics. I think he just wanted to make sure that I was on the "same sheet of music" as he was. We agreed on everything and went to sleep early.

Since I was a senior captain, I was designated Gun Lead for the week. Right or wrong, I was given the position and this would be not only a gunship check but also a flight lead check. Our departure and flight to Plei Djerang the next morning was fairly uneventful with the normal stop at the river to test the guns and rockets. I adjusted the grease pencil pipper on the windscreen to match my sitting height and felt pretty confident. We played the usual games at the FOL and had a couple of missions for cold exfils. It was so quiet it was almost spooky. I noticed that the natives from the village stayed away for the first time since we had been going to Plei Djerang. The kids only came by one time, which was also unusual.

A couple of days into the week we finally got a briefing on a situation that seemed to be brewing. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had been detected moving a large number of troops down the trail into Cambodia and appeared to be getting ready for a major attack somewhere. We would be putting additional teams into the field for the next few days to see what they could find out. Hopefully, they could catch a prisoner that would talk. Whoever made these decisions also upped the payment from two to three bags of rice for the team member who caught a talking prisoner. Nixon's Vietnamization program was on track as far as getting Americans out of Vietnam but it made things a bit more dangerous for the rest of us. "Charlie" knew we were getting out soon and felt like he would meet less resistance because of it.

The morning of February 3, 1972, started like all the rest. Breakfast at the chow hall, pilot briefing, crew briefing and takeoff. I was really proud of the way I got everyone to

check in on the radio like the Thunderbirds. I would call out an elongated "Guuuunnnn Lead!" and the other three gunships and the slick would immediately respond with, "2", "3", "4", "5", in rapid succession. It sounded very professional and gave all of us some pride in an otherwise pride-less job. We tested the rockets and guns again at the river and from that point on, nothing went exactly as planned.

As we flew north from the river to Plei Djerang I began to hear some chatter on the radio that was unusual. Bruce, Bob, and Jon were chatting on the intercom and I interrupted saying, "Bruce, turn up the radio. I just heard something interesting." What we then heard was a forward air controller talking to another bird about dropping a "daisy cutter" in some hilly country. "That must be a C-130 dropping a blivit," said Jon. We listened intently as we heard the discussion about the bomb hitting slightly on the side of a hill but it seemed acceptable. "Sounds like they are making an LZ for somebody." I said. Bruce replied, "Yeah, couldn't be us though; we're still 20 minutes from the FOL." The remainder of the flight into Plei Djerang was pretty quiet as all of us were thinking the same thing. If that LZ was for us we were in trouble. "Charlie" wasn't dumb. When a C-130 makes a landing zone, the bad guys try to get there in a hurry and set up as many traps as they can for the obvious arrival of helicopters.

We landed, hot refueled, and parked the bird. Then Bob and Jon retrieved some rockets from the CONEX to replace the two or three we had fired on the river. They also pulled out replacement ammo for the mini-guns. We waited. And we waited. I turned to Bruce and asked, "Do you suppose they are really going to use us for that LZ?" "I hope not," he replied. Finally we heard the drone of the O-2 as it circled to land. This was also unusual since we rarely got to visit face to face with the forward air controllers. He landed and taxied close to the tent we had set up on the ramp. His Vietnamese interpreter got out and headed toward the crew of the Vietnamese Huey. The captain flying the O-2 came toward us and said, "Let's go into the tent. I want to personally brief you guys on this one." I asked, "Was that you talking to the C-130?" "Yup, this is going to be a little tough but I know you guys can handle it." he answered.

The captain rolled out his map on the wooden table in the tent and pointed to an "X" marked in some fairly hilly terrain. "That's where the 'daisy cutter' hit. It's pretty good but you're going to have upsloping terrain to the west. We're going to put in a five man team with plans to leave them until they either go 'hot' or get a prisoner." he stated, "I'll lead you to the spot and if you need a 'mark' I've got plenty of 'willy peets' to mark it for you. It's about a 30 to 40 minute flight to get there so you won't have much loiter time after we get a 'team OK' will you?" "We can probably give about 30 minutes but that's it," I replied. "We'll launch two guns and the slick and hold the other two guns until we need them." I looked at Bruce for approval as I said this and he just nodded his head. "Since it has been so long since the 130 dropped, let's load one pod on each gunship with 'nails'. You agree Bruce?" "Sure do," he replied.

So we left the tent and helped Jon and Bob load 'nails' in place of the normal high explosive rockets. 'Nails' were 2.75-inch rockets but the head on them was longer to accommodate the fleshettes that resembled ten penny nails. These marvels of warfare

would explode about 400 feet in the air and disperse the nails at the ground covering an area about the size of a tennis court. Nasty if you happened to be in front of one and the look of a porcupine comes to mind. Course "Charlie" learned long ago that if you stand behind a tree big enough to block the nails then you were safe. We were going to use 'nails' to prep the LZ before we descended too close.

Jon looked at me as we loaded the rockets and said, "Captain, are we really going up to that LZ the C-130 made for us?" "Sure are Jon. How lucky do you feel"? He just looked at me with the most serious look I had ever seen from him. "I'm going to top off those gun cans just a bit more." he said. "An extra 500 rounds ought to fit if I work it right."

We started engines and as we did I noticed the five-man team approach the Vietnamese slick. They were a bit of a rag tag crew but had the look of pretty fierce warriors. They were not wearing NVA uniforms but were carrying AK47 automatic weapons and had bandoleers crossed across their chests. They obviously suspected that this was going to be a tough one also. The O-2 departed and we fell in right behind him.

As we followed the O-2 it was very quiet in our bird. It was spooky and I sensed that everyone was a bit nervous. Jon broke the silence by saying, "Can we make 'em hot, boss?" I replied, "Sure, make 'em hot and keep your eyes open." I then made some small talk with Bruce to keep things' light. "Ever fly one of those O-2's Bruce?" "Nope, and never wanted to. I understand that they can't even maintain level flight if they lose the front engine. The back pusher just isn't enough." "Yeah, I heard that too but at least he gets flying time while we normally sit on the ground and wait." I quipped. "I need to check this gun, boss." Bob called out. "Go ahead but make it a very short burst. Save the ammo you know," I replied. "I'm going to test mine too." Jon interjected. "Go ahead Jon." Both gunners fired a couple of short bursts and I could tell that they were getting very nervous. This was going to be a new experience for all of us. We had never before used an LZ like this that was made for us.

"Gun Lead, your target is at 10 o'clock at the base of that hill. You got a tally"? came the call from the FAC. "Negative, not for sure," I replied. "I'll give you some smoke for a reference," he announced as he rolled left and started a dive. He fired one rocket and pulled up to return to our altitude. "The target is two clicks northwest of my mark. Copy?" he called. Bruce called, "I've got it Hawk, about 9:30 low." "Roger, we've got it," I announced on the radio. "Gun Two, do you have it?" I asked. "Roger, we have it." came the response. "OK Two, let's prep it on the west side, starting my run," I called. "Two!" was the acknowledgment. I turned toward the LZ and then dropped collective. About halfway down I pulled collective as I nosed over and fired off two rockets. I started a bank and pull to the left only to notice that Gun Two was behind and on my left side. "Holy cow, I hope he doesn't hit us," I exclaimed. I should have told him which way I was going to break but just forgot and he didn't ask. I expected him to be directly behind us and fire after I pulled off. I glanced over to the right again and saw the rockets explode in the air. "Looks about right!" I said. "OK Two, let's go again. I'll be pulling off to the left again. Sorry about that!"

I circled around and began another run on the target from a slightly different direction, due West this time. "I'll be launching the rest of the nails on this pass," I stated. I dropped collective and rolled off some power. Back in with power, raised collective and pushed over the nose. I fired off the remaining five rockets from the right tubes in fairly rapid succession and tried to spray them along the treeline. I pulled left and saw all five explode as we started our climb back to 1500 feet. Two did the same thing. "Bruce, I think we should do some 'Hunter/Killer' before we clear in the slick. You agree?" I asked. "Good idea," he replied. Bruce wasn't saying much and appeared to be turning a little "milktoast" on me. As long as he accomplished all the switch changes for me I'd be OK.

"Two, let's do Hunter/Killer. I'll go low. Stay with me," I commanded. A simple "Two!" was the response. I rolled toward the LZ and dropped collective as I went into a full auto rotation. As we approached the LZ, I brought in the power and slowed rapidly to a hover. "Keep your eyes open, guys!" I announced. Gun Two circled over us in a Figure Eight pattern as we hovered around the LZ trying to draw "Charlie's" attention and fire. Nothing! It was as quiet and peaceful as a Sunday afternoon at the park! "OK Two, we're coming out, departing to the North," I called. It was time to get on with it. "FAC, clear the slick in. The LZ is cold for now. Two, let's go into a right hand Spooky pattern." My adrenaline was beginning to pump pretty hard as I felt very uneasy about this mission. Something just did not feel right.

The Vietnamese slick came in from the North, stopped momentarily at a hover as the five man team jumped out, and then departed to the South. So far, so good. I watched as the team ran to the treeline on the West Side of the LZ and disappeared into the foliage. We followed the slick to the South and then climbed back to altitude to set up an orbit. We flew three or four miles to the East and began to orbit waiting for a "team OK". We got the call and had just started to head back to Plei Djerang when all hell broke loose. We could hear the team on the ground yelling to the FAC on the radio and in the background we could hear automatic weapons firing. "They're pinned down on the edge of the treeline and need help. Bad guys on three sides and very close," the FAC called. We turned back to the West and headed for the LZ. "Just what we figured, huh guys?" I remarked. Now the adrenaline was really pumping and my mouth was getting very dry. Everyone in my bird and in Gun Two knew exactly what to do so very little radio transmissions were necessary. I positioned our bird to the Northeast of the LZ and rolled in. "Give me left rockets." "You've got left rockets," Bruce replied as he turned the switch on the center console. I fired only one rocket as I placed the pippet just to the West of the signal mirror that one of the team members was flashing at us. I rolled left and watched the high explosive rocket explode. It hit very close to where I had aimed, so I felt good about my pippet location. Gun Two followed with a couple of rockets that landed just a bit farther West. We heard more chatter on the radio from the team, along with the continuation of the sound of automatic weapons firing. The FAC called, "They want the rockets closer to them. Those last ones pushed "Charlie" closer to them." "My God, they're almost hand to hand." I exclaimed. This time I took a big chance, I put the pippet right on the signal mirror. Our rockets weren't very accurate and the chance of hitting the team was very remote. I fired off two rockets and prayed for the team. "Perfect!" came

the call from the FAC after they exploded. I breathed a sigh of relief. "Two, we need to get down there and help them out. Standard descent and dog bone pattern on the next run, copy?" I called. "Gun Two, roger!" was the response.

We turned toward the LZ again and began our descent. Halfway down, I fired two more rockets to cover our descent and continued directly toward the team. As we reached the tops of the trees I broke to the left and called, "Right gun, clear to fire!" The sound of that right mini-gun was deafening as Jon hosed the treeline just on the other side of the team. As we rolled through level flight I heard the rockets from Gun Two explode near the team. I continued around to the right but had to add a lot of power to get back up the slope toward the team's position. As we rolled out I called, "Left gun, clear to fire!" Now Bob opened up from the left door as we came nose to nose with Gun Two. We broke to the right as we passed over the team and Bob ceased firing. As we turned back around to the left I could hear Gun Two firing his mini-gun as he made his pass over the team. When I rolled out we were again nose to nose and I cleared Jon to fire once again. Everything seemed to be going just fine except for the sloping terrain to the South edge that caused us to slow down coming back up or stay a little high in the turn.

On the next pass from the South I called, "Give me rockets!" "You've got rockets," Bruce called. I fired a rocket into the trees just West of the team. FAC called after that pass and said, "Keep those rockets coming. They like 'em!" Bob announced, "One rocket left in left pod!" "Roger," I called. On the next loop of the dog bone pattern to the South I thought I heard the sound of empty casings from the mini-gun hitting the floor of the Huey. "Are those empty casings hitting the floor?" I asked. "Those are HITS, boss. We are getting HOSED!!" Bob shouted as he fired some long bursts with his gun. **PING....PING, PING, PING...PING, PING, PING, PING** was the sound as AK47 rounds tore into our bird. I glanced down at the nose bubble and saw three bullet holes that had appeared. Suddenly everything seemed to go wrong at once. The Master Caution lights came on and the annunciator panel lit up like a Christmas tree. Bruce called, "Left generator out, oil temp rising, oil pressure falling, transmission chip light on!" Then Bob called, "Boss, got hole in transmission, oil coming out of the hole about the size of a quarter!" I couldn't believe it. "Let me know when it stops coming out!" I replied. Bruce called, "Transmission pressure dropping, temp rising." I started thinking about ground school and the fact that Bell Helicopter said that you could fly a Huey without oil in the transmission for about 30 minutes before it would seize. We were about 35 minutes from Plei Djerang. As my mind was racing to decide exactly what to do Bob called again, "**Right gunner's hit, right gunner's hit!**" Jon had taken an AK47 round right through his clear visor on his helmet and was bleeding profusely. Bruce said, "He looks pretty bad, Hawk, I think we better get out of here!" Just then my stomach came right up into my mouth. A ground launched rocket came flying up in front of the nose and continued past us without exploding. It was so close that I could see exhaust particles on the windscreen. If our Huey had been equipped with four blades instead of two, I probably wouldn't be writing this.

Suddenly, Jon who had been knocked against the transmission tunnel came to his senses again and got back up on his mini-gun and began firing. Apparently, it was just a

scalp wound and his was really mad now. He was firing with both triggers pulled which put out 4,000 rounds a minute. He was about to melt the barrels so I called, "Right gun, stop firing, right gun stop firing." He stopped and shouted, "I'm OK, I'm OK!" Just then the Master Caution light came on again and Bruce called, "Both generators out!" We were now down to only battery power and the mini-guns would not work. Both gunners started using backup weapons. Jon used his M-16 and Bob used a 40mm grenade launcher. Enough was enough, we had to get out of this situation. "Gun Two, Gun Lead, we've been hit, door gunner wounded, departing to the North, follow us out!" Bob called, "Oil just stopped coming out of the transmission." I didn't want to raise the collective and increase the torque on the transmission so I held our altitude and proceeded Northeast. I looked at Bruce who seemed to be in a bit of a daze as he was smiling and just looking straight ahead. I said, "Bruce, I don't think we can make it all the way back to Plei Djerang. Let's find a place to put her down." He smiled more and said, "OK!"

As we made our way at treetop level I kept looking for a place to put the bird on the ground. "Jon, how you doing?" I asked. A simple "OK" was the answer. I saw Bruce look around out of the corner of my eye. "He's bleeding pretty bad," Bruce said. Then I spotted a clearing in the trees about half a mile ahead. "Let's try for the one at 2 o'clock," I said. "Slick, we are going to try the clearing at our 2 o'clock...be ready to come and get us." I intended to fly over the area to check it and then swing around landing into the wind that was from the South. As we flew over it Bob called, "Bad guys! They're firing at us!" He had spotted two or three of "Charlie's" finest running across the small LZ and as we flew over them they began to shoot at us. This was not a good day! I called up to the slick, "Slick, give us a C and C to the biggest open area you can see from up there. We've got 'Charlie' in this one." C and C stood for Command and Control and from his vantage point he would direct us to a place to put our crippled bird on the ground. The slick pilot began giving us instructions. "Turn left...stop turn." "Turn further left...stop turn." "Straight ahead...down that valley...about five clicks is a big open field." I responded to the directions and made my way down the valley just above the tree line. I spotted the open field and called, "I've got it...we'll be turning into the wind...come and get us!"

I came over the area that resembled a big wheat field in Nebraska and turned to the South. I dropped collective and we were now committed to a landing. No way I was going to add torque to the sick transmission at this point. As we got close I could tell that this was no wheat field. It was a bamboo field and most of it had been cut down with the bamboo lying crisscross everywhere. I made a very soft touchdown and immediately cut the engines while reaching for the rotor brake. "OK, get the safeing sectors out of the mini-guns and set up a 'Hasty Perimeter!'" That meant that the gunners would hop out and protect us aft with their backup weapons. Bruce and I would cover the forward sectors. By removing the safeing sectors from the mini-guns "Charlie" would be prevented from using them against us in the future. Bruce yelled, "I'll shoot out the radios!"

I grabbed my vest and AR-15 and as I stepped out of the chopper I slipped off the skid and saw my left leg disappear into the bamboo. The bamboo was 2-3 inches in diameter and must have been 3-5 feet deep. It was very sharp and cut the shin of my leg pretty bad. (I still have the scar on that leg as a constant reminder.) I pulled my leg out just as Gun

Two flew overhead firing at the treeline to the North. Almost immediately, I could hear automatic weapons firing from that same treeline and as I looked North, I could see muzzle flashes. I then heard the distinctive sound of rounds passing by and the thud of rounds hitting our chopper. Jon was now out of the bird and this was the first time I had seen his condition. He was still bleeding from his head and looked very dazed. He started firing at the treeline as the slick came to a hover about 50 yards to the West of us. The bamboo was going to be tough to walk on but we had to get to that slick.

"Jon, let's get to the slick!" I yelled. Bruce was still shooting out the radios and Bob was lobbing 40mm into the trees. Between the gunship firing overhead, Bob's 40mm explosions, and "Charlie's" firing, the sound was deafening. I followed Jon toward the slick but every two or three steps Jon would fall down. I finally grabbed one of his arms and put it over my shoulder and around my neck. I had my AR-15 braced on my right hip firing at the trees while holding Jon's right wrist with my left hand. It was the best I could do. We fell into the bamboo a couple of times together and after the third time I looked at him and yelled, "Jon, you've got to do this on your own!" He nodded and started again to make his way to the slick. The next time I fell down I lost my AR-15 into the bamboo and it was so deep I couldn't reach it. My heart was pounding so hard I could feel it in my chest and hear it in my ears. I was really scared!!

We finally got to the rescue slick and climbed aboard. The slick gunners were also firing at the trees to protect us and the noise continued. It had taken us at least ten minutes to cover that 50 yards and I was worried about Bruce and Bob who were still at our chopper firing at the trees. Onboard the slick I moved up between the two pilots and yelled, "Get over there closer or those guys aren't going to make it!" The pilot responded, "But there's a tree over there and we might hit it." I yelled back, "Chop it down with your rotor if you have to or use ladders...GET CLOSER!" He moved over toward our chopper and dropped ladders. For some unknown reason the door gunner on the North side of the slick decided to go down the ladder and help get Bob and Bruce with their gear. The M60 machine gun was just sitting there and I heard a round go right through the slick. I jumped up and began firing the M60 into the trees. Out of the corner of my eyes I noticed movement in the trees just to the West of our position. I swung the 60 around slightly and saw two figures making their way to the East. I fired into their area and never saw them again. "Got 'em," I said to myself.

Bruce, Bob, and the slick door gunner finally made it up the ladders and inside the slick. I hit the arm of the pilot while yelling, "Get out of here...get out of here, NOW!" We headed out to the East and climbed up to altitude. As we left the area I looked back at our embattled Huey and wondered if I would ever see her again. I wouldn't. Later that day some Vietnamese A-1's would get permission to use her for target practice. I'm sure that she is still sitting today exactly where I left her.

The 30-minute flight back to Plei Djerang was very quiet and I moved to the seats on the left side of the transmission tunnel. I looked at my watch...it was about 10:30 AM. Then I noticed the date in the little window of my watch..."3". **It was February 3, 1972!** It was exactly nine years to the day that I had been involved in the B-47 crash at

Greenham Common in England. It was also almost the exact time of day! I sat back and just stared at the ground and sky listening to the whine of the engines and transmission. The seriousness of what had just happened was beginning to sink in and then adding the irony of the date and time of day was almost too much to handle. The left door gunner looked down at me and said, "Captain, you look like you could use a cigarette!" as he offered me a Marlboro. I looked back at him and said, "Sure could...thanks!"

We arrived back at Plei Djerang safe and sound except for the head wound suffered by Jon. He had taken an AK47 round through his clear visor and it lodged in the back of his helmet. A scalp wound bleeds a lot so his condition was not as bad as it appeared. He was walking around and said he was fine except for a terrible headache. My leg had stopped bleeding where the bamboo had sliced it open and I never did seek medical treatment for it. I should have since that would have been enough to get a Purple Heart medal but I just didn't feel it was necessary.

A check of the other gunship revealed several bullet holes in the fuselage and rotor blades and we found out that they were down to only two clips of M16 ammo. The slick that picked us up was down to about 150 rounds of M60 ammo and a couple of M16 clips. We had gotten out of there just in time it appeared. The other two gunships had dispatched when we departed the area of the team. They were also unable to suppress the ground fire long enough to get the Vietnamese slick in to pick up the team and had to return to Plei Djerang. The FAC got some Army Cobra gunships to cover the team while waiting for some A1E fighters to arrive. The team was finally picked up while the Cobra gunships and the A1E's pounded "Charlie".

The FAC returned to Plei Djerang to check on us and we had an opportunity to talk with him. He said that intelligence suspected that NVA regulars were massing for an attack, probably on Kontum and the size of the force was estimated at somewhere close to 50,000. I said to him, "I think I saw at least half of them myself!" We refueled all the birds and headed back to Ban Me Thuit just after noon. Everyone from maintenance wanted to know details but I was in no mood to talk much. New crews arrived that afternoon with a replacement chopper for the one I left in Cambodia and the rest flew in on a Blackbird. We returned to Cam Ranh where I headed for the club. I only had one drink and then headed to quarters where I just lay on my bunk staring at the ceiling. I looked down at my leg and saw it was bleeding a little but just wiped it off. I still have a scar on my left shin and every time I notice it I think of that day. After reviewing the events of the day I determined that this in fact had been **a very big day!**

Aftermath

The rest of February 1972 proved to be very uneventful for me. I flew a few training sorties out of Cam Ranh but was really looking forward to the leave I had scheduled for March. With Laurie and Jeff in school it was not practical to try to meet them in Hawaii so I planned to see them in Tucson. Bruce had signed me off as qualified to be a gunship commander so another trip to Ban Me Thuit was in order but not near as eventful as the last one. During the whole month the “Monday morning quarterbacks” questioned me about why I did this or that on February 3rd. Everyone seemed to have their own opinion about what should have been done. All I could say was that I did the best I could under the circumstances. One of the more aggressive pilots was deep in criticism, none of it constructive. I finally had to say to him, “You had to be there!”

The trip back to the states was long but worth it. Bonnie and the kids met me at the airport and my eyes filled with tears when I saw them. My parents came down from Iowa to be with me also. I was home for about a week and a half before I had to go back. I really could not talk much about the war without being choked up so we sort of avoided the topic. They all knew that I had been shot down and my Dad was especially curious. He stopped questioning me when he saw my emotions. I hated to leave Tucson that next week but as a good soldier I tried to be brave in front of the family.

The trip back was horrible. I hated the thought of returning to Vietnam the way things were going. There was no anticipation of doing good things for the war effort at all. I saw on TV while I was home all of the demonstrations against the war and how the wearing of the uniform could be very hazardous. All the way back to Nam I just wanted to cry.

My bird took me to Saigon where I was to get a ride to Cam Ranh in a transport. When I arrived at the terminal I noticed several Hornets were in the terminal. Most of them were the “old heads” that had gotten to Cam Ranh before me. I went over to them to see what was happening. “What’s happening, guys?” I asked. “We’re headed home! Assignments are in,” one of them shouted. “What do you mean, you guys aren’t due to rotate for a couple more months?” “I mean, we’re going home. The war is over for the Hornets. The squadron is being deactivated, the choppers are being shipped home in 141’s and C-5’s.” Wow. I had no idea that all those prayers I said on the trip back to Nam would be answered. I got on a C-123 and headed for Cam Ranh. When I arrived I could not believe my eyes. Almost all of the Huey’s were gone and the hooch was half empty. I checked in with the squadron and found that an assignment notification was waiting for me.

All of the letters I had written when I first got to Vietnam did some good. I was being sent back to Air Training Command. I thought it must be a mistake because the base was Lackland AFB in San Antonio and I knew that they did not even have a runway much

less any flyable aircraft. They were all on static display! Some checks with personnel confirmed it...I was going to Lackland to be behind a desk for a while. Oh well, at least I will get out of here.

I called Bonnie that night to let her know that I was coming home. This whole ordeal had been tough on both of us but even with the very bad connection, I could tell that she was glad it was over. I had to go back to the hooch and write her a letter explaining the whole thing.

I never flew a Huey again. It was a little sad but I went to the flightline at night and said good-bye to one of the warbirds. It was about to be taken apart for the trip to the states and it happened to be one of the birds I had flown. I walked all around her and touched almost every part I could. I climbed into the right seat and just sat there for a while. I thought about all the missions. I thought about all the bad things I had seen and a few of the good things. "Thank God this is almost over for us," I said to her. "Have a safe trip and maybe I'll see you again someday." I left the flightline with some mixed emotions but very thankful that I would be going home soon.

At Lackland AFB I received a nomination from Major General Carson to receive the Aviator Valor Award from the American Legion Post in New York City. The details of my shutdown were enough to get me the award and the Air Force flew Bonnie and me to New York to receive it. We had a great time but I got very choked up when the award was presented and probably embarrassed Bonnie. I could not help it. When I came to the podium all I could think of was all of the bad things I had seen and all of the young people who had given their lives for that stupid war. I dedicated that award to them.

Later in my career, I was assigned to be the Detachment Commander of the USAF ROTC unit at Texas Christian University. I was a senior Lieutenant Colonel by that time and attended the orientations and parent's weekend activities quite frequently. We always wore our dress blue uniforms at these functions and of course I had a lot of ribbons on my chest by that time. At one of these events a young freshman was questioning me about flying and seemed to have an interest in joining ROTC. Suddenly his mother approached us and grabbed his arm. She looked at me. She looked at my uniform with all the ribbons and said, "You were in Vietnam weren't you. How can you sleep at night knowing what you did over there!" I calmly replied, "Very well, actually. I never hurt anyone who wasn't trying to hurt me." She was a little taken aback but merely said, "Come on son, let's go!" As she and her son left me I noticed that the young man looked over his shoulder back at me as if to say he was sorry. I appreciated that. I left that function early that night. By the time I got to my truck I was crying again. When will this feeling that I have go away?

Epilogue

I recently went to a function in a park in Tucson called “Nam Jam”. It is an annual event where Vietnam veterans get together and talk about their experiences, listen to live music, and look at all the memorabilia displayed in tents and booths. Bonnie and I went there to see what it was all about. Unfortunately, it was still very hot in Tucson so we went early in the morning while it was still somewhat cool. Things had just started and we looked at the items displayed in a couple of tents labeled museum. In the second tent I spotted an area that contained items labeled “Special Forces”. There were several pictures and I pointed to one that contained the images of the indians that composed our teams that we put on the ground in Cambodia. I pointed to the picture and said, “These are the guys we used to put on the.....” My voice suddenly broke and tears came to my eyes. I could not believe it. I thought I had conquered my feelings about the war. Obviously I have not. I had to leave the tent and walk around outside for a while.

I do not know if I will ever get over the feelings that I have about that terrible war. For several years when Vietnam films were produced in Hollywood I would not even try to see them. Finally I got up the courage to see “Apocalypse Now” and was sorry that I did. All of the bad feelings came back again. I have seen several more since then but am always sorry afterward. I am sure that I am not alone. Many people suffered much more than I did and have to live with much more gruesome memories. I do not feel sorry for myself...I wanted to go...its just that as a young person I had no conception of what war was. Everyone talked about the glory and the fun. Believe me, there was no glory and it sure was not fun.

That’s it for now. I hope that members of my family enjoy reading this and by doing so have a better understanding of my feelings. I needed to get it down on paper for my own mental health and having done so has been beneficial I think. We just cannot let another war similar to Vietnam ever happen again. Those of us who were in Vietnam suffered enough for all future generations, especially those who gave the ultimate sacrifice by dying for our country. We must never forget them!

Author's Note

While rummaging through a lot of old stuff in May 2003, I discovered a copy of the flight orders for the trip to Greenham Common in 1963. As it turned out, I was mistaken all these years about the actual date of the crash when Dick West was killed. The orders state that we were to depart Lincoln on February 3rd so when we crashed in England, it was actually February 4th, UK time.