

June 12, 1968

On June 12 I was assigned to fly with Ed Crisp in 566. We were supposed to fly for the Stone Mountain people and, since Ed and I get along quite well, the day looked promising. The door gunner was Sp4 Putnam and the crew chief Sp4 VanDeverer, two of our more experienced and competent enlisted men.

We cranked up and flew about three sorties for them that went without incident. They ran out of things for us to haul so we shut down and went in to eat lunch. During the conversation at lunch the gunner and crew chief mentioned that they each had about 53 days remaining in-country. Of course, that didn't sit too well with Ed and I since it'll be some time before we even go over the hump.

After lunch it was back to work, hauling stuff like C rations, ammunition, water and personnel out into the distant jungle for the Eager Arms and Lone Armor elements of the Stone Mountain battalion. Flying out to the area, jungle below, it's easy to visualize Charlie's presence. You try to allay your fears by saying to yourself that he would be foolish to shoot at a passing helicopter since that would give away his position. But, alas, it's hard to make rhyme or reason of many of his tactics.

The war was going on around us but it seemed somehow that it was someone else's war and that we weren't even a part of it. Carrying a dead soldier's body on a return trip back to LZ Sharon was sufficient evidence that we were very much a part of it all. We were soon to receive further proof.

The right fuel boost warning light flashed on at about 5 in the afternoon and I thought we might have to shut down for the day. The left pump was functioning properly so we elected to finish out the day. Stone Mountain would appreciate it.

The Lone Armor element received the next few sorties. Just a few more trips and we could head home. I established radio contact with the Eager Arms people to find out if they had anything to take back with us. Their reply was in the

affirmative. With Ed at the controls, I sat back to watch another routine approach into the LZ. We had been there numerous times during the day. Ed slowed the aircraft for the final descent into the gash in the jungle where Eager Arms was camped. We were at about 30 knots of airspeed on very short final. The crew chief and gunner had stowed their machine guns in accordance with standard operating procedure. Then all hell broke loose.

The sound was unmistakable. At the very worst moment – when a helicopter is most vulnerable – we were being raked with automatic weapons fire from both sides of the aircraft. I felt and heard the hostile rounds slamming into the paper thin skin of the fuselage. Blood appeared suddenly, splattered across the windscreen and instrument panel.

Ed reacted instinctively and without hesitation, yanking full collective pitch and lowering the nose in an effort to gain airspeed and altitude. The aircraft pitched forward to a nose down attitude that took my breath away. The windscreens then filled with jungle green as the Huey pitched almost straight down. I became certain of an impending crash and my probable demise. I was thinking to myself, “...so, this is it”.

The helicopter shuddered and kept flying, gaining airspeed and altitude as Ed coaxed us back into the air and away from the enemy fire. For the moment, we were back in control. Ed continued flying wild evasive maneuvers as we cleared the area. He then turned the controls over to me saying “I’ve been hit”.

Ed looked fine but I didn’t argue. He reached for the back of his head and drew back a hand covered in blood. Checking with the crew, we learned that the crew chief, VanDeverer, had also been hit. Putnam, the gunner, was silent but we now had other concerns. The hydraulics were gone and we could smell jet fuel. I frankly didn’t think we could keep flying and suggested putting out a mayday call which we did. No response.

I pointed the Huey towards Camp Evans since they had the closest runway for the emergency landing necessitated by the lack of hydraulic boost as well as suitable medical facilities for the wounded on board. Thanks to some recent training, I felt confident about making the 'running landing' that was required due to the loss of hydraulics. The controls were stiff and needed plenty of muscle to manipulate but we were still flying and on our way to the safe haven of Camp Evans, about 20 minutes away. The aircraft was vibrating badly and I had to use a good amount of arm strength to muster enough pull on the collective to keep us out of the trees. I was worried about Ed and the others, wanting to get them medical attention as quickly as possible.

Ten miles from Evans, I switched the VHF radio to tower frequency. There was a lot of activity with numerous other aircraft competing for clearances to land or take off. After several attempts to check in with no success, I resorted to calling out, "Mayday, mayday, mayday, this is Spade 13, and I've got an emergency!" With that, the frequency was mine. All other aircraft went silent. Evans tower responded to my call, asking for my position and nature of the emergency. I responded by stating my need for a running landing due to shot out hydraulics and that there were wounded on board. Tower gave us wind, altimeter and active runway information, clearing us to land and advising other aircraft to remain clear.

The runway was now in sight as I made a shallow, sweeping right turn to align the helicopter, lowering collective to start down. We were at eighty knots now and slowing for the recommended touchdown speed of about thirty knots. Another helicopter had joined my wing in order to be nearby if anything bad happened. A medevac helicopter that happened to be airborne as we approached prepared to land next to us when we came to a stop.

We came over the runway threshold a little hot, finally touching down at about forty knots, and slid to a grinding halt as Ed, still conscious, helped with lowering the collective full down. I shut the helicopter down, ignoring the recommended two minute cool-down. Help approached from both sides as I sat there, grateful to be back on the ground again, a bit of shock setting in.

I watched as my crew was loaded into the med-evac helicopter. All three were conscious but I could now see the extent of their injuries. Ed was apparently the least injured even though a round had hit the back of his head. It must have passed through a bulkhead or two before penetrating the nape strap on his helmet where it remained lodged after partially entering the back of his head.

VanDeverer's wounds were worse. He had been hit twice, once in the torso and once in the leg. Putnam's wounds were much more devastating. His entire lower jaw had been shredded by an AK-47 round that passed through his helmet, apparently tumbling as it tore through flesh and bone. That explained why he was unable to communicate through the intercom as we flew towards Camp Evans. I hope the surgeons were able to make him whole again. End

That night, I sipped canned beer with the other pilots while trying to describe what had happened hours earlier to me and the other crew members aboard #566 as we prepared to land in an LZ occupied by our own friendly forces. It wasn't so much that we had been shot at and hit multiple times by an enemy who wanted to destroy us, we knew that to be a fact of life. All of us grudgingly accepted and dealt with it - each in his own way. Likewise, we were acutely aware how vulnerable helicopters were in general, and in particular, while slowing and descending for landing over thick jungle where the enemy could wait with deadly intentions, scanning each hole in the canopy above for a momentary, opportunistic glimpse of a passing aircraft. They were highly motivated to take down our machines and worked diligently to get that done; we understood that.

Viewed through our front windscreens as we surveyed the touchdown area, the scene at the encampment appeared anything but hostile as we cleared the final few feet over the trees and prepared to descend into the LZ. The grunts on the ground seemed relaxed and only mildly interested in our approach, though the noise and air currents generated by a landing helicopter are horrendous. We were in radio contact with the RTO, who had popped a smoke canister giving wind information. Ed and I had every reason to assume this was to be just another routine approach just like all the others we had completed earlier that day.

I knew that we had been lucky. There were a slew of enemy combatants who had tried to ruin our day that afternoon and it should have been easy for them to accomplish the deed. Probably there were at least a half-dozen eager shooters with AK-47's set on *full auto* pointed towards our vulnerable Huey. We took a lot of hits but none of them were critical to maintaining flight; nor were they able to incapacitate either of the two pilots. It was therefore necessary to consider the possibility that some *unseen hand* that reached out and righted our ship at the last moment when a crash seemed so inevitable. My dear Mom back in Arizona would most likely have agreed with that assessment while citing her daily prayers on my behalf as proof positive.

Aside from the event itself, an aspect of it that was particularly troubling was the apparent near proximity of the bad guys to our own troops at their encampment in the jungle. Once again, the treacherous nature of jungle warfare got hammered home; because of the density of the jungle surroundings friendly and enemy forces could, using stealth, draw very near to each other without detection. The *ambush* was almost inevitable. It worked both ways. In our case, the ambush was neatly set up and almost successful because the Viet Cong had apparently made their way to the very edge of the American LZ, setting up and occupying

their positions during our earlier approaches using the noise of the helicopter to mask their movements. Once in position, they waited, opening up on us as we flew low and slow over the jungle canopy overhead. Ironically, even as Ed scrambled to distance our Huey from the danger below and away from the LZ, the *Eager Arms* RTO (radio operator) wanted to know why we had aborted the approach. In utter disbelief Ed yelled back over the FM radio “Because we just got the shit shot out of us”. The troopers on the ground apparently hadn’t even heard the sound of multiple AK-47’s firing at us over the din of our landing helicopter.

The beer and tent talk was good therapy. Now into my second month of flying, it was natural during moments of reflection to speculate about the prospect of not completing a full tour of duty unscathed. So far, as a mere pater pilot relegated to watching, listening, and sometimes learning, it seemed as if my fate depended far too significantly on whatever Aircraft Commander I happened to be flying with on a given day. Most of them were good, like Ed, but some of the others concerned me a little. I had learned early on from first hand experience and private discussions with fellow pilots and crew members which aircraft commanders were regarded as ‘good sticks’. But there were also those with reputations as *hot dogs* and/or a tad weak. Though painfully aware that risk came with the job, I also knew that risk could be managed and often mitigated by exercising a little good judgment and ordinary common sense, *discretion always being the better part of valor*.

Still a virtual neophyte as an aviator and now just beginning to develop the mechanical and judgmental skills of a seasoned helicopter pilot, I had nonetheless acquired a knack for recognizing piloting qualities (good and bad) that were to be either emulated or avoided. With each assignment to fly with another experienced pilot came the opportunity to hone my own skills through observation, discussion and practice. Ed and I, completing what had been an otherwise successful day of

flying in 566, had ignored a fundamental precept of combat helicopter operations: *When possible, avoid using the same approach direction into an LZ, lest the enemy rise up and smite thee.* We had become complacent.

After a few days off, I was eased back into the right seat, flying *ash and trash* (slang expression for typical resupply missions) missions which were uneventful. Ed Crisp was recovering on board the hospital ship, *USS Repose*, anchored just off the coast in the *South China Sea*. Putnam and VanDeverer were transported to a military medical facility in Japan and we lost track of them after that. Later, when Ed returned after his short hospital stay, several of us gathered in his tent to welcome him back. He picked up his flight helmet and said, “Take a look at this”. He pointed to a spent AK-47 round firmly embedded in the nape strap at the back of his helmet. We all righteously agreed that Ed Crisp would likely live to a ripe old age.