

Flares, Fog & Faith

The true story of how a “dustoff” pilot earned the Medal of Honor.

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Over the years I have read various accounts of the rescue missions for which I became one of two soldiers in Vietnam to receive both the Distinguished Service Cross and the Medal of Honor. None are completely accurate, including the official Medal of Honor citation. At the time, some criticized my flying on these missions as irresponsible; it was outside the regulations but necessary and in no way reckless. What follows is what actually happened on those missions and how I discovered the techniques that made them possible.

The changes between my 1964 tour in Vietnam as a helicopter ambulance, or “dustoff”, pilot and my second tour – from 1967 to 1968 – were monumental and frightening. “Dustoff” had gone from 16,000 troops supported to some 500,000, and from 4,000 patients carried per year to more than 7,000 per month. Helicopters and crew losses were alarming. And Mother Nature was killing more than Charlie. Three of our pilots from the 54th Helicopter Ambulance Detachment, which I brought to Chu Lai in August 1967, preceded us to Vietnam. All three were killed at night, two hitting mountains during bad weather. Chu Lai was full of mountains, and the weather was brutal.

I was scared to death. Charlie worked the graveyard shift and used the terrain and weather very well. There were casualties day and night in weather. We had to fly in those conditions or troops would die. But how? Our pilots were inexperienced – 10 of 12 were two months out of flight school but eager. They would push themselves for a wounded soldier, increasing the risks, almost certainties, of death or accident.

I am a person who wears my faith on my sleeve. Since my youth I have been in the habit of talking to God – often casually and not always in a prayerful way, but intensely, during stressful and dangerous situations. I had a serious dialogue with Him as I matched our experience with the mountains and weather at Chu Lai. Many of the troop locations were on mountaintops often enveloped by clouds or in valleys covered with a dense, solid fog resembling a 500-foot snow bank. These were zero-zero conditions, and there were no let-down facilities in these mountains. To make matters worse, we were to go operational during the monsoon season. OK, Lord, how do we do it?

However, weather was not our initial problem; that was Charlie. Our first operational day we had one ship shot up, on the fourth day two more, and on the fifth day, all six ships were shot up and three crewmen seriously wounded. My first tour was semi-war; this was war. But as bad as the first week was – and despite the fact that it was monsoon season – no one was killed, and we did not have to face the dreaded night weather pick-up. Then came the second week.

Night Vision. The call came late at night on Oct. 2, in the middle of a monsoon. Several units of the 101st Division had suffered numerous casualties and were surrounded deep in the

mountains to our west. All Army aircraft had been grounded. I knew the wounded must have been extremely serious or they would not have called us in such conditions. As we headed into the blizzard, I employed a method I used during my first tour in the mountainless delta: low and slow, from light to light. We ran out of lights, and our searchlight was useless in the blinding rain. OK, Lord, what now? Why are you doing this to me? Then I had a vision, an epiphany really. Thank you, Lord.

On an earlier routine night mission into the valley, as dark figures darted back and forth loading the patients, I sat there absentmindedly enjoying the bizarre beauty of night on the battlefield. The flares drifted lazily down through the mountains, illuminating the charming landscape in multiple shades of green pierced with deadly but strangely beautiful emerald and golden streaks of tracer fire. In my reverie I noticed that one of the mountains, covered with clouds, was perfectly silhouetted by the flares – a stunning sight. That vision came back to me, and I knew how to get those soldiers out.

My plan was to fly instruments (IFR) to the pick-up site (PZ) and let down using flares. My hope was that the flares would silhouette the mountains, or at least enough area around my bird to keep me clear of them. There was an Air Force flare ship at 9,000 feet over the fight. I explained to him what I wanted to do, and he agreed to help. I started down circling under the flares, working to position them outside my window. I forgot to tell the Air Force to keep a flare lighted at all times. I discovered this omission at 1,500 feet in 3,000-foot mountains when the lights went out. There was nothing to do but come to a hover, which wasn't difficult in the H model, and do a steep instrument takeoff (ITO), clear the mountains and start over. Eventually we got it right and I descended to the side of a mountain, where we made our first of several pickups. Once loaded, I did a steep ITO clear of the mountains and flew on instruments to a hospital. There were more wounded, and we went back.

This trip, we were able to get down more easily but could not locate the wounded. They were fearful that the enemy would see their signal and tried to guide us in by sound. The enemy also could hear us, but as we flew blacked out they could not see us and were firing wildly all over the sky. That turned out to be a good thing. It was from the location and fire of enemy quad .51-caliber guns that we were able to orient ourselves and find the friendly patients. But we didn't get them all.

On the third trip, we got caught in a thunder cloud – perhaps the most terrifying experience I ever had in a helicopter – but we managed to get all the patients, despite the bird needing to be grounded and checked for structural damage. I used three copilots, flew more than nine hours the night of Oct. 2 and 3, 1967, and landed 12 times, finishing around 4 a.m. I am not sure how many casualties we carried that night, but they were all, as suspected, very serious, and many would have died before morning.

The troops were grateful for our help, and the new technique got a bit of media attention – much of it ill-informed. One book actually recorded that we flew the wounded back low level under the stuff. Others called it the first-ever IFR pickup in the mountains. Still others said it was blind letdown. It was not. I believe that most of the pilots killed at night in weather were killed trying to fly contact without sufficient visibility. Three Dustoff aircraft and 13 crewmen

were destroyed in similar conditions later in October. This technique could have saved them. This technique used IFR flight with a VFR (visual, not instrument flight) letdown, not a blind one. Never guessing, I always ensured that I was clear of the terrain, and I never descended one inch blindly.

What I had done was clearly outside the rules, and had I broken the aircraft or hurt someone I would have been in serious trouble. As it turned out, I was put in for an award, initially a Distinguished Flying Cross that was later upgraded to a Distinguished Service Cross when they discovered the mission was a first. More important, we could now save the night-weather patient. Thank you, Lord. But what about zero-zero weather in the daytime on the mountains and in the valleys? Flares don't work in daylight.

I solved that problem on a mission for a snake-bite victim on a 2,400-foot mountaintop. When I saw that the PZ was engulfed with clouds from 1,400 feet up, I had a serious dialogue with God: OK, Lord, now what? Initially I flew straight into the stuff and tried to hover up the mountain. I knew that if I got disoriented I could simply fall off right or left and I would break out in the valley. That happened several times. My crew was tense. Then the ground troops were screaming that the bitten soldier was going into convulsions. I had no idea how we were going to get that kid out. On what I promised my crew would be our last try, I became disoriented.

We were blown sideways, and I was looking out my side window for a place to go in when I discovered that I could see the tip of my rotor blade and the top of the trees under it. That wind was the breath of God. Another epiphany! I now had two reference points and knew I was right side up. I then turned that baby sideways, thanked God and the powerful H model, hovered up the mountain, focused on the blade and the tree tops, right into the PZ. The troops were delighted, and one of them shouted, "God bless you, Double Nickel (my radio call sign)." God certainly had blessed us, although I was a bit upset that He took so long to do it.

Again, what we had done was outside the rules – the R in IFR and VFR is "rules" – but no one challenged us, and we now had a solution for day-weather missions. What I had learned with the snakebite mission was that you can see in zero-zero conditions, not far but far enough. All that is needed is about 20 feet in a Huey, the distance from your window to the tip of the rotor blade. But you had to be able to see to the end of your rotor disc, and you had to have another reference point: a tree, bush or the ground. Nothing must ever come between your eyes and the tip of the rotor blade. And this mission could not be flown nose first; it had to be flown sideways. This was a straight VFR pickup, albeit in IFR conditions. I cautioned our pilots not to push themselves in either night or weather conditions, but to never leave a patient in the field under those conditions and call me if necessary.

Blessed Missions. That is what happened on the day of the Medal-of-Honor missions, my day off. Two Vietnamese soldiers were seriously wounded deep in mountainous terrain at an isolated outpost appropriately called Lonely Boy. The valley was covered with fog about 400 meters deep, and the outpost was under attack. Other helicopters made seven attempts to get in before they called me. I found a mountain clear of the fog, came to a hover at about

2,000 feet and started on my predetermined path down through the fog toward the PZ, which I missed. That may have been a good thing, since the selected PZ was clearly registered by the enemy mortars. I landed in a confined area and loaded the patients.

On the way to the hospital we heard a lot of chatter from LZ West, just to our northwest. It had some 70 casualties. Why aren't they being evacuated, I wondered. Many had been in the mud all night. I was told they could not be evacuated because of the fog and enemy action; others had tried. I was astonished, since fog and enemy fire are almost mutually exclusive. I headed out to LZ West, requesting the radio frequency and location of the casualties. They would not give it to me. I asked to speak with the brigade commander and landed at LZ West.

As diplomatically as a major can be with a colonel, I explained that we could get them out and needed to get on with it. In any event, there was no need for them to die without us trying. He said it was impossible; they had tried and turned away. He spoke to some medics, who must have known our capabilities, and then actually asked my copilot if I could make it. My copilot explained that we had just made a pickup in identical weather and had done so before. The colonel warned me that the enemy had 12.7mm anti-aircraft guns, which I had not encountered before, and that they had already shot down two aircraft. He would not lift the artillery and asked me to guide four other choppers in to expedite the evacuation.

I had what we needed. The call sign was "Twister Charlie," and the wounded were near the base of LZ West only minutes away. The four choppers followed me to the base of the fog and turned back. I hovered down the mountain at about 10 feet and stumbled over a uniformed NVA unit, but I was into the fog before they could hit us. We found the patients and loaded up. I don't even remember begging God for help.

We did an ITO straight up through the fog. We heard that the troops on LZ West directly above us broke into cheers when they saw our chopper emerge from the fog. The medical officer saluted as we landed, which was nice since he outranked all of us. We off-loaded our patients for back haul to a hospital and went back. Again the four choppers tried to follow and again they turned back. In all, we made four trips in and rescued all the wounded – 54 to 60, depending on who counted. The tragedy was that they didn't call us the night before. Thereafter, the Hiep Duc valley became known as Death Valley.

The other two missions for the Medal of Honor action were not unlike many Dustoff pickups. The next area was hot, and we were hit on the way in. The friendlies would not get off the prone, and we could not find the patients. We had to leave and check our bird. They agreed to get up and help, and we went back and got the patients. The controls were damaged and we got another bird for the next pickup in a minefield. Everyone had been wounded or killed. A previous Dustoff left the area when a mine exploded, killing two more troops. I hit the spot where he safely landed, and my crew, who were real heroes, literally ran into the minefield and started loading the patients. Things were going well when, unfortunately, they set off a mine. It blew them so high in the air I feared they might hit the rotors. Shrapnel ripped into the side of our bird, and some of our lights turned crimson. Both crew members got up and finished loading. I am not sure why they both weren't killed outright, but I think it was because they were carrying a large soldier on a litter who took most of the blast. I think he was already

dead; one of his legs was bent 180 degrees under his body. We headed for the hospital at a low level.

We got another bird and continued the missions on into the night. The Medal of Honor citation credited us with 51 patients; we got at least 64.

The 54th averaged one bird hit every four to five days, and 23 Purple Hearts for the 40 men. There were a lot of days like Jan. 6. I am sure the missions in the fog, the safest of all we flew that day, were the impetus for the Medal of Honor, although the citation, and other accounts, inaccurately describes them. We did not descend “through heavy fog” or turn sideways “to blow away the fog with the back wash” from my rotor blades. How do you blow away fog? Where does it go? You can see in fog or clouds and fly as long as you can see two reference points. Most aviators don’t believe contact flight in such conditions is possible, and it is therefore illegal. Many soldiers are alive today because it is possible.

What was truly remarkable was that the original 54th never left a patient in the field, day or night, in any weather – and it carried more than 21,000 patients in nine months, probably more than any like unit ever. No one was killed, and we never lost an aircraft at night or in weather. God surely blessed this remarkable unit; He most certainly showed me the light, despite my doubts in the darkness and in the fog. I may have been a willing instrument, but He is the Author of those two awards that were the result of two epiphanies: one for flares and one for fog. And the day of the Medal of Honor action was Jan. 6, the Feast of the Epiphany.

In addition to the Medal of Honor, Maj. Gen. Brady holds the Distinguished Service Cross, two Distinguished Service Medals, two Bronze Stars and the Purple Heart, among others.