

In order to be Old and Wise, One must first be Young and Stupid. - Ancient U.S. Army proverb.

By [Phil Marshall](#)

I arrived in Viet Nam on the 4th of July, 1969, barely 21 years old. It was an average age for most of the other Army helicopter pilots I flew with. One guy was 19, while the oldest (not counting our Commanding Officer) was 28. Back home in the real world, my buddies were at the drive-in, drinking beer and looking for a carload of girls to flirt with, just as I had been doing a year or two before. Even though I had yet to fly my first hour of combat, I had already done many incredible things that my high school friends could not even dream of. I couldn't have been more proud of myself and my flight school classmates for having come this far. With a fair amount of apprehension, it was now "the moment of truth". Could we really do what we had been trained to do without letting anyone down? We especially were concerned about the troops we were there to support. It was finally time to find out if we had the "gonads" to be combat helicopter pilots.

When I found out that I was assigned to be a medevac pilot, I was devastated. In my mind, the only way I would survive the 365 days in Southeast Asia was to be a gunship pilot, blazing my way back to the states, defending myself with miniguns, rockets and grenades. All through flight school, we were taught by gun pilots, slick drivers, scout pilots (although not as many of them) and oh, yes, ONE Dustoff pilot. He was an instructor pilot at Downing Army Airfield at Ft. Wolters in May of 1968. I remember my very first primary flight instructor pointing at him as I listened intently to his every word. "There walks a dead man. He was a Dustoff pilot." "A dead man" meaning he should never have made it back since Dustoff aircraft were unarmed medevac helicopters and flew single ship missions. I never forgot the reverence with which that statement was made, as I began to form a "survival plan of action" in my mind. I would NOT fly unarmed helicopters!

Shortly after arriving at Ft. Rucker, Alabama, I learned that those of us with the highest flight grades would attend a two week gun school near the end of training while the rest learned formation flying. I wanted that top 20% and focused all my abilities and energy on making gunship training. I did well enough to make that school along with about 25 of my classmates. But as the Army would have it, during Friday night formation of the middle weekend of gun school, 24 of us, including 12 in the gun school, received orders to attend Medevac school at Ft. Sam Houston, Texas, immediately after graduation. I told my roommate, "This is it. I won't make it back." Obviously, I was wrong but I didn't know it then. It turned out to be the best thing that happened to me, even though I was wounded before the year was out and sent home before my tour was over. I had no idea of the satisfaction, pride, sense of accomplishment and even elation that I would feel in the next six months.

Since I first heard the phrase that is the title of this article, it struck me that those words were exactly what we did as "kids" flying helicopters in Viet Nam. As I look back on my own experiences, two things stand out in my mind that I consider "young and stupid."

First of all, there was landing on the Navy Hospital ships USS *Repose* and USS *Sanctuary* in the South China Sea very near the Demilitarized Zone. While in themselves, those landings were not stupid, the way we got there was! Our single engine UH-1H Hueys did not float in the water very well. In fact, not at all since we usually flew with the doors open, even at night. And what was even “stupider” I suppose was the fact that if the doors *were* closed when we reached the water, we opened them so we could get out easier if we *did* go down. Okay, so the Hueys were extremely reliable, and I still love those incredible machines, but for the moment lets discuss navigation equipment on a Huey. And the answer is: “There IS none!” Sure, we had a compass and an Automatic Direction Finder, but in the event of an engine failure on the way to the hospital ship, this would have probably been my emergency call. “Mayday, Mayday, Mayday, Dustoff 7-1-1, we’re going down over the sea. We’re about 5 miles out.” Five miles out from where? Maybe it was only 3 miles...no, 7! Shoot, I had NO idea! But come look for us, will ya?

But I suppose we would have survived; we had water wings! Mine were draped over the back of my seat, along with my M-16 rifle. It was a well known (and very true) fact that during an emergency exit from an aircraft, if you don’t have it strapped to your body, you won’t take it with you. If I had gone down over land, I probably wouldn’t have taken my weapon with me. I wouldn’t have grabbed the “wings” either, because not only had I never tried to inflate them, I had never even tried to put them on. Well, maybe we could have used our survival radio once we were in the water or forced down over the jungle. Hehehehe....survival radio, what’s that? Is that AM or FM? Can I pick up Armed Forces Radio on it? We HAD no survival radios in those aircraft. (So I guess that makes three “Young and Stupids”.)

Once out to sea, landing on the ships was an interesting experience in itself, especially when the decks were bouncing up and down like a fishing bobber with a carp under it. I already knew the difference between port and starboard and it wasn’t that hard to figure out “beam” and “quartering” approaches. I used to laugh at the occasional slick driver who flew out to let guys from his unit use the shopping facilities on the ships. The radioman on the ship would tell them “Cleared for a port quarter approach.” The silence on the radio was the proverbial “pregnant pause” when the ship would radio to the helicopter again “Just land to the back of the boat from the left side.” It always got an immediate “Roger!”

It has been said many times by Navy and Marine jet pilots that landing on an aircraft carrier is like landing on a postage stamp. I would never dispute that, but I would argue that putting a helicopter on the tiny pad of the hospital ship is like landing on a *corner* of that postage stamp. And night time was even worse. The first time I tried to land on the ship at night, I terminated at a 30 foot hover *over* the deck instead of *on* the deck and the Aircraft Commander had to take over and hover us down to the ship. That was probably the lowest point of my Viet Nam flying experience, and I never forgot it. I promised myself that it would never happen again and it didn’t. It wasn’t easy and I will now confess that my depth perception almost was not good enough to pass my initial flight physical, but I made it. Knowing that my depth perception left little margin for error on the night approaches (especially), I had to totally concentrate on what I was doing and not

relax for a second until we were down on that rockin' and rollin' ship. The night I was wounded, my new co-pilot put us right on the deck, but all the while I had visions of my first 30 foot hover when *I* was a Funny New Guy. I knew that if Don Study got in trouble on the approach, I could not be of much help, but we were Young and Stupid and we made it. I will always thank Don for his late night "picture perfect" landing on the round end of the boat.

Oh, were we Young and Stupid on hoist missions, too; the second Y & S thing we did! The most incredible, dangerous, high pucker-factor, exhilarating thing a man can do with a helicopter is to pull an insecure hoist mission, day or night. Add to that, it is also the most unforgiving mission flown in a helicopter. First, one has to understand what a hoist mission is and why we did them. Generally, someone is usually badly wounded in jungle or mountainous (or both) terrain where a helicopter cannot land on the ground. The tactical situation is such that they cannot get him (or them) to a secure open area for evacuation. We must now hover over the trees or rocky terrain while we let out up to 150 feet of quarter inch cable with a jungle penetrator or a stokes litter attached to it. *Translation:* There's bad guys all around, we've got wounded, get in here NOW before they die or we have more wounded and you have to come back again. We don't have anyplace for you to land, so just hang your butts out in the open sky for several minutes so any kid with a bow and arrow can shoot you down and Gee, those red crosses on your helicopter sure make great aiming points, don't they? When you crash, we'll try to recover your bodies.

We were unarmed and experience taught us that usually, we were better off to quickly fly to the landing zone, get in and get out as fast as possible while avoiding the bad guys and fly straight back to the hospital. If we waited for gunship support, it may be too late for the wounded, so most times we tried to "sneak in" and "sneak out" (if that's possible in a clattering helicopter) and complete the rescue before the enemy had TOO much time to shoot us up....or down. A hoist mission was just the opposite. We still got there in a hurry, but once there, we hovered over the trees like a target at the county fair 25 cent shooting booth. Five minutes or more seemed like hours while we sat in the air over the ground troops, taxing every bit of professionalism that we had. And the reader better believe we had the utmost professionalism. The crewmen I flew with on hoist missions (like me in their teens and early 20's) were absolutely the best and I wish I could shake every one of their hands and hug them today. I am so very proud to have served with them. It required every skill we had. If we had been shot down on virtually *any* hoist mission, our high hover would not have allowed us to make a safe landing and many would surely die. It happened many times, and their names are on the Wall in Washington, D.C.

One particular mission I recall was a day hoist. We were an easier target during the day, but unlike at night, we could see what we were doing. When we were on short final over the landing zone, I heard small arms fire and the crewchief yelled "We're taking fire!" I pulled power into the rotor system to get out of there as quickly as I could when the radio operator on the ground called out "Dustoff, where are you going?" "We're taking fire," I said. "That was us giving you covering fire!" he replied. "OK, I'm turning around" and I

did another Young & Stupid thing; I made a pedal turn (U-turn) about 200 feet in the air, probably over some bad guys, and hovered back in over the trees.

Normally, one has to push a button to talk over the intercom in a military aircraft, but on a hoist mission, we turned it to “hot mikes” because we all needed our hands for other things. Everything that was said, every noise, every round fired, every grunt and groan was amplified and transmitted into everyone’s headset. A constant line of chatter was transmitted from the medic and the crewchief to the pilots, who were both on the flight controls in case one of us got shot. “The cable’s going out...about halfway down...come right...it’s on the ground...looking good....come forward just a little...keep your tail straight....come left...they’re on the penetrator...” was typical of the continual commentary from the enlisted crewmembers. As the Aircraft Commander in control of the helicopter, my eyes never left the tree branches that were touching the nose of my aircraft, but made flight adjustments according to the guys in the back. During a hoist mission, we flew with one finger on a button on the cyclic stick that operated an electric solenoid. It would instantly cut the cable should any part of the lift apparatus get snagged in the trees. Otherwise, if we got tangled up, it could cause the aircraft to crash. I wonder how many guys would have gotten on the hoist had they known that.

On this particular mission, we knew it was going to be an insecure hoist, so we grabbed some unsuspecting “schmuck”, told him to get his weapon and some ammo and run with us to the aircraft. We put him in the back of the cargo compartment with his M-16 and a helmet, hooked him up to the intercom and we were off. I have no idea who he was, but we logged his flight time as “PP - Patient Protector”. After the first of the two injured soldiers were hoisted on board, the din of the covering fire began to register in my head. With the front of my Huey still kissing the tree leaves and my crew keeping me posted as to what was going on, I took a quick, curious look out my left window to see where the friendly fire was impacting. “Oh, Sugar!” (Not my *exact* word.) “I can throw a rock in there, it’s so close!” was the rest of my thought. I then realized that ole PP back there was just sitting in the hell hole taking it all in, not doing a thing! “Put some fire in that bunker!” I yelled to Private What’s-His-Name. I guess that woke him up as the next thing I heard was his rifle plugging away at a mound of dirt just outside his door and 30 feet down.

The rest of the mission went as expected with no more surprises. We took no hits on that mission and as we lifted out of the landing zone, the fact that we “cheated death” again left me with all the exciting feelings I mentioned before. There was an adrenaline high, too, and a tremendous sense of accomplishment that I have yet to experience since flying my last mission in Viet Nam. The emotions are almost indescribable, but there *was* one more feeling. Relief from being so scared! Being scared in the sense of risking one’s life for others, for sure, but also a sense of being scared that you won’t be up to the standards of your fellow pilots. Scared that maybe, just maybe, you’ll fail your mission where someone else just like you would have succeeded. I suppose that’s what kept most of us going in the daily risk of flying helicopters in combat in Viet Nam. If we didn’t do it, the next guy would and we would have been found to be personally lacking what it took to complete the mission.

In retrospect, I think that's what happened to one of the pilots in our unit a few months after I left. Warrant Officer Jim Gaddis was a tall, curly haired kid as I remember him. Always smiling and never hurt anyone, I would guess. On what turned out to be his final mission, they were to pick up wounded on a mountain top, but got caught in heavy fire while making their approach. Whether they took hits at this time or not is speculation, but he tried another tactic. He dropped to the deck a couple miles out and then screamed up the hill at 120 knots and tree top level, trying to "sneak in" past the enemy. But this time he definitely took hits in a .50 caliber crossfire and as he peeled off from the mountain, fuel was streaming from the aircraft and the gunships that were escorting him told Jim to put it on the ground right away because of the serious leak. "I think I can make it back!" was his last message as the aircraft caught fire, rolled inverted and crashed in flames killing all on board. My opinion is that he was as afraid that he couldn't complete the mission as much as he was afraid to die. At least, I believe that's how I would have felt had it been me. We always at least tried to complete the mission and felt that we let someone down if we didn't.

So, were we really Young and Stupid? Yes, most definitely young, but stupid? I don't think so. We all volunteered to do something that only a year or two before we could not have even dreamed that we would be doing. Something that only a very few could ever experience; something for which only a very few could even qualify. Those of us lucky enough to come home learned from the excursion, and were without question, changed men and no longer wide-eyed boys.

Some of us changed for the better, some of us didn't, but I used the opportunity to prove to myself that I could accomplish the goals that I set for myself and do them well. We *all* did well. As a group, we helicopter pilots did what we had to do and then some. We sacrificed our youth and innocence; we achieved above and beyond the call of duty on a daily basis. Not only were we *not* found to be lacking as youthful aviators, as a whole we far exceeded the expectations. We are now Older and Wiser, and for that I am very thankful.

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