

## **JUNE 24, 1967**

*By Spider door gunner Dick CHERRY BOY Detra*

June 24, 1967 started off as a great day, why shouldn't it, it was Major Bobby Wofford's daughters birthday. The Black Widows flew to Bung At in the southern III Corps in the morning to support the 2nd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment and after being released flew over to the Tan An area to work with the 3rd Brigade, 9th Infantry Division. It was a real good day of work for the unit, after which they headed back to home base. As the flight of slicks and guns closed on Dau Tieng, they flew into a heavy monsoon storm. Wofford, who was in contact with his flight operations, was told that visibility was down, but the ceiling wasn't bad. He had the flight close in on him and then led them down to the 03 inactive runway, which was used as a heliport for the Black Widows and Spiders. Black Widow 16, Captain Maurice Charbonneau had the distinction of naming the heliport the WEB. Sometime in mid-June, he had just returned with a flight of slicks from the day's mission and after refueling Charbonneau radioed the air traffic control tower and asked permission to hover from the refueling point across the active 06 runway to the WEB. The tower responded with Black Widow 16, you are cleared to hover across the active 06 to the WEB. The name stuck and was used at LZ Sally and Phu Bai. Camp Rainier's main 06 runway was used for fixed wing aircraft and as a staging area and Pickup Zone (PZ) for combat assaults during operations with grunts from the 3/22 (Regulars) and the 188<sup>th</sup>'s next door neighbors, the 2/12 (White Warriors) Infantry.

The weather was so bad that it was not safe for the flight to hover to the refueling points. Wofford was told by his Maintenance Officer through flight ops to pull off to the side of the runway in the designated revetment locations and shut down. Maintenance would refuel the helicopters by truck and disperse them. The problem was that the unit wasn't completely set up with anything yet and had only recently hired Vietnamese day workers to help fill sand bags for the revetments. Several Vietnamese were caught stepping off distances between the three rows of planned revetments. One row of ten slick revetments was planned for construction on the left side of the runway; another row of ten slick revetments on the right side of the runway, six gunship revetments built facing out towards the perimeter and two gunship revetments near the counter mortar tent.

Wofford instructed the Maintenance Officer to get the birds refueled and to call the XO, Major James Rungee when this was completed and the pilots would come and disperse their aircraft. The Maintenance Officer decided to pull all the maintenance on the birds before moving them - wrong move, especially for Black Widow 6. The Air Force had furnished the 188th and 603rd maintenance crews with portable flood lights that were setup by the 4th Signal Detachment (avionics) at the junction of the 06 and the 03 runways. In order to work on the helicopters these portable lights were used every night by the maintenance crews.

The local force VC had the airfield zeroed in and under constant surveillance, watching and patiently waiting for the right opportunity to arise. At 11:28 pm, Karumph! Karumph! Karumph! Karumph! four VC mortar tubes opened up on the 188th AHC's helicopters. The VC mortar crews vectored in on the flood lights and starting with the counter mortar tent and Spider gunships located at the junction of both runways walked 100 rounds of 82mm HE (high explosive) back and forth along the rows of helicopters being worked on by the maintenance crews and crew chiefs. The VC knew they would be in a world of shit if that Light Fire Team (LFT) got off the ground.

That night the counter mortar LFT consisted of 1Lt. Robert Wallace, peter pilot WO1 James R. Poggemeyer, crew chief Sp/4 Billy Oates and door gunner Sp/4 Leroy Lamb on Spider gunship #66-00708 and Spider 61, 1Lt George Andrews, peter pilot WO1 Rodney Davie, crew chief Sp/4 Jessie Johnson and door gunner Sp/4 Stan Moody on Spider gunship #66-00712. The gunnies were sound asleep in the counter mortar tent when the mortar attack started. As the incoming rounds exploded all around them the gunnies scrambled to get to their gunships. Lamb was hit by shrapnel in the left bicep. Andrews who was outside taking a leak caught some shrapnel in his left leg. 1LT Wallace and 1LT Andrews checked to see who else was wounded.

When the mortars started hitting up by the main runway, Sp/5 Billy Oates was awakened by a terribly awful noise. It took a few seconds for him to recognize what was happening. The mortar rounds were impacting in groups of four. Andrews, seeing that Lamb had been hit gave him a direct order not to fly and yelled out, "Get that man out of here." With complete disregard for his own personal safety Billy ran through the exploding shells to his injured friend Leroy Lamb and physically carried him across 200 yards of open space to the edge of the airstrip. By that time people were coming from the company area and they took Lamb from there to the 3rd Brigade field hospital, located across the road from the medevac pad at the southern end of the WEB.

1LT Wallace got 708 started but as 1Lt. Andrews was cranking, 712 took a direct hit that glanced off the swirling main rotor blades and impacted on the tail boom, directly beneath the engine. The explosion nearly separated the tail boom from the main body of the gunship and the concussion from the blast exploded through the interior of the ship throwing Jessie Johnson against the interior bulkhead and blowing Moody out of the gunship. Stan was hit by shrapnel in the right arm and left leg and his fatigue uniform was shredded by the explosion. It was a miracle that the gunship didn't explode after taking a direct hit. Andrews immediately shut down the totaled gunship. The interior of the cabin was thick with smoke. Still dazed from the explosion Moody checked on Davie, who had been hit by shrapnel in the right hand and was down on his hands and knees on the floor. Struggling to hold his pants up; the entire right side of his fatigues shredded and his jungle boots nearly blown off, Moody opened the right side pilot's door, slid back the armor plating and pulled Davie out of the gunship. With complete disregard for his own personal safety and bleeding profusely from his own wounds Moody helped Davie, who was having a bad time of it, across the WEB to the 3rd Brigade field hospital. As they neared the hospital Moody kept telling his pilot to stay down just as a mortar round hit a bunker close to where they were. They were both treated and released. Moody would later be awarded the Bronze Star w/ V device for his heroics during the mortar attack. On his second tour with B-36, 5th Special Forces he would earn the Silver Star. Sad to say after returning to the states Stan Moody took his own life in 1987.

1LT Andrews then ran to another flyable gunship (#66-00706) and cranked it. He found another pilot and crew chief Billy Oates who had just returned from carrying Leroy Lamb across the Web volunteered to go up on 706, even though the gunship was heavily damaged. Billy's gunship 708 had been peppered with shrapnel but had gotten off. In the confusion Andrews had left his map and radio frequencies (SOI) in 712. Billy left his flight helmet in 708 so he had no radio contact with the AC or peter pilot. Once they got up, Andrews made contact with Wallace and orbited the area looking for the mortar position. Billy and the rest of the LFT and passengers finally saw the flash from the mortar rounds as they left the tubes. Andrews made a gun run on the VC mortar position with miniguns and

rockets while Billy opened up with his M60 machine gun and brought effective fire on the target; taking out the mortar position. When they finally landed back at the WEB they had a chance to survey the devastation done by the mortar attack. No one got much sleep that night but the Spiders got some pay back because of the heroics of the counter mortar team.

Close to the maintenance ramp and wood line bordering the 65th combat engineer company area and the 2/12 Infantry company area mortar rounds were impacting while Sp/4 Humbert DeGregory was sitting inside one of the slicks doing some paper work. As he jumped out of the Huey, he was hit by shrapnel behind the right ear. He hauled ass for the drainage ditch that ran along both sides of the WEB which was the length of two football fields. Humbert tried to get his buddy to follow him and get clear of the helicopter. More mortar rounds exploded and Humbert was hit again by shrapnel on the left side of his waist just as he made it to the ditch.

Sp/4 Darrell Williams was working on one of the helicopters when he saw mortar rounds exploding close to his position and moved out to the middle of the WEB along with other maintenance people. He tried to go in three different directions but each time a mortar round exploded in front of him. Finally he just hit the ground and held on to his steel pot. He didn't think he was going to get out of there alive and did some praying. When Darrell heard a gunship cranking he noticed another maintenance guy, Humbert DeGregory running towards the gunship.

When DeGregory heard one of the gunships cranking and in fear for his life he ran to the gunship and was helped aboard by Jessie Johnson and Darrell Williams. Once Wallace got the shot up, over weight gunship off the ground Johnson bandaged De Gregory's wound and tried his best to stop the bleeding. When they finally landed at the medevac pad he was taken to the 3rd Brigade field hospital. Because of his head wound a priest from the 4th Infantry Division gave Humbert his last rights. That same night he was medevaced to Vung Tau where he spent three weeks recovering from his wounds. DeGregory returned to the company just in time for the TDY move north to Phu Hiep, where he became a 1st flight platoon crew chief and assigned to the company maintenance bird #66-16111.

While 1Lt. Wallace was cranking 708, he noticed maintenance personnel laying spread eagle on the ground in the middle of the WEB. Wallace wasn't aware of the fact that he had two passengers on board. As the overloaded gunship made its way, bouncing along the 06 runway a mortar round exploded 15 to 20 feet behind them. The blast caught them just under the stabilizer fin and rocked the whole front end of the gunship forward. The 40mm grenade launcher barrel on the nose was pointed down and made contact with the runway. The barrel scrapped along the runway for ten or twenty feet before Wallace made translational lift. 708 was blown down twice by two impacting mortar rounds during take off. Because of the wounded on board Wallace never had a chance to use the grenade launcher and wasn't sure if it was operational or not.

When they got up in the air, Wallace reported in to the base Tactical Operations Center (TOC) for the 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division. He was told that the fire was coming from a village to the NE from an area that the base camp had taken mortar fire from before so they flew over to take a look around. Wallace was the only gunship up and the heavy rain wasn't helping them spot the mortar position. He called Black Widow operations and told them that he was up, but 1Lt. Andrews wasn't and to send medics to the airfield - there were wounded on the airfield. He told them that he had two maintenance

personnel onboard and that Sp/4 Humbert DeGregory had been wounded in the neck but the wound didn't seem too serious. They continued to orbit.

When Andrews finally got up, they went into a holding pattern waiting for the artillery to fire their damn mission. They never really effectively got their counter mortar fire out - mortars but no heavy stuff. Andrews joined Wallace in orbit and started looking for the VC mortar position but couldn't see much in the rain. A Rat Pack LFT scrambled from Tay Ninh, had just arrived on station so they now had two LFTs looking for the mortar position. Spider 66, Captain Frank Kerbl got another gunship up. DeGregory was bleeding severely from the neck wound; crew chief Jessie Johnson had changed the dressings twice, but couldn't get the bleeding stopped. When Kerbl arrived on station, Wallace turned the fire team over to Andrews and told him he had the fire team. Then he told the Rat Pack LFT that Spider 61 now had the fire team. Wallace called Spider 66 and told him to contact Spider 61, that 1LT Andrews had the fire team and to take all directions from him. Kerbl flew wing for Andrews.

When Wallace landed back at the WEB, it was covered with JP4 and dud mortar rounds. He could have flown Humbert DeGregory to Tay Ninh but since the mortar threat had been neutralized, he decided to land at the medevac pad at Camp Rainier where he shut down and checked out the damage to the gunship. They had extensive damage; main rotor blades had all kinds of holes in them; the tail rotor had holes; the tail boom had holes along with a long gash on one side and a bad hydraulic leak. Fortunately none of the controls were affected. There were holes in the fuel cell, but it was self-sealing, so it sealed itself. They also had a hydraulic leak.

When the mortar attack started Sp/4 Don Sparks and two other maintenance personnel were inside the maintenance hanger tent. The structure consisted of two parts connex containers with a wooden floor constructed between them and a circular canvas tent covering the work area and connex containers. Because there were no bunkers near by, the three men laid flat on the floor directly below the hanger ceiling. A mortar round detonated on the tent, hitting Don Sparks with shrapnel in the back of the head and back. One of the other maintenance guys was seriously wounded in the leg. Don and the other guy carried the wounded man the short distance to the 3rd Brigade hospital. Unfortunately the man lost his leg and was medevaced back to the states.

Crew chief Sp/4 Ed Desisto was with a group of four or five guys working on one of the helicopters when they saw the first flash and thought it was outgoing artillery fire. When they saw the mortar explosions working their way down the runway towards their position all of them jumped off the helicopter and ran for the drainage ditch. Just as he jumped into the ditch a mortar round exploded to the right of his location. DeSisto was hit in the face and arm and the three guys behind him were also hit by shrapnel.

Sp/4 Carl Zito was in the maintenance office working on maintenance charts and doing some filing when the attack started. Everyone scrambled. Some ran from the far end of the airfield back towards the maintenance ramp. In the confusion, Carl left his steel helmet, flack jacket and rifle in the office. The only cover they had was the drainage ditch - shit water never smelled so good. The VC just walked the rounds in and put them right where they wanted. When the attack was over they headed back across the airfield when his sergeant saved his life. As Carl was about to step down on a dud mortar round the sergeant grabbed and pushed him out of the way and then shined his light on the

round. As he shined his flashlight around the immediate area they saw two other dud rounds that had not exploded.

Another lucky soldier was Spider armorer Sp/5 Dave Miller who left the armament hootch when the attack started and ran for the drainage ditch, where he waited until the all clear was given. When he stood up he noticed a dud mortar round sticking out of the ground six feet from his position.

Sp/4 Neil Connelly, a 4th Signal Detachment avionics specialist was working on one of the helicopters near the RRT van parked next to a culvert that had water flowing through it from the drainage ditch. As he dove into the ditch the RRT van took a direct hit from a mortar round, destroying the van.

Sp/4 Jim Wilson and other maintenance personnel were working on #66-16089, the 12th CAG Commanders slick in one of the hanger tents on the PSP maintenance ramp changing seals on the hot end of the L-13 engine, because it was burning oil. During the attack, they dove into the muddy water of the drainage ditch near the medevac pad and waited for the all clear siren to sound. The Military Police compound located right next to the maintenance area wasn't so lucky. Their company area was hit hard and most of their people were either killed or wounded during the attack.

When Andrews landed back at the WEB, he was stitched up at the 3rd Brigade hospital and immediately headed over to the Tactical Operations Center (TOC). Major General George P. Seneff, Commander of the 1st Aviation Brigade, had arrived shortly after hearing of the mortar attack and awarded Andrews the Silver Star Medal on the spot for his actions during the mortar attack. 1LT Robert Wallace was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, Billy Oates received a Bronze Star with V/device, for his bravery under fire during the mortar attack. Unfortunately Jessie Johnson's heroism under fire went unawarded. Later in his tour Johnson was wounded in action but never received a purple heart. Most of the enlisted gunnies never received the awards for heroism they deserved during the same missions that their pilots received awards for and should have been acknowledged for. The policy in many Aviation units was an automatic Distinguished Flying Cross if you got up during a mortar attack.

Others wounded during the attack were Sp/4 James R. Grindstaff (frag wound left shoulder), Sp/4 David J. Bryan (frag wound right shoulder), Sp/4 Joseph W. Wittner (frag wound head), Sp/4 Lewis T. Hodge (frag wound left leg, right arm), Sp/4 Jimmy D. Moody (frag wound right arm), Sgt. David A. Beale (frag wound right arm), Sp/4 Roger E. Blankenship, PFC Gary J. Walker and SFC Hubert Arrowood.

Immediately after the mortar attack, Major Wofford called Black Baron 6, LTC James Merryman at Cu Chi to report the attack. Merryman asked Black Widow 6 for the damage report, thinking it would be minimal because his S-3 section had earlier confirmed that the 188th helicopters were dispersed. Major Wofford replied it was major with 29 out of 31 helicopters being damaged in the attack. This sounded unbelievable because it would have taken thousands of mortars to cover all of Dau Tieng.

Well, as it turned out the company had not refueled prior to dispersing so were brought to the airfield to refuel. At that point Major Wofford decided not to return the helicopters to their dispersed positions, but to pull maintenance and refuel in the morning. As a result, the VC just walked their mortars down the line of aircraft. The 188th temporarily ceased to exist as a combat unit. The next day it had a new

commander. The primary reason that Merryman relieved Major Wofford was his failure to follow an order that resulted in the 188th being put out of business by a VC mortar attack.

On the rainy morning of June 25, 1967 Black Widow 6, Major Wofford was told by LTC Merryman that he was being relieved of duty and transferred to the 269th CAB staff at Cu Chi as the Safety Officer and that Major James McWhorter would replace him as the new CO. It was at that moment that Major Bobby Wofford felt the morale of his men was at its lowest. When the company heard he was being replaced, there was almost a mutiny. Before the quote Change of Command, McWhorter and Wofford actually passed the 188th Gideon. Before Merryman and McWhorter arrived at Dau Tieng, Wofford had a formation to explain to the company why he was leaving and that he expected them to support the new CO. He told them that the company was as well trained as they could possibly be and would make a name for themselves as the best lift company in Vietnam and that he would expect nothing less from them. During the months of combat ahead, these words would come true for the Black Widows and Spiders. Wofford later transferred and got a job with the help of an old friend at 1st Aviation Brigade Headquarters. They had served together stateside in Texas.

There were those in the company opposed to and those approving of Wofford being relieved of command. The Hueys were parked in the designated revetment spots on the WEB, the only problem with that was they hadn't been built yet. With the change of command, the word was things were going to be a little different around here. Before the attack the troops were always bitchin and complaining about filling sand bags, after the mortar attack that all changed. Of the twenty-nine helicopters damaged during the mortar attack seventeen were totally destroyed.

The next morning a patrol from the 2/12 Infantry found the bodies, mortar tubes and a hand drawn map with the layout of the heliport and the locations of the helicopter revetments. That same morning all of the flight personnel converged on the WEB to see the results of the mortar attack. As Oates was checking out the damage to the counter mortar tent he was shocked and amazed to find a dud mortar round protruding out of the ground at the corner of the counter mortar tent. There were dud 82mm rounds scattered all across the entire heliport and maintenance area. EOD was called in to defuse the dud mortar rounds. The VC had every helicopter targeted their mortar rounds never went across the 06 active runway. Before the Black Cats of the 213th ASHC sling loaded the damaged 188th helicopters from Dau Tieng to the bone yard at the 520th Transportation Battalion (aircraft maintenance and support) in Phu Loi, the maintenance people were busy stripping the radios out of the damaged helicopters. After the mortar attack the pilots were sent to other units in the 12th CAG until replacement helicopters arrived.

The following statement was the official 25th Infantry Division Operational Report Lessons Learned dated July 31, 1967. At 2328 hours on June 24, 1967, the Dau Tieng base camp (XT490471) received an attack by 82mm mortars which lasted for about eleven minutes resulting in approximately 70 rounds of 82mm high explosive ammunition impacting inside the base camp and 30 rounds outside the perimeter. The primary target was the airstrip. The attack resulted in fifty wounded in action (17 of which required dust-off) and one civilian wounded in action. One helicopter gunship was destroyed and 28 received substantial damage. Other damage included a fire truck, a wheeled wrecker, eight ton trucks, an RTT van, and a 15 kilowatt generator. In addition numerous tents had to be salvaged as a result of damage received during the attack. A sweep of the suspected mortar position on June 25th

located four mortar positions in the vicinity of a village approximately 2 kilometers northwest of Camp Rainier.

In a letter home to his folks on June 25, 1967, 2nd flight platoon crew chief Ron Merlock described the mortar attack. *“It rained almost all day today and it really came down. Did you hear anything at home about Dau Tieng getting mortared? Last night at 11:28 PM we were lying in bed and all these explosions started going off and we thought it was our artillery. Then they were coming in so fast that we knew they were mortars. We all bailed out of bed and dove into the bunkers outside our tents. It lasted about 10 to 15 minutes. Charlie was after our helicopters and he sure got them. Hit the airfield with over a hundred shells. We lost most of our ships. They were blown all to hell. They sure zeroed in on those ships. We’re getting all new aircraft from what I hear. One ship took a direct hit and almost blew the tail boom completely off. My ship has big holes all over it and in the windows. It wasn’t even fixed yet from the time we got shot down. We have been waiting for this to happen ever since the ships got here. Our maintenance crews were working on the ships that night...29 of them got hit but no one was killed thank God. Now we have to start all over again with more ships. They have been hauling them out all day long. We went out to the airfield this morning and picked up dud shells that didn’t go off when they hit. Those mortars are a sound I’ll never forget. They were falling like rain. Just one steady pounding, they sure can throw them in awful fast. Things are really messed up around here now.”*