



Lessons Learned Night Flying in the Delta

As a helicopter pilot remembering the night flight training at Fort Wolters, TX, flying the TH-55 with your flight instructor along the highway with the lights from Mineral Wells, TX serving as a reference point that could not be ignored. You grasp as a pater pilot in Vietnam that the training just wasn't adequate for what you faced now that you were flying at night on a combat mission.

As a helicopter pilot remembering the solo night flight training at Fort Wolters, TX, the hovering up on the taxiway and turning your TH-55 perpendicular to the runway so you could watch the tower for the flashing of the handheld beacon that was flashed at you to let you know it was your turn to take-off and enter the traffic pattern. You realize as a pater pilot in Vietnam that the training just wasn't adequate for what you faced now that you were flying at night on a combat mission.

As a helicopter pilot remembering the night flight training at Hunter Army Airfield, GA where you and your student pilot partner would take your UH-1D on a short cross country flight through the southeastern Georgia countryside with the lights from the cities and towns lighting your way. Your last night landing at Hunter Army Airfield was to fly down the green beam of light that showed you were on the right glide path for landing the Huey. You now recognize as a pater pilot in Vietnam that the training just wasn't adequate for what you faced now that you were flying at night on a combat mission.

Thanks to all those aircraft commanders that took the time to teach the pater pilots what the pater pilots *really* had to learn about flying at night in a combat situation for their tour in Vietnam.

After being a pater pilot with the 162nd Assault Helicopter Company for about a month and a half, I flew several night missions as a loaned out pater pilot to fly with the 235th Assault Weapons Company, "The Delta Devils". Their company was stationed on the opposite side

(south) of the runway at Can Tho Army Airfield so our two companies didn't socialize except for occasionally in the officers club.



Since they were a weapons company that flew Cobra Gunships, I guess none of their pilots wanted to fly as the peter pilot in a UH-1H unless they had to do so. I was told that they were short on pilots for the few missions I flew with them. Actually, it was a very good learning experience for me to fly in the 'slick' which served as both their flare airship and their Command & Control airship.

I had flown a few night missions with the 162nd AHC on the Moc Hoa mission as a peter pilot and the way the C & C ran the mission was that the whole flight would take off together and the radar station would vector the flare ship over the target. Out would go the flare and the "C" Model Gunships would do a recon by fire in the area illuminated by the flare. This process was repeated time and again at many different locations along the Cambodia-South Vietnam border in the jurisdiction of the Moc Hoa base.



I flew one night mission with the 235th AWC out of the airfield located at Cai Cai located near the Cambodia-South Vietnam border. This base is located many miles WNW of Moc Hoa. The difference in the mission was that the Huey didn't stage at the airfield but at a small outpost closer to the border that had a small heliport that could only support one aircraft landing there. The Cobra gunships must have staged out of the Cai Cai airfield.

All the other night missions I flew as the 235th AWC C & C's peter pilot were out of Ca Mau down in the southern section of the delta. We even got shot up one night and had to make a forced landing right in the center of the city; they sent another aircraft to pick us up in the next morning. I flew out of Rach Gia with them one evening on a twilight mission too.

When we cranked to start the mission, the Cobra Gunships were always on station by the time we reached the area of interest. That is when I learned the first lesson of flying with Cobras, they are much faster than the UH-1H so they need much less time to get on station and unlike the "C" model gunships, which always cranked with you, they always let you crank first and leave and then they would catch up with the UH-1H to proceed with the mission. They said this allowed them to stay on station longer.

When we were on station over the area of interest they needed a specific target to shoot at because it is very difficult for them to do a recon by fire at night since they didn't have door gunners that could pop off about 50 to 100 rounds of M-60 machine gun fire to see if they received a response. That is when I learned the second lesson of flying with Cobras, they were great as aerial artillery but they couldn't and shouldn't fly low and slow like the "C" model to ferret out the enemy or do a recon of an area, they didn't have two sets of extra eyes checking things out. I guess that is why "the snakes (AH-1Gs) and the egg (OH-6A)" were such a lethal combination.

Another thing I noticed when flying as the peter pilot in the C & C aircraft with the 235th AWC aircraft commander was that the AC appeared to be more accurate and exacting when giving the Cobra Gunships permission to fire on a particular target. He always gave them an exact reference

point for them to aim at when firing their 2.75 inch rockets, 40 millimeter grenades, and/or 7.62 millimeter minigun rounds.

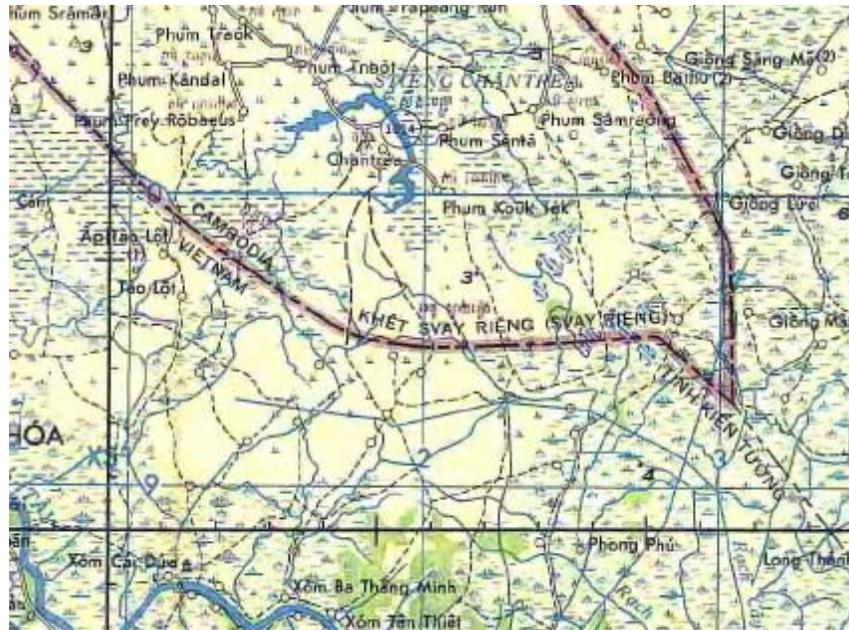
I only flew one night mission again with Cobra Gunships where I was the aircraft commander of the command & control aircraft. It was a mission where we were on stand-by to help any outpost in the delta that had come under nighttime attack. The lessons I learned while flying as the peter pilot with the 235th AWC served me very well that night.



After I had become an aircraft commander with air mission commander orders, I flew my fair share of night missions out of Moc Hoa as the C & C aircraft. There the mission was to try and stop the night infiltration of enemy personnel over the border from Cambodia into South Vietnam.

I had even flown some daytime missions in the area where the Green Berets had dropped electronic sensors, that had the appearance being an olive drab 25 pound bomb with a plastic plant coming out from one end, out of the aircraft along the foot trails in the 'Plain of Reeds' that were clearly visible from the air but I understand were hard to detect from ground level. There were radio receivers back at the Green Berets' outpost that alerted them when one of the sensors had been activated.





The entire area south and southwest of the “parrot’s beak”, a section of the Cambodian-South Vietnamese border that looks like its name on the map, had been ‘seeded’ the year before with bombs and mines set to explode if they were disturbed in any way. The area was even a NO-FLY zone because the munitions planted there were that sensitive and could be set off by rotor wash. The reason behind this action must have been to funnel the infiltrating enemy towards a specific area which would serve as a choke point where it would be easier to then interdict them.

The Moc Hoa mission at night was a game of cat and mouse played by two adversaries, each one trying to outsmart the other. During the dry season the enemy would start large fires burning acres of grasslands in an effort mask their infiltrating into the country. My guess this was one of their means of foiling the sniffer aircraft while at the same time supplying them with a smoke screen they could use to hide their movement. I don’t know if they knew about the sensors dropped by the Green Berets, but when they were activated we would fire in the area even if it was covered by smoke and no specific enemy could be seen.

The radar operator would vector the flareship over the target area and they would drop the flare the “C” model gunship would go down take a look a do a recon by fire. Every once in a while we would find a large group of the enemy that would suddenly open fire on the flight with automatic weapons up to and including 51 millimeter machineguns. If it wasn’t so deadly, it was a kind of breath taking to see the many sets of tracers going back and forth from air to ground and vice versa as the two parties continued the hostilities. By going dark they couldn’t see our position in the sky and their position was known on the ground so a few 2.75 inch 17 pound warhead rockets would shut them up. The whole area was pounded repeatedly until it was felt that the enemy had been eliminated.

As we got closer to the start date of the invasion of Cambodia, the enemy became more and more aggressive with the encounters near the border. Did they know something that we didn’t? We

had no clue an invasion had been planned and thought the enemy was just getting more confident in their encounters with the night border patrol.

On April 30, 1970 I flew the *dumbest* night mission ever. First of all we had only one Copperhead "C" model gunship available to fly the mission that night. So all we had were one gunship, one flare aircraft, and one C & C aircraft to patrol that whole section of border. When the gunship came to Moc Hoa WO1 Alex Spence told me he didn't think one of rocket pods on his aircraft was working. I asked him what he wanted to do and he indicated he wanted to fly the mission anyway. *That was a bad decision by me as the C & C to go on and fly the mission.*

Up we go to fly the mission and no sooner than we start to get to the area designated by our back seat and the door gunners fire a few rounds into the tree line when the whole sky just lit up with tracer fire from both sides of the border. I told Alex to get out of there and he went low at the ground level and tried to pop up and fire a volley of rockets back at the enemy position. The right pod fired but the left pod didn't. After he had fired a few rockets from the right pod and NONE from the left pod, the aircraft became unbalanced and very difficult to fly.

Here we were trying to fight off a sizable enemy force with just a single unbalanced gunship, a C & C slick, and a flare ship. We were lucky to escape without any damage to any aircraft and all of the crew members and passengers were unhurt. When we came back to the area after we had regrouped and the crewchief of the "C" model managed to rewire the controls to the left pod so that it would fire, there was no response when we did a recon by fire. The invasion of Cambodia started the next day at dawn. After the invasion, the border area became pretty quiet during the day and especially at night.

I learned the hard way to not fly a mission if a key piece of equipment was malfunctioning before you even set out on the mission because you were endangering the successful completion of the mission and also endangering the welfare of the crews involved with the mission! That mistake was never made again.

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12/69 to 12/70