

"The Day Colin Powell Should Have Listened to Shark 4."

By J.C. Pennington
(Shark 4)

When I was flying Dolphin slicks of the 174th Assault Helicopter Company (before I got into the Shark gun platoon) in late '68, Colin Powell was a staff officer, Major, on the Americal Division staff.

The Americal was made up of three brigades and had one aviation assault helicopter company supporting each brigade. I was in the 174th AHC and we supported the 11th Light Infantry Brigade (LIB) of Lt. Calley/Capt. Medina/My Lai infamy.

The 11th LIB was made up of three (or four depending on need) infantry battalions (BN). Each BN was assigned a 174th resupply ship and one command and control (C&C) ship each day.

The resupply ship would spend the whole day flying out to the BN's companies in the field with beans and bullets. You basically spent the whole day (10 to 12 hours) flying round trips from the BN's resupply pad to the field units and back.

The C&C ship was the property of the Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) who commanded the BN. That could be flying him out to field units, recon of landing zones (LZ) for planned assaults, flying him to the hospital to visit his wounded troops or even helping out with resupply if the LTC didn't need his ship.

These resupply missions could be, and usually were, all over the map in terms of missions. Resupply of course, but medevacs were common, recons, spraying agent orange (although we didn't know that's what it was at the time), mail runs, transporting personnel in and out of the field. Hell, I even flew a Vietnamese brass band in one time as part of a change of command ceremony.

OK, to the day in question with Colin Powell. I was flying resupply for one of the BNs that was on a sweep in the mountains. Terrible terrain and jungle. I really felt bad for the grunts. On one of my trips back to the resupply pad I got a radio call telling me to go out and support one of the companies of the BN that had just stumbled on a huge North Vietnamese Army (NVA) base camp. Apparently, they had found tons of enemy supplies: ammo, food, weapons, medical supplies, barracks, mess hall, the whole shootin' match.

As I was getting ready to take off, the BN CO jumped on board with his operations officer and first sergeant. Apparently, his C&C ship was busy so off we go trying to find this unit that found the base camp/cache. Working off a map and grid coordinates we eventually found them but there was nowhere to land within several clicks (kilometers). Triple canopy jungle, ridge line, etc. Nasty.

The LTC desperately wanted to land and inspect the loot (and no doubt have his photo taken with it). He told his unit to cut out an LZ so we could land and drop him off. My tail is already

starting to pucker over that prospect. So, we bored holes in the sky for a while and the grunts started taking down trees with C4 (plastic explosive) and detonation cord. It clears the space of trees but leaves stumps so actual "landing" is not really an option...as long as you want to keep your tailrotor, and I did so we'd have to just hover at the bottom.

Also, when you take down trees at the base it leaves neighboring trees still overhanging the LZ. Those tend to shred main rotor blades. Finally, they said they had a hole cut for the LZ and I should come on in. It may have been a big hole at the bottom but it wasn't much of a hole at the top. I told the CO I'd give it a try but if at any point I thought it was a no-go I was not going to push it. He reluctantly agreed but since I was the aircraft commander he had no choice.

Well, I trimmed a few branches on the way down but kept the tailrotor clean and we barely had enough room at the bottom for the main rotor blades. Barely. I can say that in 1,000 hours of flying helicopters in Vietnam I never landed in a tighter spot. Big time pucker factor.

The CO jumps off, I very carefully lift straight up and clear the trees. I went to refuel and when I got back the LTC was ready for me to pick him up so I have to go through the whole "let's don't crash" routine again. He jumped on board with some souvenirs and I took him back to his headquarters. I made one more trip in and out (more souvenirs) safely. Those three landings, in what we called a "hover hole", were never easy and I was sweating bullets each time. To the grunts I'm sure it looked routine after seeing a Huey get in and out of there three times. It was **never** routine.

(Now the Powell part) As I was flying back to the resupply pad I got a radio call that the Division Commander, Maj Gen Gettys (two-stars) was flying out to the just-discovered enemy base camp and they wanted me to circle the area until they arrived to show his pilot where the LZ was.

I immediately got a bad feeling about that. The guy flying was a VIP pilot on a VIP ship. To this day it was the most immaculately-kept Huey I ever saw. Beautiful new paint job and the whole ship was **waxed!** It looked like it was on the way to a parade.

Anyway, when I hooked up with the VIP ship I called and offered to fly the general into the LZ. I said that I was the only one who had flown into and out of the LZ and it was very tight. I said we could transfer back at the BN pad and it would only take about 25 minutes roundtrip. Naturally the VIP pilot declined. I don't blame him. I'd have done the same thing. It's the old "balls/brains" conundrum. The fact is, as a VIP pilot, he just didn't have the experience line pilots had doing all the crazy shit we did 10 to 12 hours a day, seven days a week. As soon as he said he didn't need me I took off because I still had a lot of resupply missions to the other field units.

So, I didn't see the crash. The VIP pilot got about halfway down into the canopy, caught a main rotor blade on a tree trunk, slung both blades, rolled it over and crashed inverted. The good news was that there was no fire and no fatalities. The bad news was that everyone on the VIP ship was hurt to one degree or another. General Gettys broke his back and Maj. Colin Powell broke his ankle.

I didn't know until years later that Powell was on the ship. I saw him when he was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and noticed that he wore an American patch. I still didn't think too much about it. Only when he wrote his book did I find out that he was on the VIP ship that day. I smiled to myself and thought, "You should have listened to Shark 4."

After writing this story, I thought I'd pull out my copy of Powell's book, My American Journey, that I had not read in 20 years to see if his story and mine matched up. They did, more than I had remembered.

Funny thing about us Warrant Officer Huey pilots of the day. We were called many things. John Steinbeck said we had "the slow hands of Casals on the cello." Correspondent Joe Galloway, co-author of We Were Soldiers Once...And Young, called us "God's own lunatics." Turns out Colin Powell said we had "the hands of a safecracker's touch." Then of course there were a lot of senior officers who just called us "arrogant and insolent." They had no sense of humor.

In any case, this is an excerpt from Powell's book about the day his VIP pilot tried to get into a very tight landing zone that only I had flown into at that point:

"I had thought earlier that maybe this landing would be better handled by a small slick piloted by one of those nineteen-year-olds with the hands of a safecracker's touch and plenty of experience in shoehorning helos into tight fits.

"But the General's pilot, Chief Warrant Officer James *****, was an experienced flier. This was his general, his helo, his landing, and he expected no problem.

"We spotted a smoke grenade signaling the site of the hole chopped out of the heavy growth and headed for it. The pilot began his approach to the landing site, realized he was coming in too fast, backed off, and came at it again. On the second pass, he hovered, then began his descent. Bits of stripped-off branches and leaves swirled through the air as we moved down through the trees.

"Since I was sitting outboard, I could see how little clearance we had, about two feet at each end of the blade. I began to shout, 'Pull out!' "But it was too late. I watched the pilot struggling against the treacherous backdraft created by the trees, and then, WHACK! At the height of about three stories, the blade stuck a tree trunk. One minute we were flying and the next we were dead weight, as the rotor blades went instantly from 324 rpm to zero. The helo dropped like an elevator with a snapped cable. I reflexively assumed the crash posture, head down, arms locked around my knees. I listened to the engine's futile whine for what seemed an eternity before we smashed into the ground."

Colin Powell may have been wrong about Iraq, but he was right about who he should have been flying him that day in Vietnam.

Warrant Officer J.C. Pennington with a bamboo model of a helicopter found at the NVA base camp. It was a training aid teach the bad guys how to shoot down helicopters.



MG Gettys (2nd from the right) on LZ Cork days before the crash.

