

Vietnam War Story: Flare Mission Gone Bad

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Of all the crazy flying we did flying flare missions had its own unique ways of dying. And they make for bad dreams if you happen to survive a flare accident.

Most of the attacks on our bases occurred at night. The Army's solution- turn the night into day by dropping very bright magnesium parachute flares from helicopters over the camp's perimeter. The MK-24 parachute flare was in wide use for this purpose. It puts out over 2-million candlepower for about 3 minutes as it descends under a 16-foot diameter parachute. It burned at 5000°F and could illuminate a large area bright enough to read by. When a camp came under attack, quick reaction aircrews scrambled into the air, usually a couple of gunships and a UH-1D or H flare ship. The MK-24 flare is housed in an aluminum canister about 36-inches long and 4 1/2-inches in diameter weighing about 30-pounds. Located at the top of the canister are two setting knobs, the first a delay timer setting the time in seconds that the flare will fall to clear the aircraft and deploy the parachute at the right altitude to give maximum illumination over the target area. This timer is triggered when a steel lanyard with its end clipped to a short static line attached to the helicopter. When the flare is tossed out by the crew chief it falls to the end of the static line initiating a jerk that starts the timer. It only takes a 12-pound pull to initiate the flare. The lanyard breaks away from the helicopter and the falling flare counts off the number of seconds of freefall before the parachute deploys. The second timer knob determines the number of seconds from initial lanyard pull to flare ignition. The flare now descends under parachute, burning white hot for three minutes. The aircrew must determine these timer values before takeoff and replace a plastic protective cover over the setting knobs and coiled up lanyard to prevent accidentally pulling on a dangling lanyard. As many as 60 flares were stacked on the cabin floor just ahead of where the door gunner and crew chief sat. The pilot would do a quick engine start and be airborne in 5 minutes from initial call to launch. The helicopter would quickly climb to drop altitude, usually around 3,000 feet above the camp.



2 MK-24 parachute flares over our Phan Thiet camp. Red tracer rounds are from our AH-1G Cobra gunships. Aug 1968

Below the gunships were getting into position to make runs along the perimeter. The flare ship pilot would set up his run upwind of the drop area and tell the guys in back to get ready to drop. The door gunner, sitting on the right side of the cabin would pick up a flare and place it in his lap and remove the plastic safety cap. He then handed it to the crew chief sitting on the left side. The flare lanyard was snapped to the helicopter's static line. On command the crew chief would toss the flare out. In our case the right cargo door was sometimes closed. The mission would continue as corrections were made to

altitude, and drop points for optimum and overlapping illumination coverage.

It was a surreal scene viewed from above as the Cobra's worked under the flare light. Done right we could keep constant illumination over the camp with overlapping flares. We could keep this up for a complete fuel load, more than 2 hours.

On this particular July night in 1968 my crew was on 5-minute alert at Phan Thiet airfield. B Troop's camp was a hastily built site about a mile south of the airfield just outside Phan Thiet's perimeter. The call came to me late in the evening to scramble, the camp was under attack! 5 minutes later we were airborne and climbing to altitude. Off to the south we could see our guard towers' 50 cal machine guns raking the southern perimeter fences. Trip flares had been set off by a 16-man enemy sapper team. They had been caught in the open. We began chucking flares out at 3,000 feet and soon the whole area was lit up. All the sudden there was a loud explosion and bright flash in the back of our Huey. A flare had ejected inside the cabin. We had 10 seconds before the flare ignited. I began an emergency descent. We had only dropped a few flares. 10 seconds passed and we were still alive, but where was the flare? I turned around to see what was going on behind me. The door gunner was doubled over and bleeding! He had just handed a flare to the crew chief when the flare and parachute ejected from its aluminum tube. He had inadvertently pulled the arming lanyard while removing the plastic safety cap before handing it to the crew chief. The flare exited out the left side of the helicopter. The outer tube fired back across the cabin striking the door gunner in the kneecap, continued to the right striking the closed cargo door and bounced back out the left side of the helicopter. The flare and parachute didn't hang up on the skid or other parts of the airframe. We lucked out that the parachute didn't end up in the tail rotor. The crew chief lost his left kneecap. We were finished for the night. There were tales of others who weren't so lucky when flares had ignited inside the helicopter.



Author standing 5-minute Alert at Phan Thiet airfield in front of tac map. August 1968. B Troop 7/17th Air Cav