

THE RUB

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As I stand on this side of the Grand Canyon and look across to the far hazy rim in the distance, I am having thoughts and memories of days long past. In one respect, the far rim is dim and distant, with vague images. But in another respect it has become more clear - more defined - more vivid. This might be due to the old light bulb syndrome. You know, --- how ---- , just before a light bulb burns out, it suddenly becomes more bright -- more vivid, --- and then -- bam. That could be what I am experiencing - I don't know. But I am having these thoughts and images of Vietnam so I thought I would put them on paper while the light bulb is still on.

Give me some latitude guys - I know our experiences are unique and different - so when I say "we" I am speaking in a generic way. Don't get your panties in a wad and start throwing rocks if you have a different recollection. OK?

After we migrated through flight school at Ft Wolters and Ft Rucker, a Spec-4 in the puzzle palace matched our name to a unit and our fates were sealed.

We arrived in Vietnam right out of flight school and we were pretty much worthless. My Unit was A Troop 7/1 Cav in the Delta on the Mekong River, outside a village called Vinh Long, and it was 1969, and I was worthless. On a good day, with a check list, I might get a Huey started.

So this is what started me thinking. As I stand here and look back toward the far rim, it seems to me that we evolved through about 4 or 5 phases during our 12 month Vietnam experience. The first phase being - pretty much worthless.

My unit was made up of slicks, guns, and scouts and, except for Christmas - 2 safety stand-downs - and the death of Ho Chi Minh, we put a combat load in the air everyday. Four UH-1s for troop insertion, two pair of cobra gun ships for air cover and two pair of OH-6 scouts, to do what ever it was the scouts did - and a C&C (command and control) high bird. Our mission was search and destroy. I was a new-guy in the UH-1 slick platoon. I remember going to the flight-line for the first time. Each aircraft was parked between 7 foot high concrete walls (revetments). I ask "when are the tugs going to pull them out for us".

We were told to sit in the right seat - don't touch anything - just watch and learn. It's easy to spot a new-guy. He is as shiny as a new penny, from his eyes to the 38 revolver on his hip. He always has his chicken plate and his safety flairs. He usually has a Playboy magazine in his flight bag. (He has not yet come to realized what is really important - but that will come soon enough). The learning curve is fast and steep. Our young lad is re-learning flight school in short order.

The next phase I'll call the competent phase. Before long we were flying down the ramp at something more than a "brisk walk" and into and out of the revetments without a thought. Our chest plates were being stowed under the seats - They "really were" hot, heavy, uncomfortable and they "really would" be in the way in a "Get the hell out of the aircraft" situation. The revolvers slowly became cameras, and the Playboy magazines were replaced with more important thoughts and images --- Food. Mom's great home cooked meals, hamburgers, milk-shakes, coconut cream pie. Forget girls - We began to dream about food. And we began to learn how to fly our aircraft in the combat environment.

Due to attrition - some injuries, - but mostly re-assignments and rotations back to the US, at about the 4th to 5th month we had a major transformation. We were assigned as Aircraft Commanders (PIC - Pilot in Command).

For some of us, this was the first time we were put in command of anything. This was MAJOR. We had control and responsibility over men, over machinery, over a combat mission (and our average age was 19 1/2). Our names were painted on the side of the aircraft with the letters AC next to it. As we walked up, the crew chief and door gunner would give us a status report - The crew and co-pilot would look to us for guidance - direction - leadership. The learning curve was still steep but we were beginning to see the big picture. We walked with a swagger. We began to develop our style - our philosophy - our Mission Statement - - - - And --- and it had Nothing to do with medals, --- or killing gooks, --- or winning battles or wars.

“We gotta get out a this place ----- If its the last - - ----- “

We experienced hours of boredom, interrupted with moments of terror. We flew almost everyday, everything from unloading troops in smoking bomb craters to recovering medivac wounded off mountain tops (yep, we had a few mountains in the Delta). Night flare drops to full suppression insertions. From Napalm to Orange. Flechettes to Arch lights - It was an exciting, terrifying, horrible , time.

At around the 9th to 10th month we slowly evolved into a new phase. This one was not as defined. There were no new letters after our names, but, due to the same reasons as above, we found ourselves as Senior Aircraft Commanders. We had our ducks in a row. We could plant one skid on an out-cropping of a steep ledge and hold it there while the crew unloaded supplies, as we explained to the new co-pilot what was happening - we could give C&C an update, check on the unloading of supplies going on behind us and, if a mortar exploded in front of us, - the right hand on the cyclic would not waver - Our ducks were lined up. We were the go-to guys - When the missions came down - we were asked to do the hard ones.

“Sure Boss, I’ll take that single ship night resupply - piece of cake.”

Mason, in his book Chickenhawk, does a good job of describing this phase of our flying skill. (A great book, IMHO). We had the Aircraft Control Touch - The Combat Situational Awareness - and the courage built on skill and experience.

Not just the crews, but the whole unit looked to us for leadership. New Commanders (as they rotated in and out every 6 months - to punch their combat command ticket) would ask us questions. We would answer their questions and give them our advice, --- but - - we would never tell them that our Mission Statements did not match theirs.

But - then - something happens. As most of us will learn later in life, it is one thing to get the ducks lined up. It is another thing to keep the little critters there. They begin to wander. It might be a letter from home - or - it might be a good friend has a very bad day. In my case, it was a page being turned on a calendar. There it was, circled in red - The day - the go home date. “I might really make it!” And that’s when we enter the new phase - we become, A Short Timer.

We begin to act differently -- We dust off the ol’ chicken plate - If we had been talkers , we talk less - If we were smokers , we smoke more - We stop giving good answers to questions and say things like “you Dip Shit - Put the fckn camera down and pay attention”.

The same guy that said “Piece of cake” a few weeks before is now standing in the day room with his hands on his hips.

“NO FKN WAY - You can throw me in the Brig for all I care - I Ain’t doin that mission”.

This is a totally different phase.

Some of the new-guys might roll their eyes - But then a PIC would stand up – “OK guys, cut him some slack - I can take that one Boss.”

And so, it comes full circle - We arrive in-country, pretty much Worthless - and we leave to go home - Pretty much Worthless. But that’s not the point --- It’s all the shit that happens between those twelve months - The transformations and the evolutions - The laughter and the tears - The losses and the life long friendships.

There-in lies - THE RUB.