

## **My Sixty Second Hero**

By

[Angus Macaulay](#)

During my tour in Vietnam, I saw a number of youngsters do heroic stuff and receive decorations for their bravery. But there was one guy whom I assume never got a decoration but will always stand out as among the very bravest. I don't know his name, his unit or anything about him other than he piloted a Huey helicopter.

The situation was this. On Thanksgiving Day, 1967, I was commanding an armored cavalry platoon with eight armored vehicles, each mounted with three machine guns. We had already been patrolling endless miles of rice paddies for two days in a monotonous drizzle of rain. We were operating ten or so miles into the Que Son Valley (southwest of Da Nang), near a speck on the map known as Hill 63. About 6:30 AM, as we began our third move, we first heard some intense firing and then an urgent radio call ordering us to link up with our second platoon that had been ambushed near the base of Hill 63.

Other than a few skirmishes and snipers, this would be my first firefight as a platoon leader just as it was for most of the forty plus kids in our platoon. While we pressed our vehicles across miles of flat paddies the anxious and confused radio traffic made it almost impossible to follow what exactly was going on, where the enemy was located, or even where our own forces were placed. Twenty minutes later we found them—in what would become my most memorable Thanksgiving.

We had gone about five miles and we were already beginning to take some scattered sniper fire when we came across our second platoon. Their eight vehicles were standing in the rain almost idle in the middle of the paddies. Twenty-one of their machine guns were blasting into a large “dry” island marked by its bamboo thickets, dense jungle and dominated by a long slopping hill that lay directly in front of them. This was Hill 63.

The two companies of the infantry that our second platoon were attached to, were scattered behind the 2<sup>nd</sup>'s armored personnel carriers for safety or lying half submerged in paddy water behind two foot high muddy dikes and returning fire as best they could. But it was clear that this had been a one sided fight by a very determined force of North Vietnamese Army regulars. The NVA were dug into well concealed bunkers all along the base of the hill and masked by what we found later was almost impenetrable natural wall of bamboo several feet thick and running the length of the wood line. As the enemy returned fired we were only lucky to catch an occasional glimpse of the flashes from their automatic weapons and machine guns as well as smoke from rocket propelled grenades (RPG).

Our second platoon and the infantry line were facing a punishing fire from less than seventy-five yards away. One vehicle was already badly shot up, its three machine guns limp and abandoned. By then I already knew the vehicle commander was dead while the rest of its three-man crew were seriously wounded. The platoon sergeant, a veteran of two other wars, was also down with his arm torn off by a RPG. Our wounded troopers, along with a dozen other American casualties, were being dragged further back to an improvised landing zone for air evacuation. To my right, I could see the young major commanding the task force—white as a sheet from a shattered shoulder—as he coolly coordinated by radio our counter attack with the artillery support and air strikes. However, despite his wounds and all hell breaking loose, he calmly paused long enough

to order my platoon move on line with his other units to lay a base of machine gun fire for the assault. Later that major would be awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his extraordinary gallantry and his second Purple Heart for a career-ending wound.

Even today, I still shudder when I think of that moment. Of our trying to smash our way through that solid wall of bamboo that would slow our vehicles to such a crawl they would be easy pickings for any close in fighting with a dug in enemy. But it was also obvious we'd needed reinforcements. Radio chatter quickly confirmed that more troops were on their way by helicopter.

By now everyone has seen on television what a helicopter infantry assault looks like. They are an impressive maneuver of coordination that include picking the right landing zone (LZ), securing it, coordinating colored smoke to assure that the pilots set down at the right moment but most of all in the right place. That day it was particularly true since this was going to be a "Hot LZ"—with enemy fire grazing across the ground as those brave kids stepped into the middle of our fight.

But there is always the human factor in any plan. What could the planners expect from the Army pilots? Unlike the Navy, Air Force and Marines aviators—the Army did not demand that its flyers be college educated or even commissioned officers. Most Army flyers were Warrant Officers with more high school in them than military experience. Those young pilots always reminded me of every eager teenager who built and drove the fastest hot rod. And they flew that way, believing they were as bullet proof in their choppers and flew as if they were screaming down a two mile straightaway at 110 miles an hour in a souped up Model A.

After a half hour of intense firing, I could hear the growing sound of "whumping" as chopper blades bit the damp air to maintain minimum attitude. The plan was simple; each "Eagle Flight" of six choppers would land behind us, dump their load of seven or eight infantrymen, and then as a platoon of about 45 GIs, they would move up from our rear for added reinforcements. The plan included three consecutive landings giving us an entire infantry company for the planned assault. Red smoke would signify where the actual LZ was located.

At least this time, it started right. Over the radio the lead chopper in the first wave confirmed the red smoke signal. But suddenly the wind changed direction and a red mist drifted passed us and settled between our front line and the fortified North Vietnamese position. Our enemy knew our helicopter landing tactics and more red smoke appeared, this time from a smoke grenade tossed out by the NVA. In all the confusion, there just wasn't time to warn the lead pilot to abort, as his helicopter glided into a hover only a few feet off the ground about half way between our lines and the NVA firing positions. As our firing eased up to make sure we didn't hit any "friendlies" as our troops exited the choppers—the enemy fire just became even more ferocious.

It had all happened too quickly but then the lead pilot realized what was at stake. He knew instantly that his other five companion pilots were following him into a withering crossfire between our cavalry infantry team and NVA hidden behind automatic weapons in the jungle at the base of the hill.

That lead pilot had two options.

He knew that once his GI cargo was gone he could probably get away and go back for more troops. Mission accomplished. But he also realized if he did, he was condemning those eight hapless infantrymen he had brought in to be trapped in an open rice paddy with little prospect for

escape. By staying where he was, he could serve as a shield thus giving them some cover to withdraw back to our position while his two door gunners covered their retreat.

In the midst of all this madness, NVA rounds just continued to pound into his helicopter as he bravely continued to hover. And finally with his engine seemingly ready to stall out, his battered craft finally settled into two feet of paddy water. His blades were still turning as all the infantry were now spilling out of all the other helicopters and withdrawing to some safety of our firing line. And still that lead helicopter stayed put, with his engine now smoking but blades still turning as bullets kept beating into his aircraft.

“What the hell is he doing?” I screamed to myself.

Then I realized that he was staying put not only to protect those GIs but was going to continue to shield the other choppers landed behind him until they were back in the air. The enemy fire only intensified as the other helicopters slowly lifted off the ground to escape this lethal trap.

And finally, with all the other choppers away, the lead chopper finally began its wobble into the air. Smoking and unsteady at first, it slowly gained speed and enough altitude until it was finally able to limp directly over the NVA position, with the door gunners still returning fire. Finally he was high in the sky, still smoking but heading east.

Even in all the confusion, I still had enough sense to look up for just a moment to catch a glimpse of him because I realized I had seen real battlefield bravery.

How long did this pilot and his crew take that unbelievable punishment to protect their passengers and those other birds? Maybe it took two or three minutes. I don't know. It seemed like an eternity but in battle your whole sense of time seemed (as it does now) like slow motion. That is what makes my memory of his bravery still so vivid. Maybe he was there for only a minute but with the intensity of fire they were taking it was clear that pilot had made a conscious decision to risk his life and the lives of his crew to save so many others.

Did he make it? I have no idea, but a Thanksgiving never goes by that I don't think of him and ask God to bless that “sixty second hero” wherever he is.

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