

Michelin Plantation

by [Tony Lazzarini](#)

The Michelin Plantation made up part of an area called the “Iron Triangle”. Mechanized units were constantly running in to tank traps or over powerful mines. Boobie traps infested the area with the intent to wound rather than kill. The V.C. understood by injuring someone, another person would have to see after him, eliminating one other person from combat. They also knew that a helicopter would probably show up soon to evacuate the wounded. If he played the “wait and see” game, he may be able to make a big score for the day.

I was flying in Little Bear 714 after the loss of 626. We had been ferrying replacement troops and dropping off mail most the day. One of those “ash and trash” missions. Darkness would soon prevail and I was looking forward to some hot chow. Flying all day meant someone handed you a can of C-rations and you ate it in the air. With no doors to block the wind, getting food to your mouth could prove to be quite an undertaking. The “Chicken soup with noodles” I had ended up with was the most challenging. It’s not so bad that it was cold, but most of the noodles were carried off by the turbulence off the passing air before I could get them into my mouth. I had gazed at them hungrily as they dangled off the barrel of my machine gun.

Lt. Zelsman had proven to be an excellent flyer. He was the A/C. I had long forgiven him for the “barrel in the mud” incident. The crew chief from 626, Jerry Spurling, was sitting on the opposite side of the ship manning the other machine gun.

We heard the call about fifteen minutes from base. An APC (Armored personnel carrier) had run over a mine in the Michelin Plantation and needed evacuation of the seriously wounded personnel. They neglected to mention the four dead GIs. We were the closest to their location so the Lt. took the call. We had been flying at our usual 1500-foot altitude but dropped down just above the tree tops and hustled to the coordinates provided by the unfortunate crew. Flying 120 knots a few feet above the treetops never gave the enemy a chance to draw a bead on us. He could hear us coming but it was hard to distinguish from what direction. If we happen to pass over him, at that speed he could not get his weapon aimed at us in time to get off a shot. The pick up point was easy to spot. There was a column of smoke coming from the still burning APC. To make things more interesting, ammo inside of it was starting to explode. The grunts had tried to clear a zone for us by blowing up obstructing trees with C-4 and grenades. It would be tight getting in and even tighter getting out. They all looked to be in shock when

we squeezed our way down to land. Two guys toting a body wrapped in a poncho headed for the ship. "Load only the seriously wounded first," came the order from the Lt. "We'll pick up the dead on our last run."

I got out of the ship and passed this info to the guys. They had a dull, blank look on their face with eyes that could see but not comprehend. We got the wounded and a few others on board for a total of one half dozen.

With not a lot of room to spare, the Lt. pulled pitch and swung the ship around. We got a little speed up then tried to clear the trees. No way. Not enough room. He asked me to watch the tail rotor as we backed up to get a longer run. I told him to stop when leaves started to depart the closest branch. He brought on the power and we tried to make another run. The trees kept getting closer when he pulled back on the stick to abort just as the main rotor blades started to hack away at their tops. We sat back down on the ground. "Were too heavy" he shouted over my headset, "We'll have to unload a couple". Nothing I ever said was harder than telling these guys some would have to get off. They had already been through more than most people would ever be. It would be getting dark soon. By now every V.C. in the area would know what was going on. A couple of the guys got off. I stopped one and looked into his eyes and yelled over the noise of the desperately spinning rotor blades, "We'll be back!"

This time Lt. Zelsman didn't ask me to watch the rear, he just backed up the Huey until we could feel it shake from all the foliage it was chopping up behind us. He had a genuine 1300 horsepower Pratt and Whitney turbine engine at his control and he planned to use every last bit of it. This had to be the time. He was either going to clear the woods or park us in them. He put the nose down and made the assault. I think it was at this moment I told myself I would never refer to the pilots as "bus drivers" again. The rotor blades cried in agony and I could feel the ship strain as it struggled to lift. I was ecstatic to see the skids scrape the treetops as he rushed to get to the medical tent with our precious cargo.

Twice more we would make the trip out and back. The last to pick up the dead. By the time we got back to our own mess hall, chow had ended. Flight operations had informed them a ship would be coming in late and to hold some food for us. Jerry and I took hot water and soap to wash the blood off the inside of 714. Liver is what was for dinner that night. We both passed and headed over to the EM club to drink as much beer as possible. Tomorrow would be another day.

From my book on the Vietnam War-Highest Traditions