

Purple Heart Day, March 16, 1967

By: [Charlie Ostick](#)

“H” hour. A US Infantry company makes a lightning quick airmobile assault in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. They are flying out of Plei Djereng, a forward refueling base of the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division west of Pleiku. They are chasing the NVA 32<sup>nd</sup> Le Loy Division.

I’m the flight leader of a 16 helicopter UH-1H assault and I’m on my second tour in Vietnam. Because I’m on my 2<sup>nd</sup> tour, I often get to be the flight leader. On this day I’m flying number 1 bird in the assault. We’re flying into a large landing zone – called an LZ – west of the airfield at Plei Djereng. The first lift of four UH-1H Hueys goes into the north end of the LZ. We get 16 in and 16 out with no ground fire.

This is what it sounded like on the flight leader’s radio on that first assault.

“Red Leader, this is Ironman, last round red, over”.

“This is Red Leader, I see red smoke, thanks, out”.

“Gambler Gun, this is Red Leader, send ‘em in, over”.

“This is Gambler Gun, Wilco, out”.

On the radio as an air assault operation is conducted; Ironman is the artillery, red smoke indicates that that was the last round of artillery fired in this prep on the landing zone, Red Leader is the leader of the UH-1H’s – the troop lift, and Gambler Gun is leader of the UH-1B gunships escorting the assault. The artillery preps the LZ by firing into and all around the edges and just as the Huey’s are landing the gunships come in and spray the tree lines with machine guns and rockets. Just as you approach the LZ and are committed to land all of the smoke, noise of the prep and chatter of your own door gunners makes for an exciting moment.

The first lift has already has gone in and now the second lift is preparing to come back into the same LZ. We had gone back to Plei Djereng to pick up another load of Infantry and this time there is no prep of the landing zone because there are friendlies on the ground. The friendlies had not made any contact with the NVA yet. So, I am approaching the landing zone and landing 4 Hueys into the other end of this rather large landing zone.

As I touch down on the heels of the chopper and I roll it forward onto the skids, up pops an NVA soldier in a trench directly in front of us and he fires at the chopper – I don’t know how many rounds. A bullet comes through the windshield and goes into the dead center of my helmet right between my eyes. I was turning my head to holler at the crew chief and the door gunner as the shot was fired and that motion causes the bullet to come out of the helmet right over my ear. It goes into the circuit panel up above our heads and starts an electrical fire. The bullet must have also hit the circuits controlling the engine and the rotor tachometers because they die. The tachometers indicate that the engine is dead and that the rotors are not turning. My copilot, George Foursome, thought that the

engine had died but we could still hear it running and I said, “It’s not dead, it’s not dead. Pull us out of here.” My head falls onto my chest and I raise my visor. As you know from those who have seen them, head wounds bleed a lot. I had blood all down my face and onto my chest so George thought I was dead. Thank goodness he wasn’t dead too because he pulled us out of there flew us to the pick up zone. En route to the PZ, I pull out one of the big Army first-aid bandages and apply it to my head.

There the first medic that saw me thought I was in extreme pain and he gave me some morphine. That’s the last time I was awake for the next 8 hours. Later I recall talking to the surgeon at Pleiku who had initially treated me and he just happened to be a cosmetic surgeon. Instead of the normal 8 or 10 “Frankenstein” stitches that a surgeon would put in my head, he put 51 stitches in. You can hardly see the area where that bullet went through and out over my ear. It only glanced off of my skull. I would say that I have a hard head. The Army sends me to the 18<sup>th</sup> Evac. Hospital in Qui Nhon down on the coast. I stayed there over the weekend before I came back to up to Camp Enari, which is the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division base camp near Dragon Mountain, at that time and started additional duties since I couldn’t fly anymore for awhile. I was grounded for an indefinite period because of vision in my right eye. They had me doing things like Club Officer, and Mess Officer before the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade of the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division asked for me to come up and be their Brigade Aviation Officer at Dak To.

As a side story to this Purple Heart Day. One of the Infantry soldiers that jumped out of my chopper right after I was fired on or when I was fired on charged the trench where the NVA were. He fired full automatic down the trench killing four NVA soldiers and basically saved the day for the Infantry and us pilots. I believe he was put in for a Silver Star – he certainly deserved it. He probably saved our lives that day.



