WRECKAGE OF DREAMS

by Brian Lambie

Brian Lambie in 1968

CHAPTER ONE

THE DREAM

As a small child I remember watching a television sign off that recited the romantic poem about flying by a World War II pilot Gillespie Magee of the 412 squadron, RCAF. I had no idea who he was, but like many young dreamers, I was captivated!

High Flight

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds - and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of - wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there

I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air.
Up, up the long delirious, burning blue,
I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace
Where never lark, or even eagle flew -
And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high untresspassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand and touched the face of God.

It was the kind of stuff that caused goose bumps and crept into my dreams. A lasting impression was made – a seed was planted.

My first time in the air was on a commercial flight to basic training in Louisiana. Two months later I was in a military flight school. How ironic it was and strangely how lucky I felt. Strange because for an 18 year old American youth in 1967, anything military meant Vietnam. This was before the "lottery draft". For most young men at the time, it was a forgone conclusion. You would be drafted and sent to Vietnam and very likely as a "grunt" (infantryman). For me, there was no prospect of postponing an ominous event. It was simple. I joined or I would be drafted. Long before I realized it, I became part of the cannon fodder for years of painful social unrest.

Since I had been a cocky 17-year-old, the war didn't frighten me. It must have been that youthful view of life. Even though you know about death, you behave as if life will never end. The danger seems to take a back seat to style.

Being resigned to going in the military one way or another, I wanted to have some say in what I would be doing. When the time came, I knew that by joining the military I could maintain some control of my fate. It wasn't long before that childhood dream had me walking into the Army recruiter's office. Walking through the steamy jungles of Southeast Asia was not what I had in mind. I wanted to fly!

The room was large, dimly lit. The recruiter’s enthusiasm nearly matched mine. He explained that there was a chance of getting into helicopter flight school without a college degree. However, it was not based solely on desire. Even at a time with a great demand for "warm bodies", there were necessary requirements and tests to pass. Among other things, your aptitude, spatial perception, eyesight, height, weight, and even the full motion of all digits and limbs were tested and measured. All the results must meet strict standards before you are accepted.

Obviously, not everyone made the cut. Once the papers were signed though, you were in. If you washed out anywhere along the line, you didn't just go home. You became a "grunt", like it or not.

Next, I faced the challenge of going through infantry basic training. Not only did I need to accomplish basic training, I had to pass a rigorous flight physical before being allowed into flight school. A few hopefuls were cut at this point and did things I'm sure they hadn't planned on doing.

The stakes were high but I had my dream.

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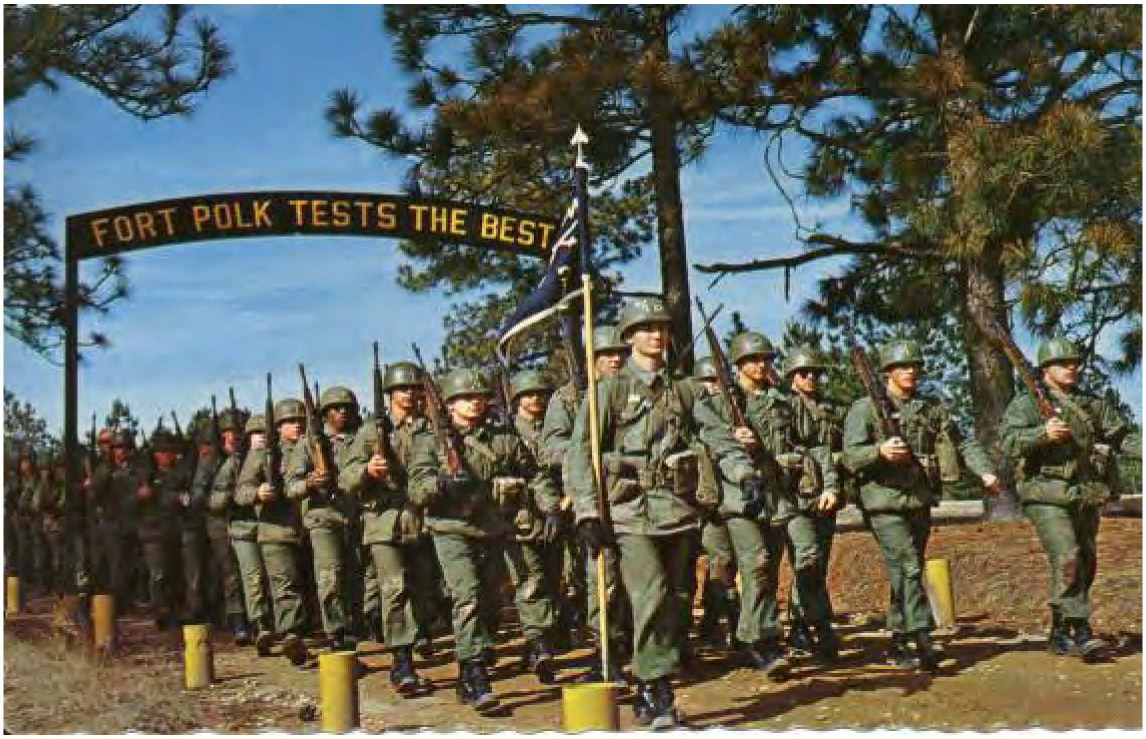
FORT POLK TESTS THE BEST

Basic training is about three things; fighting skill, teamwork and discipline. The incessant physical conditioning, weapons training and tactics make you a potentially effective fighter. The unifying process comes in subtle ways however. Shaved heads, identical uniforms, formations, eating sleeping and training together, all served to meld complete strangers into teams. It is quite remarkable how fast it occurs.

The theory is that discipline makes possible, the quick and efficient use of teams in life and death situations (battle for one). You learn that if each man acts independently in battle, nothing can be accomplished except making you and others vulnerable.

The benefit to the individual is hard to see at first, but you do become more confident and effective. Eventually, you begin to think you really know something!

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Flight school was a concentrated 9 months of full time training. From 4:45 A.M. to 10 P.M. your days were filled. The man responsible for your daily ration of harassment was called the TAC Officer (Tactical Officer). He didn't seem to know the nation needed lots and lots of pilots. He was lurking in every dark corner looking for ways to "eliminate" you from the program. Elimination was the common term for the abrupt cut that resulted in being reassigned to an infantry company. I once saw a man standing in front of me in formation eliminated because he had forgotten to put on his belt!

If the TAC didn't get you, there were other places you could fail and be eliminated. The various academic classes in weather, aerodynamics, maintenance, navigation and a myriad of other fields were demanding and required. To succeed was to walk on a razor edge, cold and wickedly sharp.

I can recall phone conversations with my parents during this time. As I would accomplish one stage of my training I'd report, "Well, I made it this far but the next step is tougher and I just don't know if I'll make it!"

Oh yes, there was the flying! A number of Candidates, as we were then disdainfully called by the cadre, didn't accomplish the first hurdle. Learning to hover a helicopter within the first 30 hours of flight instruction is not an easy thing to do! Every time I see some Hollywood hero jump into a helicopter and fly away flawlessly, I have to laugh. Do not attempt this at home! I assure you that you will experience every pilot's worst nightmare. Crash, burn and die!

If and when you did hover, the tradition was to sew a set of wings on your hat. The last one to hover in each flight had to sew theirs on upside down. Even these people felt a great sense of accomplishment.

Those still remaining in the program at that point had survived a very severe selection process. There was little gray area here and once you had learned to hover and control a helicopter to that degree, you realized you could really fly! Not only did you feel you really knew something, you began to feel invincible!

Of course that was before you realized you had to learn how to land a helicopter without power from 500 feet (autorotation). Also, you had to do high-speed (100 knots) low level (from 50 feet) autorotations, hovering autorotations, and long complicated cross-country flights at night. You had to make landings on pinnacles, in confined areas, and fly in tight formations. You learned to land on hillsides, do sling loading, fire remote control rockets and machine guns while flying. Even more challenging, you had to fly under a hood with reference only to the instruments and make precise takeoffs, landings, and traffic patterns.

At each stage of training you took a "check ride" with a pilot from a special unit to assess your proficiency. Of course failure meant elimination. After the hover was mastered, 200 hours of air flight training lay ahead. This combined with academics, survival and military readiness training could easily make some people crack under the strain.

I realized early on that all the pressure and applied stress is exactly what was intended. I suspect that others who succeeded understood as well. If you could not take this level of stress, you would be very vulnerable in combat and perhaps put a lot of other people at risk.

My way of coping was to make a game of it and not let them get my goat. This effectively eliminated the trap of self-pity. For me, it was not about ego or personality or pride. It was a game in which certain things, step by step, had to be accomplished. To the degree it was useful, I was detached.

Many Candidates were weeded out through this process. Those remaining had a strong positive reinforcement that they did really know something.

After almost a year of intense training, hazing and success, a day finally came that proved significant. That day was when they pinned a set of silver wings on my chest and bars on my shoulders.

I had succeeded in accomplishing a continuous series of steps and had not slipped, tripped or been eliminated. The threat was constantly there, but had easily been avoided. In fact, I was an excellent pilot and loved it! I was exhilarated! I was a highly trained and skilled 19-year-old.

Next stop - Vietnam.

CHAPTER TWO

OUT OF THIS WORLD

Everything was different in Vietnam. When the door opened to that strange sweet smelling air, so warm and humid, I knew the game playing was over. It was not a pleasant sweetness but one that almost gagged me. I didn't know if it was the strange atmosphere or fear.

The near complete blackness of the nights was surprising. The small primitive people had such weariness in their eyes. The rugged mountains were tightly cloaked in jungle. The harsh climate seemed to dare you to fly. Everything about the place was new and therefore unsettling but a nineteen-year-old with as much training and testosterone as I had did not fear anything - yet.

It dawned on me that this was why I needed every bit of confidence I had gained. Danger, fear and death are just words to an ambitious and youthful professional. I wonder now; "Could an older and more mature man do that job?" Maybe, but how can you match the fire of youth?

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The first words out of the mouth of a veteran pilot I was introduced to was, "Fresh meat!" That put a knot in my stomach. The cold and measuring eyes scanned my person. This was a man who saw life in a different way.

The first time I flew I felt like I was starting over again. There was new country to learn my way around in; new people to get to know; new techniques to learn. The breaking-in period was an eye opener. Maturity was measured by how many days were left on your "short-timers" calendar. You made friends and had acquaintances but almost everyone was on a different timetable. Each had the same mission though: to survive and return to the "world".

Now there was no room for mistakes. The days of training were over. You still learned every day but in Vietnam, elimination took on a new meaning.

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Slowly maps became familiar and a few faces had names. There was no place to spend much money so that was good! On the other hand, the water was not potable so you always drank pop or beer. There were lots of rats and they were bigger than cats so you never saw cats. There was no such thing as weekends because "Charlie" (or VC which is short for Victor Charlie which is jargon for Vietcong) was always ready to hit you when your guard was down.

There were mortar or rocket attacks almost every night. The flying was technically risky and demanding. Day in and day out you ran the risk of being shot and the only thing you could do was hang on to the controls and fly. It became a tense routine if that's possible. Some people couldn't take that kind of tension. Looking back on all the training, you realized nothing could simulate this.

The training was not enough for at least two men in my company who committed suicide. A few others had nervous breakdowns. Many used drugs or drank heavily. One of my friends went to the flight surgeon once and complained that he couldn't sleep. He was asked if he drank much and my friend sheepishly said, "No more than most". The doctor told him to get drunk before he went to bed and he would sleep better. There was no real release or escape.

Minuteman Hootches

CHAPTER THREE

THE BIG BLUE PLANE

The face in the picture drew me in. So much warmth and vitality in his smiling face. What would he have been like today? A doctor? A writer? A businessman? Hard working and good-humored I am sure of that much. I think he would have been a great family man and, if a father, full of love and warmth for his children. These were dreams unrealized because of a life far too short.

As my eyes widened to that inward reflection, I wondered why things had turned out the way they did. It could just as easily be me long since dead. This is the burden of one who remains. Survivor guilt.

I can hear his voice so clearly and after so many years as we waded in the surf of the South China Sea.

"Are you afraid of dying Brian?"
"I never really thought about it Angus. No, I guess not."
"I am."

South China Sea

The humid air and blazing sun baked us. Angus's comments dampened the conversation and made me uncomfortable. "Why was it so heavy on his mind?", I wondered. There was nothing more to say about it then.

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That exchange happened in the summer of 1968 while we were still rookie pilots in the 176th Assault Helicopter Company. Time off was good, but it gave you time to think about things like that and that wasn't so good.

Our company area sat on the southern perimeter of Chu Lai and right next to the ocean. The beach was outside of the barbed wire and watchtowers, but on days off, we would use the area to swim, surf and get sunburned. Oh ya, and drink beer.

That beach holds several indelible spots in my memory. Like the morning I flew over the shoreline on my way out for a mission.

Glancing down I noticed something odd out of the corner of my eye. Not sure what it was, but curious enough to quickly swing around, I found a sickening sight. It was the shape of a man with legs half bent and arms stiffly held out to the sides. The curious and sickening aspect was that he was very blue in color.

When we finally made sense out of what we were seeing, it became apparent that he was a drowning victim. Later, it was learned that he had been missing from a beach to our north a few days earlier.

Apparently caught in the riptide, he became a victim of the sea. This is the last thing you would expect to cause your undoing in the middle of a war, but death there came easily and in a multitude of ways.

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I had my own lesson about the undertow. Having been raised in Minnesota, I had little experience with such a phenomenon.

A friend, Al Cerrulo and I, on a rare day off, were swimming in the ocean and attempting to body surf in the six-foot waves. After about five or ten minutes of this, we noticed that the beach was alarmingly far away. "How had we gotten out so far?", I wondered.

Al Cerrulo in 1968

I ducked under the waves and attempted to touch the bottom to see how deep it was. As my toe touched, I found I was be dragged rapidly out to sea. I immediately surfaced and warned Al of the situation. We swam and yelled for help and swam some more, but no one heard our cries.

As exhaustion softened my will, I began to believe I would drown. I remember waves breaking over me as I passively looked up at the sun through several feet of water. I was choking on water and gasping for air when my friend said his legs were cramping and he didn't think he could make it. I told him I didn't know how much I could help him but to hold on to my hand and keep paddling.

After what seemed like hours of struggling for air and dog paddling, my foot touched the bottom again. This gave us a charge of adrenaline and we eventually made it to shore. We were so weak we couldn't stand. I had swallowed so much water that, as I crawled onto the sand, I began vomiting uncontrollably.

Even that traumatic event wasn't enough to stop us from using our only luxury, "the beach". We continued our swimming and frolicking at the beach until yet another remarkable morning finally ended my swimming in the South China Sea.

While making the usual swing along the beach on take-off from the company area, I saw hundreds upon hundreds of sharks swimming along and within mere feet of the shoreline.

For some reason they were drawn to the shallows to feed in huge numbers. This was before "Jaws" but this Minnesota boy was not stupid. I never swam there again.

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The ocean was the stage for many memorable events during my tour. One day I discovered a shark that swam on the surface of the water and was as big as the helicopter (48’). I later learned it was a basking shark. On a week long mission partnering with the navy, I picked up Marine Generals and Navy Admirals from the decks of aircraft carriers in high winds and 20 foot seas. Every day the big blue plane (the ocean) stood between me and the “world”.

The sea was analogous to the war, with its awesome power, smothering effect and total lack of discrimination. It was clear to see it was the life giver and taker and perhaps messenger. Angus seemed to know, when we were wading in her shallows, what his fate would be. He could do nothing about it but fear it.

"Are you afraid of dying Brian?"

A short time after that moment a strange sight appeared in the water in front of us. Winding its way through the water was a large submerged snake. No doubt about it, it was a snake. But I had never seen a snake under water and stared in fascination.

It began to swim right at us an appeared aggressive. Instinctively we backed away. Perhaps this was the same reaction distant ancestors had. Obviously, being ancestors they survived the encounter. We too escaped harm. Years later I realized that this was probably a very deadly creature. Sea snakes are one of the most poisonous varieties known.

Was our naïve dance with the serpent a sign of future danger? Do you believe in premonitions?

Welcome to the war!

CHAPTER FOUR

WAR STORIES

Every combat experienced person has war stories. The very nature of combat if extraordinary and wholly outside of most people's understanding. As you read, accept that you cannot fully relate, but your interest and willingness to listen is salve for the wounded minds.

The greatest fear of the combat veteran is that his words will seem trivial and his motive unclear. Of course that’s exactly what they are because words are not adequate and motives in a war are always unclear. Please bear with us.

I once flew 28 days in a row taking battle damage of one sort or another to my aircraft. Each time, when the skin of the aircraft was punctured by bullets, shrapnel or flak, the maintenance people would rivet a patch over the hole.

The aircraft I was assigned had been around much longer than I had and was literally covered with these patches. It was quite natural then that someone painted the name on her nose "Patches".

You tried to normalize things like this or risk going mad. I suppose you could say trying to normalize war was mad.

Eventually Patches was condemned as unsafe to fly and was cannibalized for parts.

My second bird was a more powerful H model (pictured above). These new improved Hueys had a turbine engine with greater horsepower (1100 HP). These new engines were installed in an otherwise unchanged D model helicopter. If you used all the available power you could literally twist the drive train. Great - one more thing to be concerned about.

That ship didn't last long. On one of my rare days off she was shot down and destroyed while being flown on a "Smokey" mission by another crew. On a Smokey mission, an apparatus was attached to the exhaust of the turbine engine that would inject oil into the super hot gases coming out producing a smoke screen for ground cover. On to another Huey.

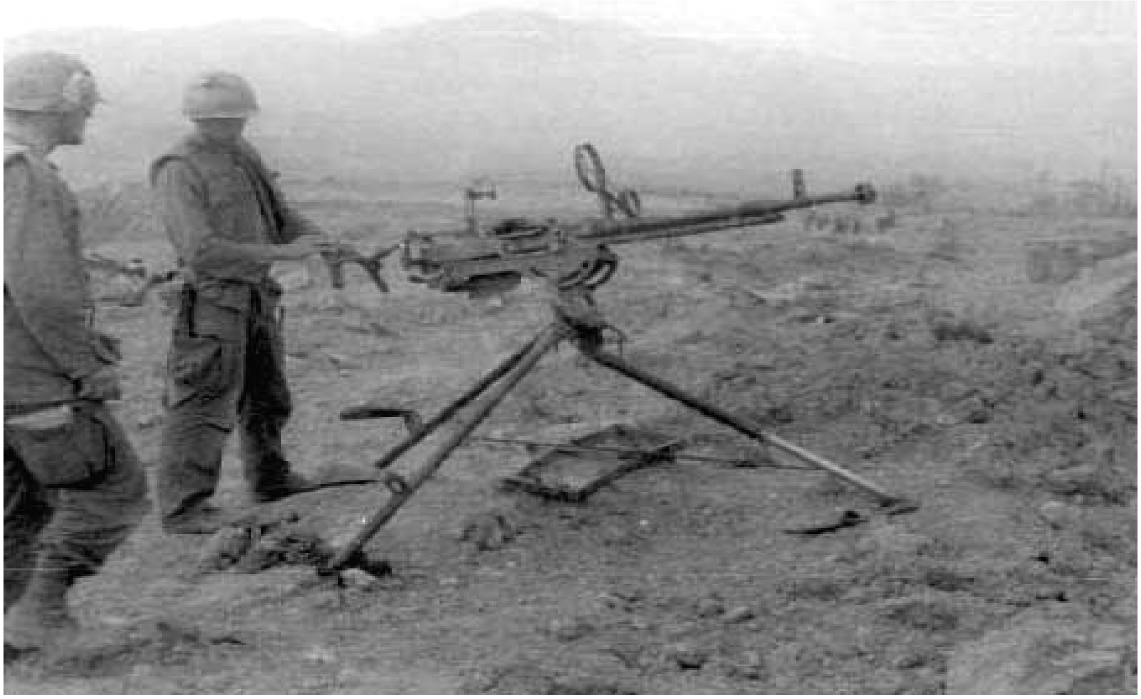
The sounds of war assaulted the nerves. The rumbling of distant B52 strikes, the thundering roar of the jets taking off, the deafening bangs of artillery guns, the thump of mortars impacting somewhere near, the occasional blast of incoming rockets, even the cascading rattle of rain on the tin roofs grew more and more agitating.

Some sounds were just irritating but some were frightening and all were more and more so as time passed.

As sounds go, no sound was ever more effective at raising primal fear in me then the sound of the Chicom 51 caliber machine gun. The slow pulsating rhythm of its firing was unmistakable and almost nauseating. Tracers as big as basketballs sailing by you at 3000 feet had a way of getting your attention! This was the most accurate and long range weapon a pilot faced.

Even the armor plating around the seats and strapped to our chests would not stop these bullets. Not only was this a large amount of lead to pass through your body but the things were designed to explode after impact with the force of a grenade.

After an encounter with one of these guns I would shake violently from the adrenaline surge in my blood. As I close my eyes now, over 35 years later, I can hear their distinctive sound and the hair stands up on the back of my neck!



51 cal. Chicom Machine Gun

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People came and people went all with different dates of arrival and departure. Some left feet first. Some never left.

It all seemed to numb your feelings. If you made friends with someone and they died, it was especially devastating. Because of that, you developed fewer friendships and became a little more distant.

If you expressed all the emotions a healthy person should, you could not function. You became unhealthy emotionally to survive.

There was no rear area, no safe place, and no refuge. It was just a constant grind of war. It is true that days or hours would pass in sure boredom but war comes in sudden unexpected doses. It is amazing how to some it became an addiction. Perhaps it was the regular doses of adrenaline.

I'm now convinced that everyone there became a little more insane each day. Guys often talked of things back in the "world". That term was universally understood to mean the United States. The American soldier literally felt he was out of this world and not in the good sense. It was more like being exiled.

It seemed that some insanity was necessary to survive. It was safer to be paranoid, homicidally violent and merciless. The war seemed to weed out the sane.

The longer I survived the more isolated and deluded I became. At some level I thought I was immortal. To consciously think such a thing would not stand up to reason, of course, and that could be dangerous. To function though, I needed that sense of immortality or I would have unraveled with self-doubt and fear. I would have lost my confidence and self-assured steadiness.

In a way, that "immortality complex" was a survival mechanism. But, like any mechanism, it was subject to break down if enough pressure was applied.

I had looked into the eyes of captured enemy soldiers, seen the odd expression on the faces of dead young G.I.'s and medivac'ed horribly mangled victims of land mines. Somehow I had managed to maintain a day to day existence. All these things had failed to penetrate my mental defenses because I kept them impersonal and distant. Of course, events of a personal nature could prove I wasn't invincible.

CHAPTER FIVE

CRACKING

On a “command and control” mission one day all hell broke loose. As a company of infantry slowly swept across a huge expanse of rice paddies, the tree line in front of them lit up like a string of Christmas tree lights.

Almost immediately I was radioed and asked to land and pick up a soldier that had just been shot in the head but was still alive. The troops were pinned down in the open and were under scathing fire from the tree line no more than 100 yards away.

My answer was a decisive "No". We called in artillery and air strikes and gave what little support our M60 machine guns could supply, but the battle raged on.

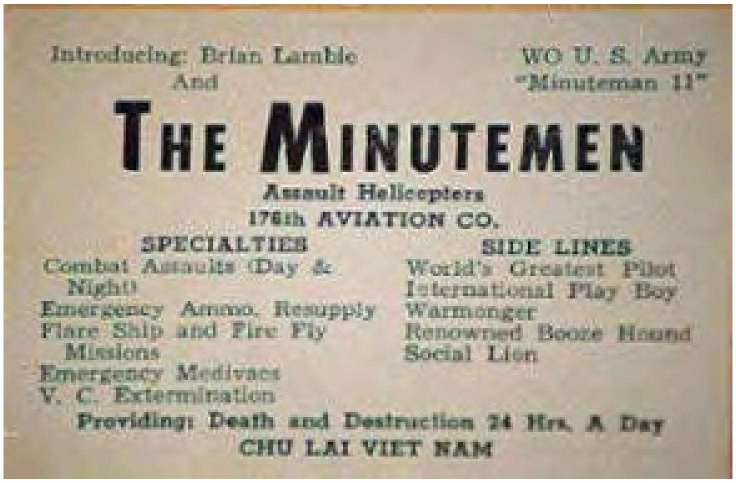
As I circled helplessly above, I thought about that soldier's mother. She didn't know it then but her baby was dying.

Oh God - I can't tell you what wretched feelings were spawned in those moments. I could not stop myself from picturing my mother and all her worst fears being realized.

Was I just afraid of dying myself or was it the correct decision? Which was the lesser evil? I was uncertain and seriously confused.

The soldier died but the guilt I feel won't. It will never be known if he would have lived had I gotten him out of there, but I will always wonder.

My invincible, immortal and untouchable self began to crumble.



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CHAPTER SIX

THE BIG "GOOD BYE"

Angus McAllister was a wonderful fun loving man from Biloxi, Mississippi. He had a loud and boisterous laugh but was warm and kind. I liked him immediately and we became very close friends in a very short time. In a place like that, if you did befriend someone, it was intense.

We would read each other's mail, share our most private thoughts and have the greatest times just talking. He was the kind of guy that would do anything for you. His pure unselfishness and grand lust for life burn in my memory!

Angus McAllister at right

After nine months in country we went on R & R to Hong Kong together and had a great time. We rode the rickshaws, employed our own tailor, ate in a real Chinese restaurant, visited the Peak, sailed on the ferry and made love to the women of this fabulous port city. It was like we craved living. We packed all the life we could into six days.

A few weeks after our R & R, he went to the flight leader without my knowledge and told him he wanted to take my mission that day. He argued that he had recently had a few days off and that I had flown many consecutive days. The Flight Leader was impressed and, deciding that this made no difference to the mission, granted his request.

Without realizing how, I had my first day off in quite a while. I slept in late and was one of the last to eat breakfast. Shortly before I was finished, I overheard a conversation in a hushed but serious tone about one of our birds being shot down. I thought I heard mention of my birds tail number. Without stopping I ran to operations fearing the worst.

It had been confirmed. The tail number of my aircraft had been spotted in the wreckage. In shocked disbelief I learned that Butler (Blackbird), the Copilot who slept next to me; Ford, my Crew Chief who had one week left in country; Bailey, my Door Gunner with eleven days left; and Angus McAllister, the Aircraft Commander and my best friend; were all dead!

There were no words only sobs. A black void and torturous emotions attacked my mind. Of course, this was dangerous. I was on the brink.

CHAPTER SEVEN

NUMB

In the weeks that followed, I was relegated to the “milk” runs. These were typical assignments for "short timers" but I was not content. Even my usual easy going exterior was stormy. After a new Aircraft Commander got shot up and I had too much to drink one night, I complained to the Flight Leader that "with my experience I should be flying those kinds of missions". After much insistence on my part, I got what I wanted. I should have heeded the old saying, “Be careful what you ask for”.

It was March 9th, 1969, two weeks after the death of all my closest friends. I was assigned a mission to re-supply and medivac' wounded from an infantry company that was surrounded by 3 regiments of North Vietnamese Regulars. The company was reduced to 42 men and had numerous dead and wounded. They were nearly out of ammunition and food.

I could have refused the mission like a number of others had leading up to that day, but I didn't and I'm not sure why. I remember sitting off by myself fidgeting and thinking about anything but the mission while the bird was being loaded.

The trapped company sat on a rise and the constant artillery and air strikes had blown all the surrounding trees away. I flew over the spot at high altitude and could see there was no cover. The men there kept well down in a ring of foxholes no more than 100 feet in diameter.

Did I see the danger? Did I really believe I would fly in and out of there untouched just like I had on over 150 missions before? I was letting my guard down but it didn’t seem to matter. Was my judgment impaired by my numbed feelings, that sense of immortality or a festering guilt? Was it that I just didn't care anymore? I honestly don't know. I do know that bravery didn't make the list. I guess I don't know what courage is anymore. There seemed to be nothing noble or righteous about it.

The only thing I can remember as motivation was a kind of nervousness and impatience to get on with it. It could be described as a kind of restless apathy.

By 9 o'clock in the morning I was descending to a battered spot on the ground. My approach was unmolested and there was no sign of movement.

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As I slowed to a hover the tension was at a maximum. No one moved from the foxholes to unload our supplies. It was obvious that the men on the ground expected the worst to happen.

Finally, after an embarrassingly long time, they realized that nothing had happened. All in a flurry, several men ran up and began unloading our cargo. At the same time some others brought up their wounded and dead to make their final trip out.

Still no gunfire! It all seemed surreal. Just to look at the surroundings and the faces of the men there, you expected a continuous raging battle to be going on, but not this.

The company commander came on the radio just as I began my takeoff. "Looks like all is clear...". His voice was interrupted by the greatest crescendo of automatic weapons fire I had ever heard!

It occurred to me, that this was the first time I could not tell the sound of my own guns from the barrage of enemy fire directed at us. It was a deafening roar! It seemed the farther we went, the more fire we took.

I kept glancing at the instruments waiting for something to go wrong.

Suddenly, an invisible hammer slammed me to the back of my seat. I was overcome with a feeling of complete and utter surprise! Not a bit of pain though. The pain circuit must have been overloaded.

All in a fragment of time, I was awed with a total and complete disbelief! My first thought was, "It's really happened!" At the same time, the dread of my eminent death struck me. I was absolutely positive I was going to die!

I noticed that my right hand had been knocked off the cyclic and I had no feeling in it. In fact, my arm was sticking straight up in the air. Also, I couldn't move my right leg. This was bad because to talk on the intercom I had to depress one of two buttons; either the one by my right hand or the one by my right foot.

The helicopter was climbing straight up in a dangerous attitude and all I could do was look at the Copilot who was busy tucking his head down. I know it was only seconds, but it seemed like forever until he finally looked up at me. He immediately resumed the tuck position. I couldn't believe it! He then took a double take and asked over the intercom "Are you hit?"

Of course he couldn't hear me but between lip reading, my frantic nodding and blood flying around the cockpit, he got the picture. With eyes as big as saucers, he grabbed the controls and began evasive action. It was obvious he was operating out of pure terror.

Habit had me cross checking the instruments even though I was certain that soon we would be going down. My mood was one of morbid awe. Shock was replacing fear. I felt like the witch of Oz. I was melting...

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To my surprise, nothing more happened. We climbed with almost self-destructive evasive action out of the din.

In a mental fog I changed the radio frequency and called the hospital to inform them of our situation and arrival time. I steadily lost blood and strength but remained conscious.

Miraculously, later inspection of the aircraft found only one bullet hole. This was the proverbial "one that had my name on it".

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I slid into a state of depression. For a long time I remained in this funk and I was slow in coming out of it. A great lesson was revealed to me for my trouble, however. I had come face to face with my own death.

I believe I came as close as I will ever come without passing on. That experience showed me the depth and value of my life. It showed me the difference between knowing life is valuable and really appreciating its value. Words are futile.

Think of it this way. We know if we loose something we value, often its worth is clarified by its loss. In death however, we have no opportunity for reflection. It's the kind of thing that can not be communicated from one to another. It is the most personal knowledge I can conceive of.

My tour in Vietnam lasted less than 10 months from May 30, 1968 to March 9, 1969. In that time I had flown 156 missions, 1067 hours of combat flight time and made somewhere between 4000 and 5000 take-offs and landings in Vietnam. At the end I was much more than 10 months older.

I had fallen far and hard but I was still alive and mostly whole. After a three-month recovery, I elected to go back to the beginning in Texas and become a flight instructor. I hadn't processed all I had learned at that point yet but I was well enough and young enough to go on.

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Since then I have experienced lingering after effects. For some time I was almost obsessed with survival. I couldn't be comfortable in a room unless I had my back to the wall and could see everything. I found it difficult to become very close to anyone. I had little emotional response to anything.

Soon after getting out of the military I had an overwhelming urge to get away from everything. I ended up on the north end of a huge lake in Ontario by myself for a couple of weeks. The loneliness was unbearable. That taught me that I needed others and that what I was trying to do was get away from myself.

Little by little I began to heal the hidden wounds.

Some ghosts still haunt me today. I still occasionally have disturbing dreams. I either dream of harrowing flights in Vietnam or have dreams where I'm being pursued and get shot repeatedly.

One of my losses was my love of flying. I once loved it so dearly and was so good at it. That part of me died. Too much wreckage lies between where I am now and that little boy dreaming about soaring though the clouds. That dream lies in wreckage with my immortal self never to rise again.

I now have an intimate awareness of what my death means and therefore what my life means.

I keep a picture of Angus around where I can see it every day. I can't forget the man who took my place.