

Three Hundred and Sixty Five Days

With Letters to Home

By

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INTRODUCTION

What follows is a narrative of my personal experience as a helicopter pilot serving in the U.S. Army in the Republic of South Vietnam during the years 1968-1969, and portions of my army flight training experiences prior to my combat duty service in Vietnam. It is a recollection of what I experienced then, and can recall now, some thirty five years later. History books tell the facts concerning the battles and politics of that war, what led up to it, how it was won or lost, and how it ended. My perspective, described herein, is much more limited and personal. It is my story, and to a limited degree, a story of others who shared the three hundred and sixty five day tour of duty with me.

This version of my memoir has excerpts taken from personal letters I wrote to my family during this period.

MY ARRIVAL

The date was May 30, 1968. It had been a very long flight from McCord Air Force Base in Seattle, Washington to Cam Rahn Bay Air Force Base in South Vietnam. I was 21 years old, three weeks past my graduation from the United States Army Aviation School at Fort Rucker, Alabama. The moment that I stepped off that airplane I was the newest arrival amongst the steady stream of mostly young men going to Vietnam to join the occupational army consisting of some 500,000 Americans. I was scared, and very lonely.

Almost to the day, three years earlier, I had walked down the isle at La Jolla High School in San Diego, California to receive my diploma. My life had undergone some major changes during those past three years; it would be changed more during the next.

COLLEGE

1965 was near the end of the period which America stood proud after the Second World War. During the preceding 20 years (1945-1965) the American

people looked upon their country as being beyond reproach...an America that had not yet lost a war. All of this would change. The nation was just beginning to pass into a new era. President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated only two years earlier, and his brother Bobby, along with Martin Luther King, would soon also die by assassin's guns. The Cold War was at its midpoint. America was confronting communism throughout the world.

What had started in Vietnam as advisory assistance had escalated into a major military commitment. President Lyndon Johnson found himself being drawn ever deeper into a conflict on the other side of the world. Many young Americans were being told to serve their country as their fathers had only a few years before in the Korean and Second World Wars. The military buildup required a draft that soon was inducting thirty thousand young men a month to fulfill the needs of the ever growing manpower requirements of the Vietnam conflict.

As the escalation of the war in Vietnam was taking place I graduated from high school and went off to college.

I went off to college for the wrong reasons. After three semesters I wanted to enlist in the armed forces--this despite much well intended advice to the contrary from many friends, and my family. I had made the first major decision of my life.

Aviation had always been of interest to me. As a youngster I built my share of model airplanes, and loved to read of the exploits of aerial combat during the World Wars. When I began to seriously consider joining the military I naturally gravitated to the possibility of becoming a pilot. Lacking a college degree, my best chance of becoming one was through the army's Warrant Officer Helicopter Flight Training Program. I started the application process at the local army recruiting station in Spokane, Washington where I was attending Whitworth College.

I left college on a cold winter day in January of 1967. On March 27 of that year I was inducted into the U.S. Army at Oakland, California. I was two weeks short of my twentieth birthday. The Army soon had me on a plane with three other helicopter heroes to be, headed to Fort Polk, Louisiana. We had orders to attend Army Helicopter Flight School at the completion of basic training.

BASIC TRAINING

Basic training is an experience one never forgets. I was a middle class white boy who was used to a middle class lifestyle. In military basic training, one is stripped of his identity and given a new one. The process takes about eight to ten weeks. You get a shaved head and surrender all civilian clothing. Your mind is tested for aptitude and your body poked with needles. You are given your military serial number and told to memorize it. We were given army underwear, army pants, shirts, boots, a jacket, a hat and a duffel bag to put it all in. We were then loaded into a large truck and transported, like cattle, to our basic training company area. It was here where we were introduced to the drill sergeants. The drill sergeants were not nice people. We were made to stand at attention while they screamed at us. The next three hours were a succession of pushups and running. We had to dump the contents of our duffel bags into a pile so that the drill sergeants could rummage through, looking for anything not issued to us. We were assigned a barracks and bed. We were issued sheets and blankets. It was late that night before I found myself in that bed. We were awakened many times and told to fall into formation. The next day started very early. Welcome to basic training Pvt. Kearns.

There is no privacy in basic training. You eat, sleep, and eliminate in the presence of others. I learned how to act and look like a soldier. I was taught the Military Code of Conduct and learned how powerless I was, and what I could expect should I stray from those rules. I learned how to march, whom, and how to salute, to shoot and clean a rifle, how to crawl as if my life would depend on it, and how to put on a gas mask while in a gas chamber filled with C2 tear gas. I learned how to kill someone; in fact, I was pushed to the point where I learned that I was capable of killing someone. All of this was basic training. At the completion of basic training I was put on an army bus with other helicopter want to be pilots and shipped to Ft. Wolters, Texas, the home of The United States Army Primary Helicopter Flight School. I was sure the hard part was over. Now the fun would start.

FLIGHT SCHOOL

The Vietnam War, with its massive helicopter fleet, required a lot of pilots to fly them. Since the army did not have a large enough pool of helicopter pilots to fulfill the requirements demanded by the war in Vietnam, it had to train many new ones. Over 40,000 pilots were trained during the course of the Vietnam Conflict. Most applicants for helicopter pilot training program were much like me: young,

capable enough to learn to fly and adventurous enough to be willing to fly helicopters in Vietnam. All of us shared the desire for change and adventure. Not many of us, I think, really knew what we were getting into. Whatever our motivations, our lives would never be the same again.

The majority of army student helicopter pilots went through flight school as warrant officer candidates (WOCs). Upon graduation WOCs received the rank of Warrant Officer (WO1) along with their Army Aviator Wings. Alongside the WOCs were a smaller number of commissioned officers (RLOs, real live officers) who went through the same flight and academic training for their wings. We would all serve together after graduation.

Fort Wolters was located in Mineral Wells, Texas. It was there that primary flight training was conducted: first by one month of preflight training, followed by four months of primary flight instruction. Upon graduation from Fort Wolters the graduates were sent to Fort Rucker, Alabama for another four months of advanced flight and ground instruction. It was at Rucker where we were trained to fly instruments, received a basic checkout in the Bell UH-1 helicopter "Huey", and underwent advanced tactical training. Upon graduation from Fort Rucker the new pilots received orders for their first assignment as army aviators. Immediately upon graduation, most were given orders to report to Vietnam within a matter of a few weeks.

Instead of the Drill Sergeants of basic, we had a new demon to contend with: the TAC Officer. I remember some of their names to this day: men like CW2 Newhauser and CW2 Duer. The TAC was himself a warrant officer who had served a tour in Vietnam as a pilot. They knew what was waiting for us as army helicopter pilots in Vietnam and they intended to see that nobody went over there who was not fit to do so.

Constant harassment and pressure were applied to us. If a WOC could not deal with harassment of the sort handed out in flight school what would he do in a far more stressful and dangerous situation such as Vietnam?

Picture, if you will, a young warrant officer candidate standing at attention with a TAC about one inch from the tip of his nose. The dialog would go something like this:

TAC: "Candy...date. Do you know you have a bomb in your boot?"

WOC: "Sir, Candidate Kearns, No **Sir!**"

TAC: "Is that a fuse in your boot...Candy...date?"

WOC: Looking at a stray boot lace not tucked away in a military manner, "Sir, Candidate Kearns, no **Sir**, that is my boot lace sir!"

TAC: "Candy...date Kearns, if I light that fuse would your boot blow up?"

WOC: "Sir Candidate Kearns, no **Sir!**"

TAC: "Candy...date Kearns. Are you a dhu...d?"

WOC: "Sir, Candidate Kearns, no **Sir**. I'm not a dud, **Sir!**"

TAC: "Candy...date dhu...d, I don't think you are going to make it through this program!"

WOC: "**Sir**, Candidate Kearns, No **Sir!** uh, I mean, Yes **Sir!** I intend to make it through this program, **Sir!**"

TAC: "Candy...date, I think you are a scum ...bag."

WOC: with lips quivering, "**Sir**, Candidate Kearns, **Sir**, I'm not a scum bag, **SIR!**"

TAC: "Candy...date, are you going to be a he...row?"

WOC: "**Sir**, Candidate Kearns, **Sir**, Yes **Sir**, uh no **Sir**, I mean, I don't know if I want to be a hero, **Sir**."

TAC: "Candy...date, you better pull your head out of your ass and get with the program!"

At this point the TAC would move on to his next victim. The process was ongoing.

The first month at Wolters was spent in the classrooms, the parade field, and our barracks. Our living areas had to be kept in a spotless and orderly condition. The latrines were kept spotless, the hallways waxed, and our personal areas displayed to exacting standards. When the TACs inspected our barracks and found anything not up to their standards we were issued demerits. Too many demerits meant fewer privileges, and often extra hardship--hardship such as practicing close order drill, or extra physical training during what could have been free time.

The academic stress was considerable. If you failed a written examination you would retake it after a thorough review of the subject matter. If you failed it a second time, you were out of the program. Map reading was my wakeup call. I had to retake no other written exams.

Upon successful completion of the first month flight training began.

Three different helicopter trainers were used at Fort Wolters: Bell OH-13, Hughes TH-55, and the Hiller OH-23D. I was assigned to an OH-23D training flight. We were also assigned our flight instructors.

An early flight lesson would go like this: The small noisy helicopter would be hovering in a large field. The instructor would be on the controls flying it while I sat next to him not knowing what was to come next.

Instructor: "OK Kearns, put your feet on the pedals and keep the nose straight. Remember the nose will move in the direction you push, right pedal right turn. Left pedal left turn. That a boy. Now notice when I add power the nose turns to the right, unless you add left pedal. If I reduce power, you must add right pedal. That a boy, you are doing well."

"Now, hold on to the collective stick with your left hand and try to keep it positioned so that we maintain a steady height of three feet above the ground. Up collective, up we go. Down collective and down we go. Damn it! Keep that nose straight when you make power changes with the collective! Watch the height! Don't hit the ground! Up! Up! Keep that damn nose straight!"

"Keep an eye on the RPM! If you move the collective you need to adjust the throttle."

"OK, now let's try the cyclic stick with your right hand. Remember, the helicopter will go in the direction you push the cyclic. Left cyclic, you go left. Right, you go to the right. Forward, forward. Aft, you guessed it, aft."

OK, any questions? You got it. Watch it, not so much control input!"

At this point the helicopter would begin to drift from its position, slowly at first, but progressively faster and more erratically...in every directional axis: nose up, nose down, nose left, nose right, sideways left, sideways right, up and down. The harder I tried the more uncontrollable and terrifying it became. Just prior to crashing, the instructor would grab the controls and in about 1/2 second have the machine completely under control again, as if by the hands of God himself.

"OK Kearns, let's try it again. You have the controls..."

Even the long awaited flight training was tougher than I had expected.

My relationship with my instructor was not helping me much. His style of verbal abuse, while teaching, was not helping me to learn how to fly. It was nearing time to solo and I was not going to be ready. If you failed to solo within the apportioned period of time you could find yourself terminated from the program, or in some cases sent back to the following class—not a move of distinction.

I gave serious thought to giving it all up and resigning. I approached my commanding officer and expressed my frustration. We had a long talk behind closed doors where he was able to convince me to stick it out. He told me to consider asking for a different flight instructor. He also told me that if I left flight training due to my own volition I could expect to be wading in a Vietnamese rice paddy very soon.

My new instructor (Mr. Saunders) knew how to teach without intimidating. I began to relax more and develop the early skills needed to solo.

Learning a difficult task such as flying a helicopter is accomplished in a series of steps. Motor skills are developed and layered upon each other. Along with the motor skill development came increasing self confidence.

I had soloed, but I was progressing slowly with my flight training. I needed to take the next step, that step came for me on a solo flight.

Throughout the training zone, in and around Fort Wolters, were confined landing areas. Some of these areas were on flat land surrounded by trees and brush. Others were located on hill tops and as such called pinnacles. All were marked by old automobile tires painted white, yellow, or red. These color distinctions were used to classify in regards to difficulty of use. Normally students on solo flights were restricted to white tire areas.

I was flying about on a solo flight in my OH-23, trying to pick suitable white tire areas to practice with. As long as I could make a shallow approach I felt little intimidation. While practicing with my instructor I had been having trouble with my rate of closure since I feared that approaching too slow would result in falling out of the sky. There was something here that I was missing and my confidence level was suffering for it.

While cruising above a narrow Texas road I spotted a large hill. I banked to fly over it and spotted a red tire on its top. A few more orbits and I began to feel an uptake in my adrenalin level. My palms were growing sweaty. A few more orbits and I decided I was going to land on that pinnacle. I made my high recon and set myself up for an approach. All looked well as I approached the red tire while I kept my airspeed up. Over the trees on my approach, still keeping my airspeed up...I continued. I was now committed to land since I had descended below the tree tops that I would have had to clear to order to abort the landing. No instructor sat next to me telling me what to do or take the controls from me. I was going to land, or crash. It was that simple.

As I approached the ground I realized I was going too fast, the trees were looming at me to my front. I needed to stop my forward speed now or I was going to indeed hit them with my rotor blades. I pulled back on the cyclic stick and dug the tail stinger into the ground, thus plowing a furrow across the landing area. I came to a stop before hitting those trees. I had survived a horrible approach...barely.

After my heart rate returned to normal I reduced the engine RPM, frictioned down the controls, and climbed out of the cockpit to survey the landing

area. Sure enough, there was a stripe of yellow paint across the rocks I had drug the stinger over, ending where my machine sat idling. I had come in way too fast. I would not make that mistake again.

The helicopter revved back up to operating RPM, the friction was taken off, and the machine and I once again roared back into the air. Again an approach was initiated, only this time my airspeed was correct. My landing was perfect.

On my way back to our training base I felt a little more like a helicopter pilot.

I graduated from Fort Wolters in November of 1967 and reported to Fort Rucker in January of 1968.

Letter to home dated January 14, 1968

“Just a short note to give you my address, and let you know that everything is going better than I expected. They treat us with a lot more respect here than they did at Wolters. We start classes and flying tomorrow. That’s two weeks sooner than I expected. My only worry right now is flying with instruments.”

Letter to home dated January 29, 1968

“Well, I have fourteen hours of instrument flying in. I’ve been having my share of difficulties, but I am coming along. The first big test will be in two weeks when I get a check ride. I will phone you and let you know how I make out on it.

I received my officer dress blues and some assorted items in the mail last week. I sure hope I will wear them some day.”

Letter to home dated February 14, 1968

“Things are moving along fairly well. We have taken two tests and I scored 87% on both of them. As for flying, all I can say is that the check ride is due some time this week. We had so many bad weather days last week that we flew Saturday, but it was worth it since I received a grade of “A”. It’s the first “A” I have ever received, even at Wolters. If I can fly like that on the check ride I’ll have no problem. If all goes well, I will be flying Huey’s in five weeks. That sure will be a long awaited moment.”

I failed my first basic instrument check ride.

After five additional hours of basic instrument training I took another check ride and passed.

In flight school the army had a tough job to do: that was to try to teach very young men how to behave as officers as well as teach them to fly. Neither of these tasks was easy. Once again preexisting values are stripped away and replaced with new ones. Some people have considerable difficulty making the changes and learning these new skills. Time was of an essence. If a student fell too far behind the set pace he was released from training.

Letter to home dated February 22, 1968

"I have struggled through two weeks of advanced instruments. So far I find it easier than basic instruments, but time will tell. It is sure a lot more interesting."

Letter to home dated March 17, 1968

"One more week of instruments, that is if I pass my check ride! It not only will be great to fly the "Huey" but it will also be wonderful to see where I am flying."

Letter to home dated March 27, 1968

"The "Hueys" are great. I can't fly them worth a damn, but I am slowly learning. At least I think I am?"

"If all goes well, I will be a warrant officer and army aviator in seven weeks."

Letter to home dated April 3, 1968

"I passed my first phase check ride in the Huey today. Now this next month we go into tactics. That should be fun. It is in tactics that we start training in areas like mass formations, low level cross countries, tree top flying, external loads and the like. The last two weeks are spent out in the field living in tents and flying simulated missions. We also have to spend a night stumbling around the woods in escape and evasion training. I will phone you as soon as I get my orders."

Tactical was very interesting and almost fun. After all this time, energy, and money neither us, nor the army wanted anything but for us to graduate and fill our slots in the U.S. Army's helicopter pilot rosters. We were senior classmen.

We looked upon others in earlier stages of training with distain, they at us with envy.

We had been taught in flight school that an army aviator is never really lost, but only temporarily disorientated.

Challenges still presented themselves. One dark night, while performing a training flight with another WOC we found ourselves lost. It was very dark flying over the Alabama flatlands that night. Our navigation aids were only a clock, and compass. Our destination was a field where someone waited for us with a small smudge pot for identification. We missed the field. After flying about in the dark, looking for our checkpoints, we had become completely disorientated. So disorientated in fact, that we could not find the main airfield from which our flight had originated. At last, we spotted lights on the ground in the distance. Flying over them we realized that we where over one of Rucker's airfields. No telling which one though. Having had more than enough of night navigation for this evening, we landed at the airfield, still not sure where we were. We parked in the first available parking slot we came across and wandered about until we discovered that we had in fact landed at our home base. Finding our briefing room was difficult being that our bearings were still completely crossed up. As we sat in the debriefing later that evening nothing was said to us other than to make it known we had failed to check into our reporting points. Every instructor in the room knew pretty much what had happened to us and made us feel very uncomfortable by their smirks and knowing glances.

Letter to home dated April 23, 1968

"Two weeks from today marks graduation. I just hope I can hold on for fourteen more days.

Letter to home dated May 4, 1968

"We have three more days until graduation; it is sure getting close! I guess it is all over except for the shouting. We have finished training and we are now just out processing. I finished this program with an even 215 flight hours and about 540 classroom hours for the thirteen months I was in training."

I made it to graduation. I graduated from U.S. Army Helicopter Flight School Class 68-503 on May 7, 1968. I had silver aviator wings on my chest and was appointed to the rank of warrant officer, WO1. I had not believed many times

during the preceding thirteen months that this day would arrive. I was very proud. I had every right to be.

I, along with most of my classmates, received orders to report to South Vietnam. My report date for transport to Vietnam was May 28, 1968.

Tac Officer CW2 Thomas Duer would later return to Vietnam for a second tour. He would die there when his Boeing Vertol CH 47 helicopter disintegrated in flight.

ON LEAVE AT HOME

Before departing for Vietnam I went back home on leave. My parents lived in Millbrae, California at the time. It was an awkward time for us. The anti-war movement was starting to become daily news. Americans were dying by the hundreds every month and helicopter losses were being reported with alarming regularity. In the early months of 1968 the North Vietnamese launched a massive offensive throughout South Vietnam. What became known as the "Tet Offensive" brought to realization that all was not going as well in South Vietnam as some in Washington D.C. believed. If my parents had doubts about the validity of the war, and their only son going off to fight in it, they didn't tell me so. For my part, I had been sequestered in training for over a year and was not in touch with the mood of the country. It was during this period at home that I first encountered the anti-Vietnam mentality of some people. I remember, shortly prior to my departure for Vietnam, a girlfriend and I attending a play on the campus of her school. She was attending college in Santa Clara at the time. We dressed up, her in a green dress, me in my army dress green uniform, wings and warrant officer bars new and shining. Unknown to me the theme would be anti-war in nature. I was the only person in attendance wearing a uniform. To say I was the wrong person in the wrong place would be simply a gross understatement. Maybe my girlfriend felt I would benefit in some way by being exposed to this prior to going off to Vietnam. Maybe she was just as misguided as so many others.

The day to leave for Vietnam came all too fast. I had stored my car in my parent's garage. I hugged my somber father and crying mother, and left them for Vietnam.

At the airport, the ticket agent asked where I was headed. I proudly explained that I was on my way to Vietnam. His response: "That's too bad..."

It was May 28, 1968. I was 21 years old. I would step off the plane into Vietnam three days later.

THE FIRST AIR CAVALRY

Soon after my arrival in Vietnam I received orders to report to what was to be my family for the next year. That family was the First Air Cavalry Division...the Cav for short. The Cav had a reputation for living under tent roofs, eating meals out of cans, and having only cold water for showers. I was warned about life in the Cav during my training and had been persuaded that it was not really the unit one would choose if given a choice. I was not given a choice.

Letter to home dated June 3, 1968

"This will just be a short note to let you know that everything is going as well as can be expected.

We stayed at Fort Lewis for two days and left for 'Nam' Thursday morning. Eighteen hours later I was in Cam Rahn Bay. We processed into the country there and received our unit assignments. I got a change of orders. I am now a member of the 1st Cavalry Division. They are the top unit in the country and I am glad to be with them.

One drawback is the Cav is 'air mobile', meaning they move around like the horse cavalry used to, only they use choppers. That means no permanent buildings.

We are being sent farther up north tomorrow for a four day school on the Cav's tactics, and jungle warfare in general. After that is finished we will be assigned and sent to the unit in the Cav that we will belong to. I will be able to give you my address then.

It is hot and humid here. The countryside is pretty.

I will write a little better letter when I get organized and get my address."

One of, if not the best known American military units to participate in Vietnam was the First Air Cavalry Division. The division implemented a new form of tactical operations for warfare: helicopter born air mobility. The Cav's fighting men moved to and from battle in helicopters, and were supported in their efforts by helicopters. If they fell in battle helicopters flew them to medical support areas. It was a comfort to know that should they be wounded, chances were good that immediate transport via helicopter to well-equipped medical facilities could save their lives.

The standard tour of duty in Vietnam for an American soldier was three hundred and sixty five days. You could request to stay longer, some did, most of

us didn't. The majority of new arrivals in Vietnam started the three hundred and sixty five day countdown to departure the first night there.

At the time of my arrival, the Cav's headquarters were located in An Khe, South Vietnam. I flew to An Khe in an air force transport. That night I tried to sleep in a tent that smelled of mildew. My thoughts, that long and lonely night were of home, family, and friends; many of whom were attending college...maybe even burning their draft cards as I lay sweating in my cot.

My stay in An Khe was short and unpleasant; I was soon on my way in another air force transport to "I" Corps, the northern most partition of South Vietnam.

CAMP EVANS

I had been assigned to Bravo Company 227 Assault Helicopter Battalion. Bravo Company was what was known as a "lift" company. Its mission was to transport people and supplies about in what were known in Vietnam as "slicks". A slick was a Bell UH-1 helicopter manned by two pilots. Sitting in the rear, behind the pilots and facing out toward the sides sat two door gunners who manned M-60 light machine guns. The area between the pilots and door gunners was the cargo compartment. It was in the cargo compartment that our passengers sat and cargos were carried. It had no rocket launchers or other armament mounted on its sides. It was from its relatively uncluttered appearance that the name slick was derived. It is the images of slicks with infantry standing on their landing skids that are so often associated with the war in Vietnam.

Bravo Company was staged at a large "fire base" named Camp Evans. The term "fire base" referred to an encampment, often surrounded by barbed wire and fortifications manned by infantry. The larger fire bases could contain an air strip for fixed wing aircraft. Artillery units protected the fire base from within and served to provide artillery support for troops working in the surrounding area. The larger fire bases would also include so called rear or support units for the troops operating in the field. Evans was the base of operations for numerous helicopter units. These units were staged about what was called the "flight line". It was there that the flight and support crews lived. After a day or night of flying the helicopters were parked in sandbag protected revetments on the flight line. Here the maintenance crews serviced the helicopters.

Camp Evans was a busy place. People and supplies were constantly being transported into and out of its center via air force transports and of course army helicopters. Air traffic was very heavy, and at times the weather was less than

ideal. I remember seeing a midair collision between an air force C-123 transport and army Chinook helicopter within sight of Evans. After the collision the Chinook immediately began spinning. It continued to do so as it fell to earth and exploded. The transport continued to fly briefly before plunging to the ground. I do not know how many died; rumor had it the passengers on the transport were on their way home. It was becoming evident to me that death in Vietnam was always associated with how much time remained in country for the unfortunate individual. The tragedy of death was more magnified with each passing day of one's 365 day tour.

Camp Evans was located on a coastal plane. Laos was beyond the mountains to the west. The DMZ, which separated North from South Vietnam, was a short flight to the north. Highway 1, what the French called the "Street Without Joy", ran north/south just a few miles to the east between Evans and the South China Sea.

It is a testimony to my ignorance at the time that when I went to fight Ho Chi Minh's army in Vietnam I had little, if any, knowledge of what had happened to the French there. They had fought Ho Chi Minh's army only a decade prior to America's involvement in Vietnam. Without the benefit of world class aviation support, such as America used in Vietnam, the French were defeated in what was then called French Indo China. Many tens of thousands of Frenchmen died in that war and are buried in Vietnam. They died in places such as Dien Bien Phu, and on the "Street Without Joy." I have since read that the French buried their fallen soldiers in an upright position, facing France. We Americans chose to collect our fallen and return them home for burial. The "body bags" containing Americans killed in Vietnam, upon returning home, fanned the fires of America's growing anti-war mood.

Arriving at Camp Evans I felt as if I had been transported into an American Civil War camp. Everywhere I looked I saw tents, the roads were muddy and the people looked rather somber. This similarity ended; however, with the presence of army helicopters flying this way and that, projecting the whop, whop, whop sound so often associated with America in Vietnam. Dust, or mud, and unpleasant smells abounded. The air was hot and humid and infested with flies.

I hopped a ride in a jeep that delivered me to the company area of B Co. 227 Assault Helicopter Battalion. As was the case elsewhere at Evans, not a building was to be seen, only tents, bunkers and sandbags. I reported to operations where I was greeted with less than exuberance. I was soon sitting by myself on a cot, in a hot tent, my equipment piled nearby. This was my new home.

I had truly arrived in Vietnam. I could go home in 362 more days

Letter to home dated June 12, 1968

I have finally made it to my unit. Baring the unforeseen, I should be with this outfit for the next year. To make a long story short, I think I have been screwed. The unit I am now in lost almost all its aircraft in an explosion about three weeks ago. They are just starting to get some new ones to replace the loss; in the meantime, I just sit around and do nothing.

The living conditions aren't the best over here. There is no hot water, the latrines smell, and my tent where I live has a dirt floor. The heat and humidity are bad, the sky seems to be always cloudy, but it's still hot. Not to mention the insects, you have to use an insect net at night, and even so they get you."

Letter to home dated June 30, 1968

"We have gotten most of the aircraft back, but I am still sitting around. To make a long story short we are short of first pilots so until we train some the older new guys, our newest co-pilots can't get much flight time in. I don't expect to be flying on a daily basis for another month. So in the meantime all of the non flying officers and warrants are building new officer's quarters and what have you. I'm getting a good tan out of it anyway."

FNG

Life for all of us in Bravo Company was not very comfortable. The tents being used were called GP Mediums (general purpose) and stood about fifteen by forty feet in size. These tents that served as personal quarters for the warrants housed about ten men each, thus giving each person sixty square feet to call home. Furnishing consisted of a cot, sleeping bag and foot locker. We coveted extra items such as a chair, a table, and perhaps a fan. New arrivals such as me had no extras.

The mess hall was also a GP Medium with folding tables and chairs for dining. There was a field kitchen nearby. Most of the food being served came out of cans. One step above C rations (meals in boxes carried by an individual and eaten cold, at will), but still rather plain. Fresh foods were very rare. Drinking water was treated with iodine to rid it of parasites and bacteria.

Bathing was accomplished with cold water draining from elevated steel drums. The toilets were primitive. In order to use them you sat on plywood panels with holes that were placed over shortened oil drums. As the drums filled with waste the drums were dragged a short distance away where diesel was poured into them and then the diesel soaked filth ignited. The smoke from this was thick and black, the smell unpleasant. Flies and maggots were rampant.

The living conditions that I encountered upon my arrival at Bravo Company were the worst that I would see for my whole tour in Vietnam. The primitive living conditions were due in part to a traumatic event that occurred a few weeks earlier.

It was not uncommon for Camp Evans to be the target of incoming mortar and rocket fire from enemy troops in the area. One of these incoming rockets had struck Camp Evans' ammunition dump. The ensuing explosions lasted for hours...wreaking havoc. Concussions from the blasts flattened anything above ground level. Aircraft parked in their revetments were damaged or destroyed. I reported in to a company that was in the act of rebuilding itself from ruin. Upon my arrival Bravo had one air worthy helicopter and 40 pilots.

So there I sat with nothing to do but help with the rebuilding of the company area. I worked in the hot sun filling sandbags for much of my first month. There was little escape from the tedious boredom and not much comfort from the veterans who saw new arrivals as "fucking new guys"... FNGs for short. Most of these veterans had seen some rough times over the preceding months. Many of them were close to going home. A FNG was treated with little respect since he had not yet proved himself one way or another. As time went on this situation would slowly reverse, as short timers left and FNGs took their places in the company hierarchy.

With this sort of environment it was natural for people with similar time in country to form friendships. As I labored with the sandbag detail a few other FNGs arrived. It was comforting to see new arrivals for it helped to diminish the sense of loneliness. One of these new arrivals was a flight school classmate of mine: Mike Almgren. Mike was from Chicago, Illinois. Mike and I worked together filling sandbags in the hot sun. At one point Mike suffered heat stroke and had to be medivaced. We have laughed many times since when he recalls the ice pack being applied to his crotch at the field hospital in an attempt to lower his body temperature.

Upon one occasion, the 4th of July, the old guys decided to have a party. The FNGs were not invited, but one of the short timers felt sorry enough for us to

toss a bottle of gin into our tent. Having no ice and only warm tomato juice did not stop us from drinking until we puked. Our hangovers did not exempt us from sandbag detail the next day. I to this day do not care for the taste of gin.

My morale and military bearing began to deteriorate. Suffice it to say that my situation in Vietnam was a growing disappointment. I had planned on doing some serious flying. My self esteem as an officer and pilot was very low. Had I worked so hard in training only for this?

Our commanding officer, Major Ginter, was a veteran due to rotate home soon. He had the difficult job of rebuilding Bravo Company. His job was not made any easier by young warrant officers who were beginning to develop attitude problems. A war was going on, he knew that, but I was losing sight of it by beginning to focus too much on my personal disappointments, and not enough on the real situation. I was young and I regret to say ignorant.

The maintenance of the morale and discipline of their troops is perhaps one of the more challenging responsibilities commanders deal with. Keeping people busy helps to accomplish this. Since Major Ginter had bored and disenchanted pilots, such as myself, to contend with he tried to put us to useful purposes. One such useful distraction was guard duty. While Camp Evans was protected by infantry outposts and barbed wire on its perimeter, there still was the need to watch over our helicopters on the flight line during the late dark hours. Enemy troops had been known to sneak past a perimeter and place explosive charges around such things as parked aircraft. Major Ginter called upon his FNG warrants to perform this guard duty. We of course hated the duty since it required staying up and remaining alert most of the night. On one night a fellow warrant, Mike, and I were posted as guards and instructed to protect a helicopter parked on the flight line. It was late, we were tired; and we both longed for sleep. Mike and I agreed to alternate sleep breaks. It was my turn to watch, but I managed to doze off. Major Ginter happen to chose this time to check up on us and of course found two warrants guarding an aircraft, one sleeping atop the revetment, the other on the helicopters passenger seat, fast asleep. Ginter walked up to our unguarded helicopter, picked up the radio lying near Mike and dropped it on Mike's crotch. The ensuing yell from Mike served to bring me to full attention. Major Ginter proceeded to chew our butts with enough vigor to frighten the dead. The Major did not pursue the event further; his point had been well made.

I really was a FNG. I had not really come to appreciate fully the dangers we faced. It is not a pleasant thought for me to think what could have been my

fate if while I was sleeping a North Vietnamese soldier had decided to dispatch me with his knife before placing an explosive device in the helicopter I was guarding.

This difficult and disappointing period came to pass as more aircraft started arriving to replace the ones damaged by the explosions of the ammunition dump. Bravo Company took back to the skies

Letter to home dated July 23, 1968

"I am starting to fly now. Not much, but at least it's a start. On my last mission our formation was fired at and the lead aircraft was hit. It's a strange feeling, but not as bad as I expected (getting shot at).

I received a letter from a friend in flight school who came over here the same time I did, but he was assigned down south in the Delta. He has 135 hours already compared to my 16. He also has a private room, hot shower, officers club and cement floors. Somehow, I get the idea that I was screwed when I was sent to the Cav."

IN THE AIR AGAIN

Slowly, as the early months passed, some of the senior pilots completed their year and went home. At last I was given a chance to fly. My early flights were humbling; it was almost as if I had forgotten how to fly, but my rudimentary flying skills returned soon enough.

Letter to home dated July 30, 1968

"I am flying about every other day now. I am averaging about six hours each time I fly. I enjoy it, but I need a lot more practice before I will be any good."

Letter to home dated August 10, 1968

"Today is the first day I haven't flown in five days. It feels great to finally be doing something. I can see improvement in my flying every time I go up; of course I still have a ways to go yet. When I get good enough and have more experience they will make me an aircraft commander. That means I will move from the right seat over to the left one. It will put a lot more responsibility on me since I will be responsible for the aircraft and crew."

Letter to home dated Aug 24, 1968

"I will have about seventy five hours for this month, that's not bad considering I had about fifty hours the first two months in country.

They are expecting a ground attack so if we aren't flying the next day we get stuck guarding an aircraft all night, all kinds of fun."

After having spent such a long time performing menial tasks in the company area I was of course very excited about being used as a pilot. Perhaps, because of that, I took on the challenge of learning the new skills of flying in Vietnam very seriously. My enthusiasm became apparent to those looking for replacements of those old timers who were leaving. I began to fly more and more with an assortment of aircraft commanders.

Letter to home dated September 4, 1968

"Rain, rain, rain. It started last night and it is still going strong. I had to fly in it today. You now what a pain it is to drive a car in rainy weather. Well, you can imagine what it's like flying in it. We have to fly about fifty feet above the ground since when the clouds are below one thousand feet you are an easy target if you get any higher. You're safe at fifteen hundred feet, but the clouds ruin that. So we stay low and dodge trees. When I got back to my tent this evening I found it flooded. My bed was soaked...the end to a perfect day."

It was during this period that two events took place that had a very profound effect on my attitude about being in Vietnam.

It was a rather dreary day and I was sitting in my tent. I was assigned to an aircraft that was not doing much flying. The aircraft commander was the company instructor pilot and the missions rather undemanding; a good situation for breaking in new pilots. Word came through operations that we were needed to fly off somewhere. I was happy to get another chance in the air as we started the helicopter and departed Camp Evans heading west toward the mountains. I was busy enough flying the helicopter, but I at last asked the aircraft commander what our mission was. With a somber face he said that we had been called to recover the bodies of a helicopter crew that had been shot down while delivering ammunition, at night, in a tactical emergency two days earlier. My throat and stomach clamped down.

In battle there are times when the situation can become dire. A unit engaged with the enemy may be at disadvantage for many reasons. Reasons such as being heavily outnumbered, or finding themselves running out of ammunition. In such a circumstance a radio call can be made declaring a tactical emergency; such a call would normally rally any support possible to render aid. These can be, and often are, do or die moments. Everything is on the line. The crew whose bodies we had been sent to recover had volunteered to resupply a grunt unit in the mountains at night. The landing zone was too small to land so the ammunition had to be slung externally on the slick's belly hook. The drop off was successful, amazing enough; but upon the departure the slick took heavy fire from the enemy who managed to blow off the helicopter's tail rotor. Without a tail rotor control was lost resulting in a crash amongst the trees surrounding the grunt unit. All four crewmembers died.

Two days later we were able to land on the landing zone since the firefight of two nights prior was long over. The enemy had withdrawn when they realized our troops had been resupplied. The helicopter's crew's bodies had been eventually recovered from the wreckage and lay on the ground next to our landing spot. Our approach was a bit beyond my skill level so I sat in my seat in silence and watched. Having landed, we waited for a few minutes with blades turning before I heard the sounds of what sounded like sacks of potatoes being dropped on the helicopter cabin floor---a very unpleasant odor soon permeated throughout the aircraft. I was beginning to feel ill. I turned about to look in back and saw the four. The sight of their smashed bodies and disfigured faces horrified me. My stomach was now sitting in my throat. One of the dead was lying next to my seat. I remember looking into his face and noting his name and rank. I believe at least one Distinguished Flying Cross was awarded for their efforts that night. They were all heroes.

We flew the four KIAs (killed in action) back to the graves registration helipad at Camp Evans. Returning to our company area I sat in my tent in silence for a long while. This was my first view of violent death.

My other eye opener was a bit less traumatic but very important nonetheless. The experience took place on a day I found myself copiloting with a less experienced aircraft commander than I had flown with prior. Our ship was one of a flight of six. It had been a busy day of flying in and out of many different mountain LZs (landing zones) inserting troops and cargo. The flying was somewhat demanding in that we were working at high density altitudes into small helipads. As the day wore on the winds began to pick up making the flying all the

more precarious. While I had come a ways toward acceptable proficiency as a helicopter pilot I was still little help to the poor guy sitting next to me. He had to make the difficult approaches while I watched. I was not aware of it at the time but he was also being tested to his limits.

It was hot and windy. The aircraft had a full load of ammunition boxes... maybe a bit too full. The aircraft commander initiated a steep approach to a ridge top LZ. To me all looked normal at first but as we neared touchdown our rate of closure seemed a bit fast. At the point where we should have been transitioning into a hover we instead continued to descend rapidly. We hit the ground rather hard and bounced off the ridge and began to fall off the backside. Our low rotor rpm warning horn was wailing, telling us that rotor rpm was below the normal operating range. It was beginning to look like we would hit the ground again and crash. My mind pictured that dead WO1 lying on the helicopter cabin floor. The aircraft commander was not taking any action to correct our rapidly deteriorating situation. Looking back on the experience I believe he had stopped flying the helicopter and was just holding on to the controls...he was probably frozen in fear. At this point I remembered lessons from flight school training suggesting pushing down the collective stick when in a low rpm situation during approach. This action would allow for the reduced drag of the rotors to increase rpm. I pushed the collective down a bit, and as it should, the rpm increased, the rpm audio stopped its beeping, and best of all, the aircraft commander started to fly the helicopter again...away from the ground.

We had to return to Evans since one of the landing gear skids was badly bent from the hard landing on the ridge top. Once again I sat in my tent at day's end pondering the incident. All of those hours spent in flight school learning things such as gross weight limits and tricks of the trade such as lowering collective in a low rotor situation had real merit. These were the things that could mean the difference between life and death for a helicopter pilot. Maybe I should have paid a bit more attention to my instructors. I would certainly do so henceforth.

In my debriefing about the incident I was rightfully criticized for not being more help to the aircraft commander by calling out the torque reading and rotor rpm as we approached the ridge top prior to the hard landing. With the exception of pushing the collective down, which was critical, I was more of a passenger than a copilot during those critical seconds when he was running out of pitch, power, and ideas. There was so much for me to learn.

Letter to home dated September 12, 1968

"The 'gooks' sent eight 122 millimeter rockets over our way a few nights ago. There were a few casualties, but none in my unit. It sure broke the routine around here."

AIRCRAFT COMMANDER

I was checked out as an aircraft commander when I was able to demonstrate the knowledge and skills required. At the time, I may have had four hundred and twenty five hours of pilot time. I could fly reasonably well and knew enough about the theater of operations to get by. I did not; however, have very much experience. This situation did not deter my enthusiasm, or the Army's willingness to launch me into harm's way.

Letter to home dated September 27, 1968

"Flying is coming along great. They have moved me from the right seat to the left (copilot to pilot). That means I will be the aircraft commander. That is a lot more responsibility. I made it with 200 hours of flight time in country; it takes the average pilot about 400 hours. So you can see things are going well, I just hope they keep that way."

I look back on this now thirty five years later and can see the precarious situation I was in as plain as day. I did not see it as clearly in 1968. It was very exciting to strap yourself into a helicopter early in the morning and take off for a day of combat flying in Vietnam. This was exciting stuff, but also very dangerous. It was all too easy to be overcome by the excitement and glory of it all while forgetting or minimizing the hazards. No guts, no glory, you say...perhaps.

I was doing this when only three years earlier I was graduating from high school.

Young Warrant Officer Kearns, fledgling helicopter hero, aircraft commander, was going to do his damned best to help win this war---let come what may, be it over gross weight loads, enemy gunfire or weather that ducks didn't fly in.

Vietnam was heading into the monsoon season about this time, a season of thick clouds, strong winds and heavy rain. Life at Evans was made even more miserable with the downpours that regularly besieged it. Nothing seemed to stay dry. Most of the tents leaked, this required us to erect poncho liners over our cots to keep the water out. One does not sleep well in a wet sleeping bag. At one point our operations bunker was flooded to its ceiling.

Much of our flying was in the mountains to Evans' west. It was here that the Cav's ground forces found themselves trying to engage the North Vietnamese regulars traveling south on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This area was covered with heavy jungle. During the monsoon season the resulting clouds and rain made flying very difficult, if not impossible, to safely fly through. Our slicks had instruments for instrument condition flying, and we had some basic instrument training, but this was not an appropriate environment to be doing so. There is no such thing as a standard instrument approach into a mountain landing zone, or departure for that matter.

On a day when the ducks were not flying we were trying to supply an infantry (grunt) company nested deep in the mountains. The area was obscured in most places with low clouds. I was pushing the weather limits too hard trying to get the needed food and ammunition to the grunts. Predictably, I inadvertently flew into the clouds. I found myself with no ground reference outside the helicopter's plexi-glass windows. The army had taught me to fly with reference only to the aircraft's instruments, but in the proper environment with an instructor at my side and the nearest mountain two hundred miles away. Now, Mother Earth was nowhere to be seen. We were surrounded by mountains and in very serious trouble.

Unexpected flight into instrument conditions has probably killed more pilots than any other act of neglect or carelessness. Under such conditions the chance of losing control of the aircraft, or simply flying into the terrain are high. An experienced pilot should see this situation approaching and take corrective action, such as turning around before many a less experienced pilot may, thus avoiding the potential disastrous consequences awaiting there. My crew and I found ourselves with one option for escape. That option was to attempt to climb high enough to clear the mountain tops and head back to the east and Camp Evan's life saving GCA (ground controlled radar approach).

We kept the helicopter under control as we climbed up through the clouds, praying the whole time that we would not plow the helicopter into a mountain. Frantically, we called radar when we were high enough to make radio contact. No voice sounded sweeter than the radar controller's when he told us he had radar contact and started giving us vectors back to Evans.

On another occasion we were once again supplying grunts high in the mountains. I had just landed on a rather marginal landing pad that was little more than felled trees with the limbs bucked off. As the skids came in contact with the trees I reduced power thinking we had completed a landing safely. Upon power reduction the helicopter suddenly settled lower, punching a hole in its belly with a

tree stump. I was able to return to base with the hole, but the damaged aircraft was out of service for some time being repaired.

Both of these incidents were indications of an aircraft commander who was not really up to the skill and experience levels required for safe completion of these types of missions. I was called out on the carpet for them, but I still continued to fly almost every day, there was, after all, a war going on. I was gaining experience, but at considerable risk.

Letter to home dated October 14, 1968

"We have had some interesting missions lately. Just yesterday we were out in the mountains hauling supply when we were asked to evacuate a POW and a wounded GI out of a company's location in the mountains. It was raining and patches of fog were floating from one ridge to another. The area was too small to land so we dropped a rope down as we hovered overhead. The people on the ground tied the POW on first and we lifted him out and carried him (hanging 150 feet below us) to another landing zone in the mountains. My crew chief said the poor guy was so scared that he passed out while he was down there. I guess I don't blame him. Our next trip was for the wounded man. I let my copilot fly this time and we carried him out the same way. The weather was starting to move in, but things were going smoothly until we were letting the patient down onto the pad, it was then that my copilot took his eyes off the ground and looked into the clouds in front of us. He got vertigo, but did the right thing by telling me. I took the aircraft; if he hadn't told me we could have lost the whole works and probably gone into the trees ourselves. I must admit that I was happy to see the day end."

Letter to home dated October 9, 1968

"Just a note to let you know that my mail might be screwed up for a few weeks since we are on call to move south for a while. If we do move it will be unorganized for a while and I will have trouble writing letters or receiving any for that matter."

In October of 1968 the First Cav was moved down south between Saigon and Cambodia. This area contained the routes and staging areas used by the North Vietnamese in the prior year's Tet Offensive. The Cav was being placed into position to deter any repeat of the last year's major attacks on Saigon. Bravo Company found itself in a new environment; our new base was an airstrip on a

rubber plantation called Quan Loi. Flight operations continued at a frantic pace in order to support the new placement of the Cav's forces.

It was our job as helicopter crews to provide transport for the infantry and their supplies to and from the operational areas they patrolled. It was no easy task for the grunts to carry everything they might need to engage, or defend themselves from the enemy troops in the area. The absolute necessities were carried on their backs. It was not practical for them to carry all that they might need for extended operations in the field. Slicks provided a means to lighten the load. These supply missions were called "log" missions for logistical support. A typical supply load, or loads, would consist of many ammunition boxes, heavy weapons such as mortars, claymore mines, water, food (both hot and cold), mail, and individuals needing a ride in or out. We also served as a medivac helicopter when the need arose to get someone out and to medical care in the rear area.

When the grunt's patrol was completed they would normally be flown out and back to their support base where they could clean up and rest. This process was reversed when it was time for them to return to the field. These trips into and out of the field were called combat assaults or extractions. Most of these "CAs", as we called them, were routine, some were not. I'll tell more of that later.

Letter to home dated November 6, 1968

"We moved into an airfield someone else had been using so things are built up real well. There are no mountains to speak of around here, but there are a lot of rubber plantations. I like this area more than up north."

QUAN LOI

Life at Quan Loi was an improvement over Camp Evans. A few new amenities such as a wooden dining hall and GP Mediums with wooden floors improved the quality of life. The company area was situated within a grove of rubber trees. This meant shade during the heat of the day. The rainy season had ended but this forced us to endure a lot of dust. Anytime a helicopter departed or landed a cloud of red dust swept through the company area leaving everything in its wake covered with the stuff. The showers were still only cold water and the latrines the same style steel drums as we had at Evans.

Within walking distance a PX store provided shopping where we could buy extras such as fans and folding chairs. The PX was a real treat. The warrant's living areas began to take on a more hospitable appearance. I had a small writing desk where I could compose letters to family and friends at home while sitting in

my new folding chair. My new fan was placed at the foot of my bed so that I could bask in a refreshing breeze during the muggy days and nights. I even had a small closet area to hang my uniforms. The living areas were separated by plywood partitions giving a sense of privacy---something in short supply when sharing a tent with nine other people.

At the other end of the airfield was an old villa that had been transformed into an officer's club. It was now possible to spend an evening away from the company area drinking and telling stories with other aviators. It was an interesting place at most times since it attracted all kinds of people with stories of their own, some true, and I imagine, some not.

Quan Loi was infested with rats. Almgren had one walk across his chest one night while he was sleeping. It disturbed him so that he began sleeping with a machete in his cot.

The task of cleaning the company area was accomplished by local Vietnamese who would work during the day and return to the local village at night. It was suspected by a few of us that some of these locals had a dual purpose in their work: One, to make Yankee dollars, the other, to note where the latest incoming mortar rounds had impacted the previous night. These observations allowed corrections to be made for the next night's barrage.

In the event of incoming rounds, not an uncommon event, we would dash out of our tents and run for the nearest bunker. These bunkers were trenches covered by sheets of metal called PSP (portable steel planking) covered with sandbags. The bunkers gave me a feeling of claustrophobia so I developed the habit of staying in my cot when the all too often incoming rounds came whistling in. This was an act of bravado in an attempt to salvage a night's sleep...something in great demand by me. I felt that since I was surrounded by sandbags I was safe from anything short of a direct hit, and understandably avoided the risk of dashing about in the dark, running into rubber trees and seriously injuring myself. This was a situation were I was damned if I did, and damned if I didn't. One night the rounds did come very close. I bailed out of my bed and started to run. As I ran a round passed over my head. The eerie sound was like a screaming banshee that brought chills up my spine. I was sure the beast would jump on my back any second. I dove to the ground and extended my arms upward to fight off the terror from the sky. I was begging for mercy. I was terrified. The round overshot me and hit the nearby helicopter refueling facility. The jet fuel burned fiercely through most of the night.

Getting a good night sleep was further jeopardized by an eight inch artillery battery also located at Quan Loi. If they had a fire mission that required them to fire over our company area the sound was deafening, and the concussion would cause the tent sides to flap. The projectiles passing overhead sounded like a winged freight train passing through the tree tops.

BULLET IN MY LAP

Occasionally we would fly South Vietnamese Army (ARVIN) on combat assaults. Most of the ARVIN conscript troops were not known for their fierce or heroic nature in battle. That should have been a clue to the Pentagon's planners that something was wrong when the people you were fighting for didn't want to do much of the fighting themselves.

On one such extraction things didn't go well. We took seven rounds and had one of our ARVN passenger hit by small arms fire.

Letter to home dated November 6, 1968

"My aircraft took seven hits from enemy automatic weapons yesterday on a combat extraction. We were number three in a flight of six, lifting a company of ARVNs out of a hot area. We had just cleared the trees and were starting to climb when we flew over a small unit of North Vietnamese who were waiting for us in the trees. They cut loose on the whole flight, but they concentrated on us so we were the only aircraft to get hit. One round went into the nose of the ship, came up through the radio compartment, shot out my airspeed indicator and came to rest between my feet. (too close for comfort), two rounds hit the rotor blades, one came up through the floor and hit one of the ARVNs in the back of the knee and stuck in the ceiling. The other three were scattered along the tail boom. I have the round that almost hit me. I plan on keeping it to remind me how lucky I was!"

We made it without further mishap. Afterward I was criticized for breaking formation. We would have been wiser not doing so.

In early November I had been in country for five months. My environment had changed from one of boredom to a state of unreal intensity. For the most part, I had been fortunate to be lucky enough to survive any major mishap despite a tendency to explore the limits of my skills.

My luck would change.

THE ACCIDENT

November 7, 1968 started early for me. I was assigned to fly a "log" mission. My copilot for the day was a Texan named Mike LeMaster. LeMaster was a WO1 who had been in Vietnam less time than I. He was a likable guy, but had little flight time. I should not have been flying with Mike on that day for the simple reason that we were both inexperienced pilots. I should have been flying with a senior copilot and Mike LeMaster with an experienced Aircraft Commander, but that was not our fate on this day.

It was still very early and morning fog patches floated in the area around the grunt's position. As was normal we had established radio contact with their radio operator. When our arrival was eminent the landing zone was confirmed with colored smoke from a smoke grenade discharged on the ground. The smoke not only served as an aid in determining location, but also served as a wind indicator as well. There was not much wind on this morning, just some hungry grunts waiting for a helicopter to deliver their breakfast. I allowed Mike to make the first approach into the landing zone, but when it became evident that he was approaching too fast for a safe landing I took over the controls and made the landing. LeMaster was having a difficult time controlling the helicopter.

I remembered my first few days back in the cockpit only a few months earlier and how difficult it had been to regain the confidence level I possessed on graduation day from flight school.

After the cargo was removed from the helicopter, I gave LeMaster control again and told him to make the takeoff. His departure seemed a bit fast to me; nevertheless, I did nothing to slow him down. There was a large tree to our immediate left. LeMaster started a sudden turn toward the tree apparently thinking he had enough clearance to swing around it and head back the way we had come. During these few seconds I sat motionless in my seat not believing he would actually hit the tree when there was no reason to strike it. Our blades struck the tree with a loud thump. The sudden stoppage of the rotors against the tree severed the engine drive shaft and destroyed the rotor blades. Without power to the rotors, and decaying rotor RPM, the aircraft fell to the ground and rolled over on its right side. I found myself suspended in my seat harness looking out the window at a 90 degree angle to the ground. The engine was still running since the broken drive shaft no longer connected it to the transmission and rotor blades. I looked around and saw no one else in the aircraft; I appeared to be by

myself. I unbuckled from my seat and climbed to the ground within the cargo compartment. Thoughts began to race through my mind: was the aircraft going to explode, where were the other three crew members, was one of them pinned under the helicopter? At this point I realized that it was a good idea to try to shut down the engine. I climbed back between the pilot's seats and frantically tried to shut down it down, but in my shock I couldn't put the necessary sequence together to silence it. I climbed out of the wreck. I was still worried about the door gunners and was yelling at the grunts that were standing nearby and watching all this to help me try to find my missing crew. Someone put his hand on my shoulder and yelled in my ear that the crew was safe and standing nearby. Once again my attention was directed to the still running engine. I climbed on top of the wreck and attempted to disconnect a fuel line in order to shut it down. Thank God I was not able to do such a foolish thing. While I vainly struggled with the fuel line another helicopter landed nearby and one of its pilots came over, climbed into the cockpit of my aircraft and shut down the engine. As I climbed off the wrecked helicopter I felt overwhelmed with disbelief and regret. A young aviator who had only a few minutes before felt so proud and confident was now reduced to a total fool.

A few hours later I was standing at attention in front of my commanding officer's desk with LeMaster at my side. There was no justifiable reason for hitting that tree. It was pure and simple pilot error on our parts.

That afternoon a Chinook helicopter slung my wrecked machine back to Quan Loi and deposited it at the end of the runway...near the officer's club. I spent some time standing and looking at my mistake trying to find absolution for my misfortune. Finding none, I removed a small plate off the pilot's collective stick, as a souvenir, and returned to Bravo Company and secluded myself in my living area for the rest of the day.

Things would get worse.

THE BRIDGE

It had been a very long day. My helicopter was a wreck lying at the end of the airfield, my self esteem was destroyed, my efforts of the prior five months in Vietnam seemed all for nothing. What better way to end it than to go to the officer's club and try to drown my misery? Mike Almgren joined Mike LeMaster and me for an evening of serious drinking. The hours passed and the alcohol had its desired effect. Before we knew it the time had come to close up and return to the company area, go to bed, and put this unfortunate day to rest.

There were no street lights or lighted paths at Quan Loi. The club was about a mile from Bravo's area and the road between the two somewhat unfamiliar. A group of us, LeMaster and I in the lead, carelessly walked along in the darkness. We could not see one step in front of us. Suddenly, something tripped LeMaster and me at knee level. I felt myself falling forward toward the ground; but when I expected to hit the ground I instead kept falling into the darkness. I landed on my head and shoulder with a painful jolt and lost consciousness. When I awoke a short time later I found myself lying in mud. My head and right shoulder throbbed with pain. As it happened LeMaster and I had walked directly off the road, at a corner, and tripped on a short bridge wall, falling over it, we dropped about six feet into a drainage ditch. Everyone was laughing except me.

The next hour was spent in the medic's tent where after an examination it was determined that I had suffered a mild concussion and a broken right collar bone. I was lucky I hadn't broken my neck.

The next day found me lying in my cot with a very sore shoulder and terrible headache. I could expect to be grounded for at least a month. I was doomed to have nothing to do but convalesce and ponder my failure as a pilot. Every morning my brothers in arms would rise and go off to fly while I sat in my living area with nothing to do but hate my life and choke on dust.

During a soldier's tour in Vietnam a short leave was allowed. This was called R&R (rest & recuperation). There were restrictions on where you could travel to. As I recall the choices were limited to selected locations near or in Southeast Asia. Married men could go to Hawaii to meet their wives, but the single men went to places like Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur and Sidney. The army transported you to the location you selected amongst the available choices. After four days you were transported back to Vietnam.

Letter to home dated shortly after November 7, 1968

"Just a short note to ask you to please send me a money order for \$500. I just put in for a leave and I will need the money. Please try to hurry since I will be departing shortly after the twentieth of the month."

My only hope of retaining my sanity was to take my R&R and get the hell out of Vietnam.

R&R

There is one strong desire on a young man's mind that has been deprived of female companionship for over five months, and been living under conditions of hardship and danger. Moving beyond that, R&R gave ample opportunity to spend what money was left shopping, dining and enjoying the sights of a big city. The hotel was a trip to Heaven. This was the first hot shower, regular bed, and flush toilet I had seen since I had left the USA five months earlier. The food tasted as if it came from the Gods.

Letter to home dated December 8, 1968

"Well, it's back to Vietnam tomorrow. Needless to say I had a good time in Hong Kong and I think I bought some goodies for some good prices.

You should receive my tailor made cloths in the mail fairly soon. The three piece super worsted suit cost me sixty five dollars, the cashmere wool sport coat was thirty eight dollars, and the worsted slacks were fifteen dollars each.

I also bought a 35mm Minolta SRT101 with a F1.4 lens, an electronic flash, and a Rokkor 1:4 F=135mm telephoto lens. These three items plus the cases for the camera and telephoto lens cost me one hundred and eighty dollars.

I also bought a Seiko watch for twenty eight dollars.

I am enclosing a photo of me a friend took while we were on a tour. I am going on another tour this afternoon which will take us past the Red Border.

I received the money you wired me about eighteen hours after I called you. Thank you very much. I believe I will have enough left over to be able to send some back to you when I return to my unit.

So all in all I had a good time and I believe I will be ready to go back to the nitty gritty and finish my six months and days that I have left in Vietnam."

My R&R served its intended purpose; my inner tension was relieved somewhat. I would return to Bravo Company ready to try to pick up the pieces of my career and carry on.

I was forgiven my accident by the Army and put back onto active flight status when I was physically able. I put my accident behind me and found myself flying again on a regular basis. It was December of 1968 and I had about one hundred and eighty days remaining in Vietnam. The next six months would be the most intense of my tour. It was my turn to help take the helm from those before me.

My adversity had served to mature me; I was no longer a carelessly confident young pilot.

DAY IN THE LIFE

By mid December of 1968 the Cav was well entrenched in its new area of operations. Bravo Company was settled into Quan Loi. I was back in the cockpit as an aircraft commander. Bob Hope was touring Vietnam. I recall the Christmas season to be very depressing. Most of us received packages from home, but there was little Christmas spirit. It was flying as usual.

Of course, there was a routine to be followed. The routine started in the evening. Before almost everyone had gone to bed, the staff in operations would receive orders for the next day's flight requirements. Operations would then assign aircraft and crews to the specific missions. For the most part there were three types: log (supply, etc.), air assault (movement of troops), and command and control (flying commanding officers in and around the operational area). There were other types of assignments such as psychological warfare, night reconnaissance, but the basic three mentioned above were the most common. Normally you would go to bed knowing what aircraft you would be flying and with whom.

The day started with an operation's orderly making the rounds waking us up. You would dress in your fire resistant nomex flight suite, lace up your boots, strap on your sidearm, grab your flight helmet and nomex, and head to the mess hall. Hot coffee and breakfast was wolfed down there. On the way out to the helicopters we stopped by operations and received last minute instructions and information concerning the day's mission. This included things like the radio frequencies we needed, who we were supporting, and where we were going. The crews would then meet at their aircraft for preflight. During the preflight the helicopters cowlings were opened allowing inspection of fluid levels and all critical mechanical parts subject to failure. When the inspection was completed and all appeared well, the aircraft log book was signed by the aircraft commander attesting to his willingness to take the machine into the air.

Besides the two pilots the crew consisted of two enlisted men. One was the crew chief who was a helicopter mechanic. Each helicopter in the company had a crew chief assigned to it. The crew chief would perform the required maintenance on his machine besides flying with it all day as a door gunner. The other enlisted man was a door gunner who would assist the crew chief during the day. It was not uncommon for door gunners to be second tour grunts who wanted to fly as

crew members on the helicopters they themselves had been passengers on during their prior tour in Vietnam. During the preflight all four crew members would see that all was in order and ready to go for the day ahead. The door guns (M-60 machine guns) were mounted on their stands and crew members put on their armor chest protectors, helmets and gloves. The pilots strapped themselves in their armor seats and at the appointed time hollered "CLEAR" and started the Lycoming T-53 engine.

After the engine was started the rotor blades began to turn. The generator was turned on, then the radios. Contact was established with operations and any other aircraft that may be flying the same mission. When all was ready, and everybody had checked in, we would lift out of our parking revetments, amidst a cloud of dust, and hover out to the runway and align ourselves in the prearranged order, one behind the other. The flight leader was in front and his call sign was yellow one. The ship behind him was yellow two and so forth. At the time when the Yellow Flight was all in position a radio call was made to the control tower. The tower operator would clear us for departure. Anyone not flying who was still in the company area would be besieged with the howling and thumping of all the running helicopters as well as a good dusting from the rotor wash.

Of the three most common mission types the combat assault was often the most demanding and dangerous. A combat assault flight could consist of multiple helicopters, the number of which depended on the mission. Massive troop movements would combine many flights to total thirty or more helicopters, but normally a flight would consist of four to six aircraft. Each aircraft would have an assigned position in the flight. Yellow one would be the flight leader and yellow six in a flight of six would be called "tail end charlie." Each position would be responsible for some duty such as contacting artillery for flight clearance into target areas, or maintaining communications with operations at some level. All the aircraft would have an assigned position in whatever formation the flight flew. Formations could change depending on the size and shape of the landing zone.

For any combat assault we would arrive at an appointed pickup zone where the grunt unit would be waiting in full combat gear. As the slicks landed the grunts would board (about six per aircraft) and when all was ready the flight would launch in mass, heading for the landing zone.

The landing zone was often being worked over by artillery while the flight flew toward it. The flight would normally be joined by helicopter gun ships that would cover from the rear during the first approach. About one minute prior to arrival at the landing zone, artillery would send a white phosphorus round into the LZ

indicating the last shell had been fired. On short final into the landing zone the door gunners would begin cover fire with their M-60s while the gun ships would rake the perimeter from behind with rocket fire. When the slick's skids touched ground the grunts would jump out and seek cover. Ideally as yellow one started to depart the LZ tail end charlie would be ready to follow. Some of the LZs were large enough to accommodate the entire flight; others required that only a portion of the flight could land at one time. The sequence of events I just described would be complicated greatly if there was hostile fire directed at the troops or slicks. Everyone was very vulnerable despite all the firepower. It was during this phase of an insertion that helicopters could easily be shot down by determined enemy troops who survived the onslaught long enough to shoot back. As the slicks raced back to the pickup zone for the next load of grunts the thirty or so who remained on the landing zone were vulnerable should they come under attack. Their protection would be the gun ships remaining overhead and the artillery who was always on the ready to resume firing into the area should it be required. In the meanwhile, the formation would race back with the next load of grunts, drop them off and return for another load until the entire unit was in place at the landing zone. If all was well at this point the flight would fly back to base for fuel and either go off on another assault or standby as required.

Once in position the grunts would begin to carry on with their patrol. They would often stay in the field for days at a time and would require support from slicks flying log missions.

Flying log missions was much different than combat assaults. Generally you flew as a single ship and were responsible for all communications and navigation. Your mission was to fly people, food, ammunition, and water back and forth between the grunts in the field and their support base.

Command and control missions were for the most part boring days. I dreaded them. Most of the work required was simply to orbit overhead while an assault or extraction was taking place with a commanding officer and his assistants working radios in back coordinating the missions.

Lunch was often taken out of a can while sitting in or near the helicopter. During slack periods, one might even catch a few winks as best as one could in the shade of the aircraft.

At days end it was back to the Bravo Company area where a hot dinner, a cold shower, and maybe some beer or soda waited. Drinking to excess was not uncommon. Drug use was not evident though I have little doubt some people snuck off and tried to escape from the stress that way. Normally, the evening was

spent visiting, writing letters to home, or reading. Sometimes the evenings grew a bit loud with music from someone's stereo. Every evening I would fill in another slot on my "short timers' calendar." There were three hundred and sixty five slots to be filled. There was always much talk of home and what we were going to do upon our return to the real world, "The States." My parents saved some of my letters and I ended up with them some years later. It is interesting to note how much time I spent writing about the car I was going to buy when I returned from Vietnam. It was a very common interest to me and most of my friends to spend much time trying to decide what type of automobile we would purchase when we got back home. Most of us gravitated towards names like GTO, Firebird, and 442 (that is what I ended up buying). Before turning in for the night we would walk to operations and check the next day's mission board and see what was in the works for us. Another day had passed and the next was waiting.

Stress management was awfully important. There were times when the stress got to us all. Christmas Eve was such a time. I became very upset with my tent mates when they celebrated the Yule Tide Season in our tent while caring little of the fact that I was on the board for an early flight the next morning. To use the vernacular and say "I lost it with them" would be an understatement. My anger progressed to rage. People came into our tent to see what the fuss was all about. I screamed at them as well. Everyone fled and left me alone while I regained control of myself.

I managed to ruin the Christmas party, and spirit, with my angry Scrooge rendition.

Letter to home dated January 5, 1969

"Well, I just counted up the days and I found that I have one hundred and forty five days remaining in Southeast Asia. Time still seems to be going fast.

Thank you for all the Christmas presents. "

SOME EXPERIENCES OF OTHERS IN BRAVO COMPANY

A low flying helicopter was a tempting target for small arms fire. Normally, if one stayed above three thousand feet small arms fire was not effective. There were times, however, when this strategy did not work for us. Larger caliber guns on the ground, or the necessity to fly at times lower than three thousand feet would expose us to effective ground fire. Should a tracer round penetrate our helicopter's fuel cell, located beneath the cargo compartment deck, there was a

good chance of fire. There was really no way to put the fire out; we did not wear parachutes. The only recourse was to attempt to get the helicopter on the ground before the fire consumed everyone. One of Bravo's pilots was transferred to another unit. While there he had a fuel cell fire. Before he could get the aircraft on the ground most of the people on board had jumped to their deaths or were burned to death.

Another Bravo aviator seemed to draw more than his fair share of trouble. One night he was involved in a supply mission to some grunts that were engaged and needed more ammunition. His helicopter was in the process of landing, in complete darkness, when it was hit by a hail of small arms fire, all hell broke loose. One round entered the other pilot's helmet and blew it off his head, more rounds pounded into the machine causing an engine failure. They crashed. All of the crew spent that night in the jungle learning first hand what it was like to be a grunt under attack from enemy ground troops.

Some months later our same friend was struck by an AK-47 round in his lower leg. He was bleeding to death, but fast action by the crew chief and door gunner saved him by their pulling the pilot out of his seat and applying a tourniquet on his leg.

Almgren and I visited our friend in the hospital in Saigon. Lying next to him was a young soldier, heavily sedated, with no arms or legs. Our friend himself was under considerable medication, but considering all, doing well. He had serious damage to his leg and was going to be flown to Japan for reconstructive surgery. The doctors had, at one point, told him that he may lose his lower leg. The response: "If it means I get out of this place then take my leg!" The leg stayed on. I could not get out of the hospital fast enough.

PSYOPS

Psychological Operations, PSYOPS for short, was an attempt to persuade NVA and VC (Viet Cong) troops to give themselves up. On a PSYOPS mission we would mount loudspeakers and a tape player on the helicopter and broadcast messages explaining how disenchanting troops could surrender themselves. We also dropped leaflets containing the same message. I did not care for PSYOPS missions. I found them boring and dangerous. I certainly did not care for flying around below three thousand feet making a target of myself while trying to sell the enemy an idea they did not want to hear.

The day had been as boring as I expected it would be as we flew about, speakers blasting and leaflets flying. Below an American grunt company was dug

in. They called us on the radio and explained they had a problem. Apparently, the night before, they had come under attack and had lost one man. During the fire-fight a VC was also killed. The VC's body lay a few hundred yards from their perimeter. As the day wore on the grunts noticed more Vietnamese in the vicinity of the corpse. The grunts attempted to chase away or kill the individuals they saw, but with no success. They were growing nervous and agitated with the combination of the activity in the air and on the ground. I received an order on the radio to engage the individuals in question with our door guns. The loud speakers were shut off and the M-60s started to blaze away. Once the Vietnamese realized what was happening they started to run while machine gun rounds struck the dirt all around them. They ran until they were exhausted. We descended until it was possible to see that the Vietnamese were unarmed, and women. They had stopped trying to escape and just turned to face us. We did not fire anymore.

DEATH OF A FRIEND

Most of the army helicopter pilots in Vietnam were warrant officers. Warrants had very little military training in command of troops. As a result many of us took our flying a bit more seriously than many RLOs (real live officers) who had other duties. Since I held the rank of warrant officer I was not considered qualified by the army to lead or command other than as an aircraft commander.

As the months passed I became more senior amongst Bravo's pilots. My flying skills improved to the point that I was ready for more responsibility. Since the company needed pilots to serve extra duties it was normally the responsibility of a warrant officer to serve as the company instructor pilot (IP). I was asked to become the company IP.

Letter to home dated February 5, 1969

"Well, once again I am grounded, only this time it is for a different reason. It appears that since I have flown over one hundred and forty hours during the past thirty days I am required to take three days off. I think it is a good idea. I needed the rest.

Good news. I am going to become an instructor pilot for our company. I will be giving ninety day check rides to all the pilots and in-country check rides to the new people. Needless to say I am proud of myself since not everybody

makes I.P. while in Vietnam; however, just about everyone becomes one back in the States."

My job as an IP required that I become more familiar with the UH-1. I would be giving company check rides to all pilots and would be required to insure that they knew the limitations, systems, and procedures of the aircraft we all flew. It was also necessary to develop skills in emergency procedures such as engine and hydraulic failures. It was a good thing for me as a pilot to hone these skills in any case. I felt good about being an IP.

One of my new duties was to give check rides for aircraft commander (AC). The check ride for this endorsement would normally be a full day in length during which the applicant would demonstrate that he was ready for those responsibilities.

I was also given the extra duty of Safety Officer. Perhaps the CO (commanding officer) felt that as a result of my accident I had developed into one of the more safety conscious pilots, making me a good choice for the job. The position required little other than to remind everyone of safety by conducting meetings on the subject and to observe daily operations...looking for safety transgressions. I took this extra duty seriously also.

Mike LeMaster had done a lot of flying since our accident. He had become a candidate for AC by virtue of his time in country and hours flown. He had a few questionable habits as a pilot and had been given the unkind nickname of "Bore Sight." It was a topic of discussion whether or not Mike was ready to be trusted with the responsibilities of commanding a helicopter in Vietnam. Mike felt very adamant that he was ready and should be given a chance to prove himself. It was my job as the company instructor to make that decision.

The check ride did not progress very well. Mike's flying skills had come a long way since our accident, but on this day he had done a few things wrong that concerned me. In all fairness he was under a lot of pressure. Not only was he the target of peer criticism but he was flying with me---the guy riding next to him when he had flown into a tree a few months earlier. All this aside, I was preparing myself to give Mike a thumbs down on this day. Maybe in a few more weeks he would be ready, but not yet.

I think Mike new what I felt as we flew along at three thousand feet, but he said nothing. I was flying the helicopter when suddenly our engine failed. I lowered the collective stick and entered autorotation and told Mike to get on the radios and call Mayday! There was a very large rice patty within glide distance

and we auto rotated safely to it. As I maneuvered the helicopter Mike worked the radios feverishly. We touched down and came to a stop. My recent practice with power failures had paid off. Meanwhile the rotor blades had barely come to a stop when an air force jet fighter began to orbit us at low altitude. He was soon joined by numerous other aircraft. If there was a Viet Cong wanting to take a shot at us he must have thought better of it. I was amazed at how many aircraft had responded to Mike's radio calls for help. He had performed admirably to say the least.

I gave Mike LeMaster thumbs up on his AC check ride.

Not long after the engine failure I conducted a safety meeting. The topic for the night was the proper fit of our flight helmets. I invited an army flight surgeon to discuss the subject. We were all asked to put on our flight helmets and allow the doctor to inspect all of our fits. One man, a first lieutenant, was singled out by the doctor as having a perfect fitting helmet; all the rest of us failed. The remainder of the meeting was devoted to adjusting helmet straps and pads. I felt the meeting was constructive.

My efforts as an aircraft commander, instructor pilot, and safety officer were draining me. It was during this time period that I did a great part of my one thousand hours of the flying I would eventually do while in Vietnam. I needed a rest. I was sent to Vung Tau for a few days. Vung Tau was a coastal town used for in country R&Rs. For me it was a boring place, but it was restful and that was what I needed...rest. I remember drinking beer, eating pizza...little else. I began looking forward to returning to duty.

Letter to home dated April 3, 1969

"Fifty six days today. I am starting to get the short timers shakes. I am still flying almost every day and I will probably continue doing so until I leave.

I received m orders. I am going to Hunter Army Airfield in Savannah, Georgia."

Letter to home dated April 28, 1969

"They say the offensive is over but I tend to disagree. The Cav has been hit pretty hard during the past week. I won't be going into details. You can find those in the papers. I am trying to fly as little as possible, but that still puts me up every other day. So it looks like my last month here is going to be an interesting one.

Good news. My C.O. has given me a three day R&R in country. I will be spending it on the coast at Vung Tau. It should be a good break from the old routine. It will start on the third of May.

I will see you in thirty one days!"

The accident occurred on May 4, 1968.

Upon my return to Bravo Company I learned that we had lost two aircraft in a mid-air collision while I had been away. All eight crewmembers had perished...among them Mike LeMaster and the first lieutenant with the perfect fitting helmet. The helmet was found still on his head despite him having been decapitated.

The loss of my friends had a depressing effect on me. Vietnam stopped being an adventure; it became a morbid ordeal that I had to endure. This was not the first time I encountered death during my time in Vietnam, but it was the first time it visited my family. I knew most of the eight crewmembers well; their passing was felt deeply by all of us who remained in Bravo.

I had twenty five days remaining in Vietnam.

MOST CAME HOME---SOME DID NOT

I had passed into the last phase of my Vietnam experience...I was getting very close to going home. A very "short timer".

The date was May 11, 1968. I was on one of my last flights. It had been an uneventful day and my crew and I were thinking of going home and notching another day off the calendars.

I don't know what kind of day WO1 Jim Gilbert and Sergeant Paul Rodriguez had been having as they flew their OH-6 scout helicopter. I bet both men had a short timer's calendar and dreamed of a new car upon their return home. I would never have the honor of meeting them.

Late in the afternoon both of our aircraft were contacted by operations. A grunt unit was under heavy attack and running short of ammunition, a tactical emergency was declared. We were needed to fly in with a resupply of ammunition. The LZ would be hot and too small to land in making it necessary to fly the cargo in externally slung on our belly hook. This meant that our helicopter would be a sitting duck as it hovered with the external load. Gilbert and Rodriguez would go in first and attempt to draw attention away from us with covering fire as we delivered the load onto the drop point.

Upon initial radio contact with the grunt unit we were advised from which direction to approach from in order to avoid known enemy positions. The OH-6 scout would be in the lead, helping provide cover fire and diverting attention from us. We made the approach in while the scout flew ahead. After dropping off the load we did a one hundred and eighty degree pedal turn, pulled in maximum power and departed the way we had come in without taking any hits. Gilbert and Rodriquez were not so lucky; their machine was shot down and exploded in flames. Both men died.

In about eighteen days I would be going home. Those grunts we helped had enough ammunition to ward off the attack. WO1 James Gilbert and Sergeant Paul Rodriquez are enshrined on the "Wall" in Washington. I do not ever visit the "Wall" without paying respect to them for what they did for me and my crew, and those on the ground who needed our help.

MAY 29, 1969

On May 29, 1969 CW2 Paul Kearns found himself sitting amongst a group of homeward bound short timers at Saigon's airport waiting to board the "Freedom Bird" for the trip home. I was a different young man than had arrived three hundred and sixty five days earlier, much older in some ways, still very young in others. My age was twenty-two.

While we waited to board, another plane arrived and disembarked a group of FNG's, most of whom had three hundred and sixty five days remaining in Vietnam. A loud cheer erupted from us short timers.

Not long after, another loud cheer erupted as our Freedom Bird lifted off the runway and headed east, the dust and smoke of Vietnam sinking behind us.

EPILOGUE

My life was profoundly affected by my experience in Vietnam, and by the country that awaited me upon my return. Most Vietnam veterans found no parade when they returned. Our country was being torn apart by the war in Vietnam. The veterans of it found little praise. Instead we found contempt and pity. Politically, Vietnam was the first war that America lost. At such a young age it was difficult to separate myself from the political war awaiting me after returning from the real war. People who had not served, and did not understand, ridiculed my pride for what I had survived and accomplished. It would be some years before I was able to put many of those ghosts from that part of my life in their proper place, and regain a sense of balance and understanding. And yes... pride.

America would struggle in Vietnam for 6 more years after my return home. The last news image of the war I remember is of a helicopter evacuating South Vietnamese from the roof of the American Embassy in Saigon to American ships waiting off shore. I was no longer in the Army. I had recently married and was working as a civilian helicopter pilot when America extracted itself from Vietnam.

May the more than 58,000 Americans and uncounted hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese who died in that war rest in peace, and may the rest of us who came home not forget them.