

Gunship Crew Rescue

In the May/June 2017 Aviator magazine page 41, VHPA member Normal (Ed) Bruner made the following request: “On Friday, November 13th, 1967, I was flying one of the two gunship escorts for the 227th AHB 1st Air Cavalry Division for a flight of six slicks of infantry to protect another downed chopper. We had engaged the target and were subsequently shot down which occurred at night and southwest of Da Nang as I recall. This was my first experience observing "green" tracers and later learned this was the beginning of the major Tet offensive. The purpose of my writing is to determine if you could help me recall my crew members' names and see if any are still alive. I can't explain why I've waited this long to explore this. I believe my co-pilot's nickname was "Bones" and last name may have been Bradley.” [Editor's note: November 13, 2017 was a Monday]

The following is a response to Bruner's request from Clif Jenkins:

The names of the crew that rescued Ed Bruner, Bones, their crew chief, and gunner on November 13, 1967, were: John Custard, class 67-68, Clif Jenkins, class 67-9, Sergeant Stanley, door gunner, and a crew chief whose name I cannot remember. There is more to this story than plucking a downed helicopter crew from a rice paddy. As I found out later, this area was the location of a NVA Headquarters.

The following is my account of events that occurred on November 13, 1967. That day began like many others: taking off at first light from Key Ha North, test firing our guns over the sea, and proceeding to Landing Zone (LZ) Ross in our Area of Operation (AO), the Que Son Valley. We had a full day of Ash & Trash, plus medical evacuations, receiving minor combat damage to our aircraft. It was getting dark as we were finishing our last missions. We were ready to head home when we heard that a 1st Squadron of the 9th Cavalry, UH-1C was shot down. We joined our platoon leader, Lieutenant Jimmy, forming a flight of 6 slicks and 2 gun ships from D Company 227th. Our plan was to insert a company of Infantry to secure the downed aircraft where it could be recovered the following day. At that time our company, Company C 227th AHB, had 2 additional UH-1H's from Company A and 2 additional UH-1H's with crews from Company B attached to us. One of the 6 slicks joining our flight to secure the down aircraft was from another aviation unit at Chu Lai. Our company had 3 other helicopters in the AO.

We did not experience any problems at the Pickup Zone (PZ) or in route to the downed helicopter. On final approach to the LZ, we began receiving heavy small arms fire. One helicopter from our company and the helicopter from Chu Lai were unable to continue the mission due to combat damage; these were replaced by 2 helicopters from our company.

Back to a flight of 6 slicks, we did it all over again. At the LZ, we received heavier fire, resulting in one helicopter being shot down. We had a problem; we lost a helicopter trying to secure a helicopter. We still had to get the remainder of the Infantry inserted into the LZ to support the Infantry that were already there.

Another helicopter from our company joined our flight. With the last of the Infantry aboard, we headed to the LZ. When we got close to the LZ, one of our helicopters was shot down. Everyone from the downed helicopter was rescued and we continued to the LZ. On final approach, landing, and departure to the LZ, we received even heavier fire. Covering our flight as we lifted off the LZ, Bones and Burner's helicopter was shot down, landing less than a mile from the LZ. All the other flyable helicopters in our flight were headed to the hospital with wounded onboard, leaving us the only remaining helicopter in position to rescue them. We landed beside the downed aircraft and we started receiving fire again. It was obvious something was wrong as we were not returning fire. I looked back at Stanley and he had about 5 rounds of ammunition left and that was it. We got the downed crew onboard and took off.

We flew to LZ Ross and shut the helicopter down to examine it. There were quite a few holes; both rotor blades had heavy damage. Normally, we would never have flown the helicopter after seeing how severely it was damaged. However, LZ Ross was preparing for a ground attack. For our safety and those around us, as there is nothing more dangerous than panic stricken pilots on the ground, we took off and headed home. Flying at 60 Knots because of the damaged blades, we landed around midnight. The next morning after the sun came up, I was called to the flight line. When we examined the helicopter at LZ Ross, we didn't want to become targets due to bright light so we reduced the light from our flashlights. We missed seeing that the squash plate had taken a direct hit. It probably should have failed, but White Rope 6 was looking out for us. Our company referred to God as White Rope 6 and our Chaplain as White Rope 6 Mike, God's assistant. The name White Rope came from the rope around his robe. To the best of my knowledge, all 11 helicopters received combat damage and all the wounded recovered from their wounds. I remembered it was a night in November and it was on the 13th. As for day of the week, they were all the Same. I was not aware that it was a Friday the 13th until I read it in the "Looking For" column of the newsletter.

One of the wounded that night was Sergeant Bill Peterson, Crew Chief from Carney Michigan. He returned to our company on the 1st or 2nd of January 1968. On the 3rd of January 1968, Sergeant Peterson, the crew chef; the door gunner; a medic flying with us for the first time who wanted to be a door gunner; John Custard and myself at the controls. We welcomed back Sergeant Peterson in style and properly introduced the medic to what it was like being a door gunner. We took off from LZ Leslie, got shot down resulting in a very hard landing. The helicopter was destroyed, the crew chief and gunner received minor injuries and wounds. Two days later we were back flying except for the medic as I never saw him again. I believe he lost interest in becoming a door gunner.

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