

LZ Overlook
By Darrell L Jagers
CWO4 USA (Ret.)

On the evening of January 10, 1970 1Lt. Bill (Skip) King and I were assigned the mission to extract an observation and firebase by the name of LZ Overlook, located on a mountaintop overlooking "Happy Valley."

At 3,100 feet (MSL), this observation/firebase was situated on one of the highest peaks (14 degrees, 14' 46.22"N; 108 degrees, 48' 06.22" E) of a mountain range sandwiched between Happy Valley to the west and an area known as "The Crow's Foot" to the east, the southern most point of the Kim Son Valley. This area was aptly named because, when looking at a map of the area from above, seven tributaries flowing from the mountains along the southwest end of Kim Song Valley merged together forming a river flowing northeast to the Bong Son River and creating what appeared to be the foot of a crow.

Just four years before, in January and February, 1966 this area had been a part of one of the early major battles of the Vietnam War.....the Battle of Bong Son, with the 1st Cavalry Division facing off against the 22nd Regiment of the North Vietnamese Army's 3rd Division. This battle took place over several weeks beginning in the An Lao Valley and concluded in the Kim Son Valley with the results being an American victory.

The history of this area had been relayed to me by a fellow pilot, CW2 James Pratt, who served with the 1st Cavalry Division, (B/1/9) during 1967-68, before transitioning into the CH-47 and returning to Vietnam for a second tour. Because Jim was a seasoned pilot, very familiar with the entire II Corps area, I was intent upon listening and learning everything I could from him about the area we were assigned to support. Jim and several other second tour pilots were a treasure trove of information about Vietnam, tactics used in battles that had been fought throughout the country and the lessons they learned about flying in combat in this tropical and mountainous country. Other stories and songs they shared made great entertainment at the O-Club at night.

Happy Valley got its name from the fact that it was "happy" with supplies headed to the various NVA and VC units in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam. This was part of the main supply line running from Hanoi to the Mekong Delta through Laos and Cambodia. Reconnaissance seldom turned up movement during the day. But at night, the trail was a beehive of activity. Where they could, the NVA used trucks to move the supplies. But, ultimately they used whatever motor vehicles were available, bicycles, elephants and raw manpower, whatever was available to move the supplies needed to keep their forces to the south supplied.

The route started in North Vietnam and used many different valleys and trails throughout North Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam. Due to the constant

bombardment by U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy fighter-bombers, the Communist forces moved virtually everything by night and hid during the day.

It could take six months or more for an individual NVA soldier to walk the entire distance to join the war effort. These soldiers carried their weapons, ammunition and most times some mortar rounds or extra ammunition to resupply those already engaged in combat. They were also issued two sets of uniforms with the expectation they would last until the end of their tour....without knowing when that would be.

We tried many different ways to slow the flow of material and supplies. In addition to the Air Force and Navy air power, the U.S. Army established artillery firebases on mountaintops along the route, from which the M105's could rain down death and destruction upon the supply lines. Patrols were sent out regularly from bases like LZ Overlook to set up deadly ambushes along the trail or call in air strikes and artillery.

The observation/fire bases would also send out infantry scouts and Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols (LRRP Teams) to find the enemy trails and watch for activity. When they were successful, they would then call in a "fire mission" and attempt to destroy the enemy column using the trail. Naturally this did not make the NVA happy and, when they had the opportunity, the NVA would attack these firebases and attempt to overrun or destroy them completely.

These firebases were effective much of the time, but were limited by two things....weather and the ability to keep resupplied by helicopter.....the only way in or out. Consequently, when the monsoon rains and low cloud ceilings began to move in, it was absolutely imperative to pull the observation and firebases off the tops of the mountains before they were "socked in" by the clouds and impossible to support by air.

In the Central Highlands we learned that the weather was complicated. There are two seasons, rainy or dry and, unlike North Vietnam and the extreme southern areas of Vietnam, these can and do change from year to year, never occurring at the same time period in different years. The rainy season typically started from August to January with rainfall averaging 100 to 120 inches per season. Thus, when the meteorologists of the U.S. military forces determined the rainy season was about to begin, it became a scramble to pull in all the remote bases as quickly as possible.

This was the situation that dictated the mission given to the 196th and specifically me and Skip King on January 10, 1970.

LZ Overlook, the base we were assigned to extract, was situated, on a straight line, about 20 nautical miles southwest of LZ English, the largest American base in the area and the headquarters of the 173rd Airborne Brigade "Sky Soldiers" at Bong Son, near the coast of the South China Sea. On a straight line, it was also located about 45 nautical miles north of Lane Army Heliport, our home base. However, because of

tactical situations and weather conditions, it was necessary to navigate through the valleys, making the actual distance flown somewhat longer.

Our drop off zone for relocating the troops, supplies and artillery located on LZ Overlook was to be LZ Uplift, a small base about 14 nautical miles south of LZ English and along Highway 1, the main north-south highway running along the picturesque coast of Vietnam from Hanoi to Saigon.

The extraction was to be fairly simple. Two Chinooks from the 196th were assigned to the mission with the first load to be picked up at 0800 Hours on the morning of January 10. Most of the loads were external, sling loads. This saved time in loading and unloading the aircraft at both the PZ and the LZ. Instead of having the aircraft set down on the ground and lower its ramp to load 8,000 to 10,000 pounds of equipment and supplies, it was more efficient to have the loads prepared in nets or large steel containers (conex containers) while the helicopters were in route from the previous load.

It was also safer for two reasons. First the helicopter crews only had to hover for a few moments in the LZ before they were back in the air again. Secondly, if there was a malfunction or emergency situation within the complex electrical, mechanical or hydraulic systems of the Chinook, the load could be released immediately giving the aircraft greater maneuverability.

This also helped save time in completing the overall mission, which had recently became very important. Prior to and for most of 1969, there were no limits placed upon CH-47 units in completing missions. While the average number of hours flown on a mission might be six to eight hours, it was not unusual to see much longer days of 12 to 14 hours.

However, in late 1969, a directive was issued from USARV HQ to limit the number of hours for CH-47's to fly on daily missions to six hours. This included the time to fly to and from our base at Lane AHP. To fly longer than six hours required the approval of a "General-level officer." This was part of the new effort to control costs of the Vietnam War and the CH-47, at that time cost an estimated \$2,500 per hour just to operate the aircraft. The consequences of this directive meant that some missions could not be completed in one day and would require additional days to complete.

Each round trip from LZ Overlook to LZ Uplift, the drop off point, took approximately 45 minutes. This meant that the large helicopter could only carry two loads before having to refuel and top off its tanks to its maximum capacity of 4,000 pounds which lasted only 2 hours and 15 minutes of flight. It was a slow process. But it beat walking in the jungle and mountains for the troops. Plus there were no roads or trails into this area. This went on until twilight approached and it was decided to leave one Chinook load and a security force of 17 men on the mountaintop overnight.

With the limited capacity for instrument flight of Army helicopters combined with the limited instrument approach facilities in Vietnam, flying at night in the Central Highland mountains was only considered for extreme tactical emergencies. During the twenty months of my duty in Vietnam, I logged a total of 10 hours of night flight due to the extreme hazards of flying in the mountains. When the sun set, there were no lights from cities or towns and none of the tactical military bases had lights on their perimeters. It was so dark, especially during the cloudy monsoon season that most times you could not see your hand in front of your face. Using landing lights or position lights at night only invited ground fire from the enemy.

However even if we had the capacity to fly at night to get the last load out, we had to manage our mission time to six hours. By the time our wheels touched down at Lane AHP, we were at our mission maximum of six hours of flight for the day.

Unfortunately, during the night, the worst thing happened. The clouds dropped and the dreaded monsoon season was setting in. It was impossible for any aircraft to get into the mountaintop base. All the passes and valleys we used to get in to the base were socked in by clouds and rain. There was little we could do except wait for better weather and keep trying to complete the mission.

The 173rd Airborne Brigade "Sky Soldiers" based at LZ Overlook could not walk out. The mountain, with its steep cliffs and jungle-covered sides that had helped to protect them from being heavily attacked also served to imprison them. To try to march out to the nearest American base would have meant a very dangerous and difficult climb down the mountain followed by a long march through the jungle. It would also have taken more time than they had supplies to support. In addition to possibly dealing with enemy forces they had been harassing with constant artillery fire for several weeks, they would also be leaving behind 8,000 pounds of equipment and ammunition that could be used by the enemy for their own needs.

For the next five days I was assigned to missions in the area that allowed me to make attempts to fly back through the valleys to reach the firebase. However each day we were blocked by the weather conditions. Even though we could talk with the men on the AN PRC-25 field radios they carried, it was impossible for us to penetrate the weather and reach the men.

After several days the situation had become desperate for the entrapped unit. They were getting low on food and water. I called them by radio every day to check on their condition. I could hear their voices become more desperate each day as they asked if we were coming to get them. It was gut-wrenching to hear them respond each time I radioed that I could not get through...."Roger Flipper 25, we understand you're trying. We're not going anywhere. Hope to see you tomorrow!"

It reminded me of a mission I had been on in early December when a similar situation happened. A unit we had inserted and supplied in the jungles between

Cam Ranh Bay and Ban Me Thuot had become encircled and attacked. We could fly over the top of clouds and talk to them, but we could do nothing to assist them. Finally this base was overrun and dozens of men were killed or wounded. I would never forget the screams of the men on the radio. I heard and would continue to hear them in my dreams for years! I did not want that to happen again.

On the morning of January 16th, I had just completed a mission for another unit of the 173rd and decided to attempt another “run through the valleys and jungle” to get to the trapped men. This day I was flying with a new pilot in the unit, WO1 James E. (Jim) Coleman. Jim had just assigned to the 196th Flippers the month before and had only recently completed his “in country orientation” with the unit Instructor Pilots. This was to be one of his first missions flying with someone other than an instructor.

We were assigned to fly Flipper # 052, a well-respected aircraft maintained by a seasoned Flight Engineer, SP6 Rodney Yates, who kept his Chinook in immaculate operating condition. We also had a crew chief and door gunner on board, the normal crew of five. I was very confident that we had the best equipment to complete any mission.

As we flew further into the maize of valleys that day, the ceiling began to lift, giving us some encouragement. When we finally made radio contact of the unit we were told the mountaintop was clear of clouds and we could come on in! We could hear the excitement in their voices!

While we began preparation for the approach to pick up our load, we also began trying to contact the 61st Assault Helicopter Company (Lucky Stars and Star Blazers), the Huey unit assigned to this area and to this ground unit. It had been their assigned responsibility to bring out the final element of security troops after all equipment, supplies and M105 artillery pieces had been removed by Chinooks. As we approached the top of the mountain, we were unable to make radio contact. We were not concerned, however, we knew we could contact them as we left the mountains blocking the radio signals. The Huey's were only a 30 minute flight away and I knew they could launch their aircraft quickly, having flown numerous missions with them before.

After we picked up the last sling load and got about half way back to the drop off point at LZ Uplift, we finally made contact with the Lucky Stars. I explained the situation and that we were on our way out of the mountains with the last Chinook load. I asked them to launch their aircraft for the 17 men on the mountaintop. I was told, however, that their base was “socked in” with fog and rain and could not launch any aircraft. They asked me if I could go back in to pick up the men. However we were too low on fuel to attempt this.

As we dropped off our load at LZ Uplift I considered our options. We maneuvered to the hot refueling point and, while the crew chief and door gunner were topping off

the fuel tanks on each side of the ship, I discussed my thoughts with Jim Coleman and Rodney Yates.

By regulation and our unit SOP, CH-47's we were prohibited from making initial insertions to or final extractions from combat LZ's. At nearly two million dollars each, Chinooks were considered too valuable to risk for these missions.

Additionally, Chinooks were large targets by themselves and not as maneuverable as the smaller Huey.

I reasoned that nobody else was available for the mission. I knew the way in and out like the back of my hand. We would have a full load of fuel to work with and the weather had been fine going in and out. Besides, I knew if we were in their position I would be expecting someone to come back in to pick me up. Finally, I could still hear the screaming in my mind of the unit we had not been able to assist. I could not let these men down.

Even though Jim had been in country only a few weeks and was still learning the missions and getting the feel of the Chinook, he was ready to take on this mission. He had no second thoughts about making the attempt.

I was the Aircraft Commander and had final authority on whatever we did, I wanted to give the entire crew a chance to voice their thoughts. To a man, they were all ready to go back to LZ Overlook, especially Yates.

I will always remember this mission with Spec 6 Yates. He would recall it every time we flew together afterwards. He was extremely proud of what we accomplished that day. Knowing now that he would be terribly wounded a few months later as he was doing his job in the rear of the aircraft, I will never forget his enthusiasm and confidence in my ability to accomplish the mission as he said "I'm with you, Mister Jaggers!"

We took off immediately and began winding our way back through the valleys until we reached the base of the mountain upon which LZ Overlook was situated. In the time it had taken to refuel and drop off our load the weather conditions had deteriorated quickly and the top of the mountain was in the clouds again!

I decided to fly to the base of the clouds to see if I could figure out a solution. I was not going to give up that easily. Thanks to the power of the massive Lycoming turbine engines, I had plenty of power to hover far above the jungle floor, as we crept up the side of the mountain.

Reaching the base of the clouds, I determined from my altimeter that we were only about 200 feet from the top of the mountain and the men. Even though I could only see a few feet into the clouds, I made one of those decisions that was more instinctive and a reaction to the desperation of the situation. I decided to slowly climb into the clouds and hover up the side of the mountain.

Keeping the rocks and jungle trees away from the rotor blades, but staying as close as possible so I could maintain our reference to the mountainside and using our attitude indicator to keep the aircraft level, I inched my way to the top. I simultaneously called for the troops on the ground to illuminate some incendiary flares at their position in order to help me locate them through the dense clouds.

Within minutes we were at the top and could barely make out the incendiary flares burning brightly though the clouds. But it was all we needed. We hovered forward to the flares, landed and Yates immediately lowered the rear ramp and 17 men scrambled on board!

As the ramp was being raised, I was preparing for an instrument takeoff into the clouds. It was not what I wanted to do because we had only received very basic instrument training in flight training, flying a Bell OH-13 for a few hours over the state of Georgia out of Hunter AAF. Fortunately a few weeks before I had made some practice GCA (Ground Controlled Approach) radar approaches at Phu Cat Air Force Base, just 40 miles south. Our new commander, Major Harold Zumbro, a seasoned aviator on his second combat tour in Vietnam, had flown with me on a mission and, with many more hours of flight time than me, loved instrument flying and wanted to make some practice approaches under the "hood" (a device attached to the flight helmet used to limit the pilot's vision to the instrument panel). Consequently I was more proficient and comfortable with this possibility than I would normally have been.

As I began applying power to the engines, I could see a small break in the clouds on the north side of the mountaintop. I immediately picked up the aircraft and dove for the hole that had just been provided to us. I continued the dive all the way to the deck of the valley below us. However the valley led to the northwest and the area was not friendly at all. We were in the middle of Happy Valley at treetop level!

I thought I could hear gunfire below and kept watching for tracers arching through the sky indicating the enemy had us in sight. Fortunately at that altitude and at 100 knots we were a difficult target to hit. While they might be able to hear the loud engines and rotors, this noise bounced from tree to tree in the jungle, making it almost impossible to tell exactly where we were coming from or going to. As we sped along, my main concern was how we were going to be able to get out of this valley and either fly south or east to the coast and friendly bases.

Turning to Jim Coleman, I asked him to try to find our position on the map and let me know if there were any routes out of the area. However with no marked roads, no navigational radio aids and dense jungle covered mountainsides, every valley and ridgeline looked the same. Accurate navigation was impossible!

It was one thing to pluck the men off the mountain. But now I was worrying that it was going to be futile and that I had possibly put us in the position to have the men we were attempting to rescue as well as our own flight crew killed.

After several more minutes of flying to the northwest deeper into enemy territory, I decided it was time for another decision and a different course of action. I turned to the east (toward the coast and the nearest friendly bases) and flew to the top of the ridge line, coming to a hover and looking for a saddle or a pass or anything that might give us a chance to get out of Happy Valley.

Finally finding a point that looked promising, I edged the giant helicopter forward. Dragging the landing gear through the treetops while the rotors and cockpit remained in the clouds, we inched our way along until we were in the next valley and clear of the clouds.

Finding success with this maneuver, I decided to try it again....and again. After several more ridge lines and valleys we came to an area that looked familiar. It was the An Lao Valley.....another dangerous valley that continued to see many ongoing battles between the NVA and the 173rd throughout the war. We wasted no time in crossing this valley and the last ridgeline before we began to see rice paddies and villages instead of jungle. I knew we were close to the coast!

Finally I could determine we were just a few miles north of LZ English. Turning the helicopter south, I turned the controls over to Jim and let him fly the remaining 30 minutes to LZ Uplift.

As we touched down, I finally started to relax and allow myself to breathe more easily. I turned to the rear of the cargo compartment to watch the men leave. Just as I turned around a gaunt, grizzled, unshaven staff sergeant stuck his head in the cockpit. Tears were in his eyes while he was laughing, shaking my hand, hugging me and Jim and slapping us on the back, while thanking us over and over! I could also see his men celebrating, jumping up and down and laughing as they exited the rear of the Chinook. It was a great moment I will never forget!

After the last of the happy soldiers left the aircraft and we were on our way back to our home base at Lane AHP, the crew laughed and talked about the mission we had just completed. It was nervous laughter and I knew there would be more than a few drinks tossed down that night. I knew how close we had come to making our last flight I believe our crew had the same thoughts. We talked about it as we flew back, thankful we would be around to fly another day.

Because I was concerned over my decision to break regulations and ignore our SOP, I cautioned the crew to not talk about the mission to anyone else. In most helicopter units we would have been written up for commendations or medals. But I was more afraid of the consequences if Major Zumbro, whom I respected greatly, found out that I had risked the live of my crew on a voluntary mission of mercy. In retrospect,

as I got to know him better, I really believe he would have done the same thing....except that he probably would have made the instrument take off instead of plowing through treetops!!

However, it was enough for me to know that we had made a difference and 17 men were walking around their base camp that night when they started the day wondering if they would live to see the sunset.

I wish now that I had been able to get medals for Jim Coleman, Rodney Yates and the other two crewmen. I feel I owe these men a tribute for being brave enough to follow me into what could have been our "valley of death." Their confidence in me gave me the courage to try. I will never forget the satisfaction and the warm glow of just being alive at the end of the day and knowing 17 other men were also alive and in their own bunks instead of sitting alone on a far off mountaintop overlooking Happy Valley.