

Nha Be, The Mission In Which Dreams Were Made

There was always this one mission that we would fight over. I mean, literally fight. I actually snuck out to the flight line one night to sabotage another aircraft so it wouldn't be flyable. Didn't work, because the crew chief was sleeping with his ship just to prevent that.

Nha Be, a little bitty scrap of pierce steel planked heliport next to the Mekong river south of Saigon. Owned by the Navy and manned by the swift boat crews and a SEAL Detachment, it didn't seem to offer much. But for a Crossbow Light Fire Team, used to sleeping in leaky tents, eating mess hall left overs and using a four holer out back, Nha Be was the place you dreamed about.

We always left just before dawn. The AC would let us close up the doors, put down the guns and we would climb out over the rubber trees of Lai Khe at the nose bleed altitude of 2,000 feet. Listening to AFVN radio, watching the sun break out of the south China Sea, far to the east, and anticipating Nha Be, it was every bit as good as an in-country R & R.

The best possible would be crewing my own ship as I usually did; but on this one occasion, I flew gunner for Ed "Hick" Compton on the platoon "Hog" ship, Crossbow 418. The hog was named for it's armament, twenty four pairs of 2.75" rockets, mounted twenty four on a side. With the exception of the two bungee cord mounted M60 door guns, that was the only armament. Our wingman was Crossbow 419 crewed by Randy Degood. 419 had two miniguns, the door guns, and fourteen rockets.

Hick's door gunner was in Bangkok, exploring the cultural attractions, my ship was in intermediate maintenance, so I lucked out. The only thing bad was Hick was not going to give up his left door seat, so I was going to have to fire the doorgun upside down. I hated that. The reason was the ejection of spent brass on the doorgun was from the right side. If I fired the gun normally, the brass would be ejected outside the aircraft and could be blown into the tail rotor and damaging it.

But, didn't matter, ain't nothing but a thing, because we were going to Nha Be. You have to understand, Nha Be was Navy, and Navy meant good food. I mean really, really good food. We'd always cruise in before 0700, so we could still get breakfast. What you did was pick up a tray, and then walk up to the fry cook and he would say,

"How do you want your eggs?"

The first time that happened, I just stood there. The last real egg I had was somewhere east of the Golden Gate and about 100 years before. You have to remember, we were standing in a BUILDING and it had FLORESCENT LIGHTS and if you listened real close, I mean hold your breath and listen, you could hear a TOILET flushing.

I was down there one time with my ship and had to go looking for my gunner and found him in the head(!) and he was just flushing the toilet and watching the water swirl and sink out of sight, over and over again. He had this strange, little boy smile, like he had just discovered how a new toy worked.

But, anyways, after the fry cook, you moved down the line, and the next guy would ask you what kind of meat you wanted. And again, you just stared at him because you just couldn't figure out what he was saying. He'd wait for a minute, and then, politely, ask again,

"Ham, Bacon, Steak? What kind of meat do you want."

And in your best Dickens little boy voice say,

"Please, could I have all three?"

And the cook would grin and say,

"Why, sure, always happy to feed somebody that enjoys my cooking."

And you'd just stand there wondering where in the hell these people were when the Army Recruiter cruised through town.

And last, but not least, there was the milk machine. When we got milk at Lai Khe, it was usually crunchy style. It was reconstituted and a dirty gray color and had the consistency of colored water. But at Nha Be, it was the real thing, thick and rich and cold enough to make the back of your throat ache.

That was just breakfast. We would arrive at dawn and stay until dusk just so we could eat. I can remember times when we had to keep an eye on the pilots while we were going home because they were so engorged with food that they couldn't stay awake.

Mostly, we were just on stand by for mission support in case one of the swift boats or the PBRs (Patrol Boat, River) would get in trouble. We'd lay along the river, next

to the aircraft and watch the river go by, sucking on cigarettes and whining to the aircraft commander about having "just one, honest, just one," because there was another attraction and that was the Petty Officer's Club.

It usually opened about 1400; and, if we whined long enough, the ACs would usually let one of us make a run. Now normally, that would mean an argument about who was going, but not at Nha Be. We'd cut cards; play Rock, Paper, Scissors; and on occasion make fierce scowls and pretend to offer the rest of the guys to hand their heads to them. I usually won, not because I was the luckiest or the most fierce, but because I had been there the longest and that was the ultimate macho.

In a sudden acceptance of noble obligation, I would offer to buy and then head into the coldest room in III Corps. I mean, it was like walking into the back of an Eskimo Pie truck that came around the neighborhood when I was a kid. Don't get me wrong, every other building was air conditioned, but the Petty Officer was COLD. And it was dark.

Usually by the time we got in there, we had been in the sun for eight or more hours and staring at the sun's reflection from the river. When you walked in the Club, you had to stop immediately to catch your breath because it was suddenly frozen and then stand there enjoying the cold while your eyes adjusted. After your pupils finally widened enough to see, you realized you were back in the States at a cocktail lounge. I mean the long, hardwood curving bar, the tables with plush, red leather chairs and a juke box playing some where in the back ground.

When you finally got your nerve up and walked up to the bar, the bartender, some old squid, would smile and say "you look like you need a cold one" and reach below the bar and put a BOTTLE of San Miguel in front of you. He'd pop the cap off for you and start to wipe the ice and water sliding down the neck; but I always stopped him, and, just lovingly, with a gentle caress, reach out and pick the bottle up and tilt my head back and slowly let it trickle down my throat.

And then, Dickens would pop into my mind again; and I'd say, "Please, Sir, could I have eight more to go."

And he'd grin and say, "Well, that'll take a minute; why don't you have another while I find a box or something to carry them in."

And I'd smile, joining the conspiracy spanning two or three generations and kill another one while I waited.

Ah, Nha Be, I can still dream of the missions there.

Anyways, there we are, sitting out by the river, engorged with food and slightly sleepy from full strength San Miguels, when this Navy jg comes walking from the Ops Hooch, map in hand.

We all slowly climbed to our feet and then tried to decide whether or not to salute and then decided, no hat, no salute. The Navy Lieutenant didn't seem to notice and returned our non salute with a real salute and said, "Stand at ease, men."

I took that literally and collapsed into a squat on one of the cross tubes from where I was leaning on the cabin wall. "Got a mission for you...a recon by fire, down in the Rung Sat Corridor."

This managed to perk up my interest to the extent that I stretched out my legs and slid down the cross tubes to the pierce steel planking of the helipad. Then I had to casually, in hopes no one noticed, stand up because steel plating was HOT!

So, we strapped on all of our gear, armed the systems, gave one farewell glance to the mess hall, and launched to the south.

The Rung Sat Corridor was just barren mud flats. The dinks were in there, but I had never seen one on land. The only time we got kills was near the river banks and back in the mud flats we would find an occasional structure, but we never saw anyone. Of course, since the whole area was a free fire zone, anyone hearing the aircraft had plenty of time to hide.

In a recon by fire, the lead ship would be down low, and the trail back a quarter of mile or so, and high enough that he could dive down and fire his rockets if we identified a target or if we drew fire. You'll remember, I was on a Hog, so the only firing we would do, was with the door guns, saving the rockets for a real target.

I fumbled around for a minute with the upside down M60, trying to figure a comfortable way to fire it. I finally decided the hell with it, glanced around to see if anyone was looking, and then hung the gun the right way. Finding this more comfortable, I finally started watching the ground on my side.

The AC had his map out and was able to identify two major creeks which marked the boundaries of our area of operations (AO), and we started searching. I was just about to fire at something when the AC said on the intercom,

"Okay, guys, have smoke ready if you spot something; and go ahead and start firing it up."

What Hick and I were doing was firing at likely hiding places just to see if something would fire back. Now if you tried that up at Song Be or An Loc, you might get a real unhealthy (to you) reaction; but down here in the mud flats, it was just pure fun.

We usually used 100 per cent tracer ammo for the door guns as opposed to one tracer/four ball which was standard. The excuse was that it made it much easier to bring supporting fire close into troops in contact, but the real reason was it was pretty in day light and spectacular at night. We were flying a counter battery mortar mission one night near Lai Khe and I managed to write my name "Bud" in the air with tracers well enough that our wingman noticed.

But today, we had duplex rounds. Duplex belted ammo was tipped with green paint. It was loaded in the belts one standard tracer with four duplex rounds. Each cartridge had two slugs. The first one weighed about 150 grains. It had been hollowed out to have a second round, about 110 grains, inserted into the base. A real neat idea. As you fired it, and if you could see the bullet strike, you could actually see two patterns going across the ground, with one pattern about three feet higher than where you were aiming. This effectively doubled the rate of fire of the M60 to almost 1,400 rounds per minute.

Of course, we had all ready doubled the effective rate of fire to our guns by adding a half of an operating rod spring to the stock spring and placing a couple of nickels behind the buffer in the butt stock. This caused the gun to seriously speed up.

So there we were...eight, fun-loving, post-puberty adolescents, with two heavily armed helicopter gunships, out for a day of recreational shooting.

We rushed along the ground, spraying tracers and ricochets at bushes and pools of water, oooooohing and aaahhing at the neat patterns of the duplex rounds, laughing as our tracers bounced skyward, and generally having a real good time.

Then Hick spotted the bunker.

"Bunker, Sir, left side, more bunkers, a pen, PIGS! There's pigs in the pen!"

We all strained to look out the left side and see something actually alive and moving in this sea of mud and silt.

"All right, Hick, you're clear to fire and kill the pigs. Hang on a minute, I'll circle to the left."

And he quickly called our wingman, told him what we had; and we climbed up to about 200 feet. As Hick started firing, I glanced back and could see our wingman following us around the race track we had formed over the pens.

"Hey, can I let my gunners shoot, too?"

This, in the clear, on our VHF radio.

"Go for it."

Well, this went on for a minute, and I started getting frustrated; so I went into whine mode which always worked.

"Hey, Sir! On this next lap, can you extend it out, do a figure eight, and let the right side fire, too?"

I found that in dealing with Warrant Officers, if you used aeronautical phrases and terms, they figured that you knew what you were talking about; and they generally went along with it.

Well, that's what happened; and we soon came back into the target area. I was spraying rounds all over the place; I even directed some at the pigs every once in a while in case someone was watching.

When we made our figure eight, our wingman got a little behind; and, as we started our lap, he ended up about equidistant from us as we raced around. I didn't really pay any attention to this until I saw a tracer bounce off some water and go whipping straight back up right behind our tail boom.

This kind of honked me off, and I was going to say something when all of a sudden I heard,

Snick... Snick, snick, snick THUD THUD!

There's only one thing in the world that makes that sound. The snicks were rounds passing through sheet metal, and the thuds were the sounds of something substantial being hit. I started to key my microphone and yell when I saw the master caution light come on; then the whole Christmas tree on the avionics console lit up. The AC started yelling that there was no engine oil pressure and then the engine RPM started bleeding off. That funny sound when there was no sound behind you, and it took a minute to realize the STUPID ENGINE HAD QUIT.

Well, Mr. Peters dropped the collective, got a quick call off to the wingman, who was yelling back about smoke from the hot end, and we started down. I spotted what looked like a clear area that was sort of dry, and I called an LZ at one o'clock which just coincidentally was the area we're headed at.

Hick and I started spraying the only two tree lines in sight (figures) and that was when we ran out of air speed and forward motion. Mr Peters cranked the collective up, we flared, and then settled gently into...about two feet of mud. The aircraft didn't even slide with the forward motion we had left. It just hit, got stuck like fly paper; and we stopped. I went to the forward end of my chicken strap, I saw the blades flex all the way down far enough that both pilots ducked, and then we were there.

I hopped out with my Browning Hi Power in my hand to check the engine fire. Then I grabbed hold of the floor of the aircraft and the bottom of my seat and tried to pull myself back up out of the mud I had sank into. I finally found the skid to stand on, realized we weren't on fire, and used the skid to walk forward and help my pilot out.

I resisted the temptation to not tell him about the mud; but, being smarter than me and figuring that something was up when he realized the cockpit door was at ground level, he used the forward skid cap to stand on and turned around and laughed at me.

I'm sure it was just nervous energy, though.

Our wingman kept making passes over the top of us, and a Seawolf light-fire team showed up on station to relieve him. We ended up staying until Friar Tuck, the Robin Hood maintenance ship, showed up and started to rig the Charley model for slinging by a Chinook. While they were doing that, I located a hole in the right engine nacelle and, after opening the nacelle, found a severed oil line from the engine oil reservoir. And about three feet below that, in the cargo compartment, there was a slightly smaller hole.

We finally got back to Lai Khe to find there was no water left in the shower tanks, the mess hall had closed, and both clubs were locked up because of an early mission.

And on Crossbow 419, our wingman, where you would expect to find a painted miniature Japanese or German flag thirty years earlier, there was a tiny, painted silhouette of a Charley Model Huey gunship.