

# Chinook MEDEVAC from Nui Ba Den

By [Gary Roush](#), 242 ASHC Muleskinners

The most prominent terrain feature in III Corps was Nui Ba Den, the Black Virgin Mountain that protruded 3,235 feet above the rest of the area. It was visible for many miles on clear days and was great as a navigation reference. Its prominence was important for allied communications as a relay communication station and observation point for the Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA). The summit was first occupied by American forces in 1964 and was a frequent target of the Viet Cong who occupied most of the rest of the mountain which contained caves and supposedly contained the enemy head quarters for all of South Vietnam, COSVN. This key communications center was used by more than 10 U.S. units including radio intercepts for intelligence purposes. In May 1968, the top was completely overrun by the VC/NVA and all of the U.S. communication equipment was destroyed so the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division deployed A Company, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 22<sup>nd</sup> Infantry to the top of the mountain on the morning of 17 August for its defense. This timing turned out to be very lucky.

The approximately 180 signal corps, engineer and infantry troops stationed on the top of the mountain relied entirely on helicopters for all support including water. Most of this support fell to the 242 Assault Support Helicopter Company, Muleskinners out of Cu Chi. As a result, we flew to the mountain nearly every day delivering supplies and replacements from Tay Ninh.



**242 ASHC Chinook on top of Nui Ba Den**

In August 1968, I was a newly appointed aircraft commander (AC) with the Muleskinners and loved flying to the mountain so I volunteered for those missions. We were restricted to flying no more than 120 hours in a 30

day period and I was always at the max so I did not fly to the mountain every day. Mountain flying was challenging and exciting. With the combination of high density altitude, hovering out of ground effect in very tight quarters, coupled with high and gusty winds, it was definitely challenging. One day I was hovering over a spot on the mountain while indicating 50 knots. It was a blast. Unfortunately we got shot at occasionally too.

Unbeknownst to the Muleskinners, the Battle for Tay Ninh began on 17 August 1968. This battle lasted until 27 September 1968 and would prove to be a very busy time for us. On 18 August 1968, my crew and I took off at first light for Tay Ninh to accomplish our missions on Nui Ba Den. Unfortunately the only other crew member I know who was on that flight was flight engineer SP5 John D. Labelle. The Muleskinners had outstanding crews. The guys in the back were extraordinary and were highly respected by the pilots. Without them, we could never have done our job. You will see the value of those guys in a moment.

The monsoon season was in full swing so weather was a constant challenge during August and September. We tried to complete all of our sorties before mid afternoon because that is when the rain would start. On 18 August, the visibility was good but there was a cloud layer at about 2,000 feet. With the good visibility, we could see Nui Ba Den shortly after take off from Cu Chi and with the low ceiling it was obvious missions to the mountain would have to wait for the clouds to clear since the top was completely covered with clouds. When we got within FM radio range, we called the mountain to tell them there would be a delay in their daily resupply. We then discovered they had been overrun during the night and were desperate to get 23 wounded MEDEVACED to Tay Ninh.

At 0234 hours, the VC/NVA made an attempt to disrupt the communications into and out of Tay Ninh by attacking the top of Nui Ba Den with an estimated company size unit. They attacked with small arms, automatic weapons and rockets against the bunker line defended only 14 hours earlier by A/3/22 INF 25 DIV. This was a coordinated attack matching the attack time on several locations between Tay Ninh and Nui Ba Den including Fire Support Base BUELL II. The VC were successful in breaching the bunker line in the helipad area and managed to blow up one generator. (We helped replace that generator later, but that's another story.) After over three hours of close quarter fighting, the Americans finally drove the VC off the summit by about 0615 hours. The VC left behind 15 dead and several weapons including 100 satchel charges and 20 RPG rocket rounds. The Americans suffered eight killed in action (KIA) and 23 wounded. The attackers failed in their mission to cut off American communications but now the Americans had another problem – how to get their wounded evacuated.

According to our radio call to the unit we were supporting, DUSTOFF Hueys had attempted to land at the mountain top helipad without success. They were desperate to get some help and the company commander was practically begging us to try. So into the clouds we go feeling our way to the mountain top. Man was that a bad idea or what!? In hind sight, I am amazed we did not crash into the mountain. The man on the radio would say, "We can hear you but can not see you, keep on coming." We did this twice. All I can say is we were VERY lucky not to hit the mountain. Just as we were about to give up like the Hueys had done, someone in the crew came up with the idea of flying down to the base of the clouds and hovering up the side of the mountain. Our Chinook was empty so we had lots of power to hover at this altitude. So that is what we did. Because of my many sorties to the mountain, I knew the terrain very well and could picture the helipad in my mind along with its surrounding obstacles. Now all I had to do was get to the

helipad. No one in flight school taught me how to hover up the side of a mountain in the clouds!

But wait! The VC/NVA had just broken contact about an hour earlier so where were they now? My reasoning was that no self respecting VC would ever dream of a big lumbering, very noisy helicopter hovering right over their heads right after a major attack. So my logic was it would be such a surprise they would not do anything about it. I also rationalized that if our troops could not see us, neither could Charlie. Just in case though, I instructed my left door gunner to shoot anything that moved. I also instructed the left gunner to help by calling out obstacles. I was at the controls flying from the left seat. The pilot read off the instrument readings for vertical speed and altitude to give me some idea about where we were in relationship to the top and everybody looked for obstacles. And oh by the way, I had been shot at recently from this side of the mountain and took six rounds.

Now to find the helipad and not their bank of antennas. After hovering for what seemed like an hour, we finally came to the perimeter barbed wire, bunkers and finally the landing pad appeared. Needless to say, I was glad to have all four wheels safely on the ground. After a few seconds I started looking around.

The scene was like it had come out of a horror movie. In the swirling mist of the clouds, I could just make out the outline of bodies and they were lying everywhere. The rotorwash from the Chinook was slowly clearing the area right around the landing pad, revealing the nightmare our troops must have experienced minutes before. Directly under my feet through the chin bubble was a gook with half of his head missing. Next to him was another grotesque figure of a Viet Cong and then the American dead and wounded neatly lying in a row on the edge of the resupply pad, giving us just enough room to land. The nearby uninjured troops who were on guard never took their eyes from the now-breached perimeter. This was not characteristic, since we were normally the center of attention, with everyone watching us perform our hovering feats.

Fortunately we could take all 23 of the wounded at once, because I certainly did not want to go through this again. But what about the departure? My memory recalled the antennas straight ahead, still covered by the clouds, and on both sides the bunkers with high RPG fences also in the clouds, so a vertical or 180-degree turn departure were the only two reasonable alternatives, other than hovering back down the side like we had come up and I certainly did not want to do that again.

I had one instructor during primary flight school at Fort Wolters, Texas teach me how to do backward takeoffs, and my instrument instructor, CPT Adam Runk, at Fort Rucker taught me 0/0 takeoffs under the hood. Doing one was crazy, but putting both together was suicide. A vertical takeoff was certainly possible, but how high did the clouds go and how would we avoid the mountains on the way down? The only logical procedure was a hovering 180-degree turn and then a 0/0 standard takeoff on the back course of a normal approach until we were sure to be clear of the mountain, then a standard

instrument descent out of the clouds just like a VOR approach. Sounds simple, but how do you hover under Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) in a tight LZ?

In order to get high enough to get all four wheels off the ground, the cockpit will be in the clouds and I will not be able to see the ground. No one thought to teach me how to hover IFR! But wait, I have made this turn hundreds of times in good weather, so with a little care and concentration on the instruments and the help of the other four pairs of eyes to stay over the landing pad, it should work. There was no way I was going to stay on top of that mountain until the weather cleared.

The plan worked. Throughout the 180-degree hovering turn, at least one of the four other crew members had sight of the ground and gave me, in turn, the necessary directions to stay over the landing pad. Since the Chinook is so large and most loads in Vietnam were carried externally, out of sight of the pilots (the cargo hook was about 30 feet behind the cockpit), we were used to getting reliable hovering directions from the crew. I was not able to see the ground shortly after lifting the front wheels off the ground until we broke out of the clouds well away from the mountain. This marked my first and last 0/0 takeoff and landing in actual weather. There were other low-visibility landings due to monsoon rains, but no other below acceptable visibility takeoffs. After dropping off the wounded at the Tay Ninh Field Hospital, we went back for the KIAs but decided it was not worth the risk. Another Chinook picked them up after the weather cleared.

Because of limited space on top of the mountain, it was decided not to burn the Viet Cong bodies there, as was common practice. Instead they were put in a cargo net to be hauled as an external load to a suitable burning site by a Chinook flown by my hootch mate Mike Ryan. Shortly after takeoff with the sling load of enemy bodies, the sling became disengaged from the cargo hook, dumping the contents over the adjoining small mountain. Since the Viet Cong owned that mountain they were given an unexpected chance to recover their dead.

The interesting thing about this experience is that I did not report it because I thought I might get into trouble for unnecessarily risking the lives of my crew. In hind sight we probably should have gotten medals for what we did, but the satisfaction of helping out our wounded soldiers was award enough. I have often wondered what happened to those 23 wounded. Perhaps this article will help me find out.