

Cu Chi Sapper Attack

by [John LaBelle](#)

My name is John Labelle. I was a flight engineer with the 242nd Assault Support Helicopter Company, the Muleskinners in Cu Chi, Republic of Vietnam from June 1968 to February 1970. In the predawn hours of 2/26/69, I was present during a ground attack by North Vietnamese Sappers on our flight line. I was part of a reactionary force asleep on my helicopter when the attack came. One crewmember was on each helicopter in its protective revetment to assist in any attack that might occur. We were warned this may happen. We had rotated crewmen each night for two weeks in anticipation of this event. It was very difficult because we carried out our normal duties of flying daily also. It was exhausting.

The predawn attack on a moonless night began with a huge explosion in the revetment directly across from mine. What appeared to be a mortar but with no crump sound on impact was in fact a satchel charge in or behind the helicopter parked in that space. The revetment walls were made of sandwiched PSP filled with sandbags and a steel PSP floor. The explosion was accurate and profound; sending a fireball 80 feet in the air. Each Chinook was fully fueled with 5000 lbs of JP4. When the second ship blew I knew something bad was happening. I rolled to the floor and opened the side door of the CH47. I grabbed my duty weapon, a 45 pistol and got out of the ship. I was amazed to see the 3rd, 4th and 5th ships blow up in rapid succession. I knew there was a crewmember on each ship dealing with this situation. As I came to the front of the ship the raging fires revealed personnel at the opposite end of the runway about 100 yards away talking and motioning with their arms. One of them came running my way. It was one of the crewmen from another ship and he was very excited and alarmed to say the least. He told me that the soldiers we saw were VC. As he grabbed me and we looked hard, we both realized they were NVA with AK47 rifles glinting in the firelight. This crewman was a short fellow from Guam with dark hair and olive skin. The NVA had taken him for one of their own and he had run right by them in the confusion. His name was Jose Torres.

As more helicopters exploded in flames on both sides of the now roaring runway blazes, I told the young man from Guam we should take cover. At that moment a huge explosion roared over our heads knocking us to our knees and we moved to the rear of my helicopter and hid in the tall grass beside the revetment. As the helicopters continued to blow and burn brightly, a sapper, naked and muddy ran through my revetment and exited right beside us,

headed for the bunker line and darkness. His joints were tied with wire to prevent blood loss if shot or cut and he had a camouflage poncho liner over his head for crouch concealment. He had 3 or 4 RPG rounds strapped to his back.

My adrenaline was at an all time high and so I stepped from the shadow with my 45 pistol, aimed, and let the sapper have it. I fired 5 or 6 shots, missing his load of RPG every time. I thought he'd go off like a roman candle. I did not realize that the 45 tracer rounds I had loaded were of limited ballistic quality and were not accurate beyond 5 or 10 yards. I retreated to the darkness still unaware of my bad choice of ammo and thinking I was a very bad shot.

Soon I noticed the unfinished bunker between the next ship and mine had some activity. I grabbed my buddy and we cautiously went for the bunker. Four or five crewmen from other ships had rallied to this point. We did not know the fate of the rest of the guys caught in the explosions around us. Within a few minutes dawn approached and we moved out to find our friends past the wrecks of burning helicopters. When Jose Purdom, an infantry doorgunner, told me he had killed a sapper with his 45 that was carrying an RPG launcher and had blown the forward pylon of my helicopter off, I said I had seen his ammo bearer run through my revetment. We continued up the line as dawn broke to daylight and the carnage became apparent.

Suddenly a fire truck appears, attempting to douse the huge fires in one of the revetments close to us. The firemen in silver suits are suddenly hit with shrapnel as an RPG makes a direct hit on the fire truck. The fight is still on. At just about the same time two military policemen drive up in a jeep to ask if we are having a bad day, unaware of the battle raging all around us.

Next door the POL and ammo dump with rockets and fuel explodes with a tremendous roar, the victim of sappers satchel charges I am sure. Behind the MP suddenly five NVA/VC soldiers with shoulder slung rifles appear as they run down a ditch double time in an orderly exfiltration just yards away. When I point this out the MPs jump under their jeep, M16s and all. I beg for one of their rifles, feeling very under-armed at this point. They refuse because they are terrified. So me and my 45 pistol charge the 5 NVA/VC. My crappy bullets once again save me because the men I was shooting at never even saw me. They had been deep in the huge camp and were moving quickly to escape. I charged the

group from behind as fast as I could run. More of that adrenaline. I crested the road when a blast from an RPG threw me forward to my knees and just about blew my shirt off. My ears were ringing. My adrenaline still pumping I jumped up and put another clip in my pistol and continued the charge only not as fast as I was a bit dazed. I began to realize I was outgunned and that a grenadier was targeting me to protect his brothers in arms. A common tactic for infantry.

Suddenly a large explosion ten feet or less to my right as I finished my last clip sends shrapnel everywhere. With my arm extended in shooting position, I hear a large piece of steel go whizzing past very close and I feel its burn. I'm HIT. I instantly feel very lucky to be alive because the large piece just missed my head and bounced off my ribs. Six inches higher, one inch to the rear and I was dead. At this point I retreated to the bunker for safety and to assess my wounds. I remember acknowledgement of the revelation that someone was actually trying to kill ME personally. A sobering thought for someone so young and filled with such a sense of duty as we all were. Although badly wounded, I felt glad and thankful to have survived. What a close call that was.

Many men were wounded that night from shrapnel as RPG rounds and satchel charges were flying everywhere. Nine Chinooks were destroyed, five men were badly wounded and one man was killed.

A trip to the 12th Evacuation Hospital to sew my wounds made me realize I had gone through the whole battle in my stocking feet with no boots. The attacking soldiers were of the infamous DAK CONG, an elite sapper battalion that knew their job and did it well. They infiltrated between two bunkers killing all the men in each, undetected. They blew bunkers as they left. I saw the roof lift off one in front of us. The Gunships caught some in the barbed wire and a few were killed inside the base, about 13 men in all. Their bodies were dumped in the streets of Cu Chi Ville as a warning to all. They had caused a lot of damage to the base and particularly to the 242nd Muleskinners, but we were back to continuing our support mission very quickly in spite of all that happened on February 26, 1969 in Vietnam. (TET)

My helicopter, 66-19023 was repaired and flew again. See attached pictures. Unfortunately it came to a terrible end in Germany a couple of years later.



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