

05-3-07

Tony Spletstoser

LZ TIGER

Cochran, Georgia 31014

I first met Herb McMinn while recording the Battle Damage Assessment of his and Wheeler's combat crash report back in 1969.

Somehow I managed to save these notes and a few photos of the incident. Now, years later I am able to reconstruct the scenario along with added notes through the reuniting via cyberspace with the main character, Hubert McMinn. This total to me makes a pretty interesting story. I hope that it does for you also.

From: McMinn, Hubert, WarWagon14,
D Trp 3/5th Air Cav.

I joined the Cav. after six months in country, because I was tired of being an airborne jeep driver for 9th Div. Arty. Everyone told me I was nuts to change because I had a very safe job but dull. I went to Scouts and was unable to fly my three Cherry missions as an observer. I get violently airsick when I'm in that position and I don't have the controls. That's why I did not stay in Air Force ROTC. I found that I could not fly jets after doing flight training for just three hours in a T-33.

"Sir Charles's Aerial Ambush" The Helicopter Trap

**OH-6A s/n 67-16674 and
OH-6A s/n 67-xxxxx.
D Troop 3/5th Air Cav
Cpt. McMinn, Lead pilot. WarWagon 14
WO C.J. Wheeler, Trail pilot.
Radio callsign; the "WAR WAGONS"**

**16 July, 1969
Dong Tam, RVN
APO 96370 SF
A.O. XS 09/64
(The Wagon Wheel)**

The 16th of July, 1969 was just another day in the Delta for this Light Fire Team, from the 3/5th Air Cav, "D" troop. A 'light fire team' is made up of two AH-1G Cobras (Snakes) and two OH-6A Cayuses (LOACHs) in their Area of Operations (AO). The AO was up around the "Wagon Wheel" out 15 kilometers west of My Phouc Tay (XS 20/59).

The Lead Scout pilot, Capt. McMinn had just got finished checking out a "Sniffer" reading that had been provided to them by another AHCo. that had been given the job of flying the XM3 `Aircraft Mounted "Concealed Personnel Detector" ¹, and the Lead Scout was just wandering around the

¹The XM3 AMCPD was super secret "people sniffer" equipment. A device designed to detect human beings and their activities when

way Scouts do, looking for trouble.

McMinn saw a bunker that had recently been built and he started to look around it some more. The Scouts found a hooch made out of ponchos. They blew up the bunker with a "Baby Bomb" and threw a CS-smoke grenade into the hooch. But nobody came out.

They continued to hover around and dropping grenades into the little trenches that Charlie digs along the banana tree lines. They were checking out the edges of a canal when Capt. McMinn saw what he thought at the time, four children in a canal with only their heads sticking out of the water.

He held back and did not shoot them because this time he was sure that they were children. McMinn suffered of having memories of other times that his judgment had been in error. McMinn was not the type who liked the killing just for fun. As in any war, there had been unlucky innocents to die under his guns. They just had been in the wrong place at the right time. His conscience told him that he couldn't call back a mini-gun burst once it's fired.

McMinn hovered the aircraft within 30 feet of the boys' heads in the water; a move that he was soon to regret. He should have placed the aircraft's left side to them, where the crew chief/gunner could have covered them with the M-60 MG.

He motioned them to get out of the water and come up on dry land where he could see them better. The pilot motioned twice more with his hand, then suddenly they stood up, raised their weapons out of the water (one BAR, two AK-47s, and one SKS) and they opened up on him.

They had him cold; why he wasn't wounded he doesn't know. The Trail Loach was holding off to the rear. Wheeler, the pilot of the Trail aircraft was hovering, observing this scene as it unfolded. WO C.J. Wheeler felt a sudden shock when he saw the tracers. He said that fire from one of the gunners looked like big fireballs coming up at the

they are hidden from visual observation. In practice it sensed small amounts of ammonia given off by the human body. The bad part was that this required the aircraft carrying the equipment to fly at very low altitude and on straight track that could be recorded on a map by an operator in the back. On missions like this if you found some bad guys, you were apt to absorb a lot of lead. The only time that the "Snuffer-ship" didn't get shot down was when flew areas where there were no VC.

If the point was locate VC, they could have let any pilot with balls enough fly in straight lines back and forth, low and slow until the aircraft got shot up. They didn't need Hi-Tech equipment to do that. I guess that it was good for some Defense Contractor though.

McMinn's aircraft. (Likely the guy with the BAR firing WWII era 30-06 red tracers)

Capt. McMinn took immediate evasive action and put in hard left cyclic and pulled moderate pitch to try to get out of there. At this point, McMinn felt that his Loach was just about ready to come out of it and had begun to pick up some airspeed.

He was ready to pull the cyclic back to neutral and forward, when everything just went wrong. The aircraft started spinning as McMinn tried to regain control with the anti-torque peddles, but without effect. He lowered the collective pitch, then centering it, trying every trick that he could think of to get the Loch back straight.

He did not know it then, but there wasn't anything that he could have done. At some point in the midst of his jinxing, a bullet from one of the Bad Guys struck the flex-drive coupling to the tail rotor drive shaft and a few moments later it separated. (This drive shaft coupling is aft of the rotor-drive transmission located in the overhead above the passenger compartment.)

For Capt. McMinn, being shot at from such a close range it was a traumatic experience. Everything seemed to be happening at once, (which was true). It had Cpt. McMinn pretty confused. At one point he thought that he had lost the engine².

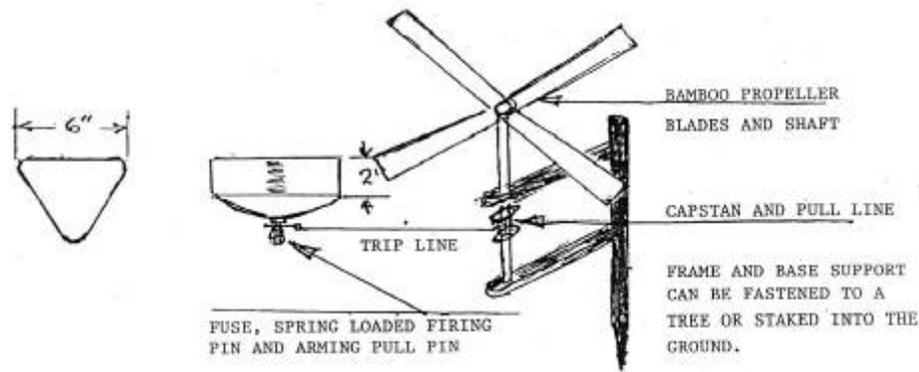
The whole thing was a mute point after the aircraft lost a rotor blade and the tail boom hit a tree. Their fate was sealed; He knew anything that happening after that was completely out of his hands. The aircraft was spinning so violently it was as if he was in a centrifuge. The force kept him pressed back into his seat. He thinks that they went around about one more time before they fell into the water.

He had received a blow behind his ear at the time that the tail boom hit the tree, and was unconscious until after they had crashed. Two CS smoke grenades went off in the cockpit to add to the mess.

The Trail aircraft pilot said that the Lead set off some kind of anti-aircraft mine as he was spinning. They were exploding behind him as he passed over them. These charges would blow straight up to about 40 ft and the cone of fire was about 30 ft across.³

²The engine had taken a hit, but nothing that would have caused it to lose power immediately, possibly the pilot had rolled off the power unconsciously in his frantic fight to save himself.

³These antiaircraft mines were very simple homemade devices that used the same principle that our "Claymore" Anti-Personnel mine. They used what looked like a used 6" triangular sardine tin. Its bottom bowled out and filled with C-4 explosive. They used any kind of broken up scrap metal, even rocks, for projectiles. The



McMinn woke up with his aircraft on its side in about 4 feet of water while his observer was attempting to get him out. There was CS gas all over the place; it looked like an oily sheen on the water. The grenades had either been exploded by gunfire or the pins had been pulled out in the crash. McMinn's observer/gunner was underwater after the crash. The butt of his M-60 had smashed him in the nose and he had been unconscious for a moment. The shock of being underwater brought him around; he unbuckled himself, came up for air, and then tried to get the pilot out.

From his position, left side now on the bottom, he couldn't manage moving the pilot. So he went out through his windscreen bubble, which wasn't there anymore, and came around to the pilot's side to unstrap and lift him out of the water. The pilot began to regain consciousness and together they helped each other to get clear of the aircraft. Meanwhile, the Trail aircraft (WO C.J. Wheeler) had been holding his trail position and watched helplessly as the shooting began.

Then as the Lead went into it's final spin, Wheeler pulled pitch, dropped the nose and roared across the four VC `children' with his mini-gun on, kicking pedals and muddying the water with them without even looking back.

He followed the Lead aircraft until it crashed and then tried to find a place to land nearby in order to help his comrades. WO Wheeler flew over the crash site and saw the observer getting out and the pilot trying to get out. Then he flew to the nearest clear area, but the lowest that he could get was about 10 ft over the water without the rotor blades hitting any trees.

The area was swampy, thick, and jungle-like with palm trees 30 to 50

under side of the tin had the detonator that was activated when the pin was pulled. The pin was connected to a string fastened to a capstan on shaft that had a 10" 4 blade propeller. The blades were 1" wide made of bamboo.

These were set in trees, in the rice grass or near anything that "Charlie" thought might attract the Army Aviation's attention. The down wash from the rotor blast would almost instantly wind up the line and pull the pin.

feet tall. The quickest way to get help to his friends was to hover over the water just a few meters from the crash site and have his observer drop the ten feet into the water. The `Trail's observer, after surfacing, waded and swam over to the crash site through the cloud of CS gas⁴ to help the downed crew.

They could see the anti-aircraft-booby traps with the little bamboo props and their windup trips. The VC had them setup in the trees, in the sawgrass. They were all over the place.

By this time, McMinn's observer had gotten the pilot out and together the two observers helped the pilot through the mud and water to a dike. McMinn and his observer were physically drained from the strain of the crash and sick from breathing the CS gas.

WO C.J. Wheeler had to find a place to land to pick them up. The first choice couldn't work out. The `Trail' pilot buzzed around and finally found a place, he returned to the dike to guide his observer and the `Lead' crew to his mini PZ. WO Wheeler flew back to the clearing; landed and waited at a ready.

The two observers and the `Lead' pilot struggled through the water to Wheeler's Loch, climbed aboard and collapsed across the cargo deck. They lay there exhausted with their legs hanging over the edge of the deck.

During the time that Wheeler was buzzing around he believes that he set off some more of the aerial booby traps and that possibly his tail boom received some damage from one these blasts.

After all were on board, the `Trail' aircraft took off and was heading for Dong Tam, when Wheeler looked back and saw the `C&C'⁵ ship (UH-1D) had set up for a landing flare to the spot he had just left. After the `C&C' Huey touched down, the `C&C' officers got out and went over to the crash site.

⁴If anybody thinks CS gas is harmless hasn't experienced the breath-taking ecstasy of trying to function while in its midst. The 2 Lochs were recovered and Hooked back to Dong Tam. I got to the aircraft 4 hours after the crash. I started setting up to take my photos for the survey and never got any closer than 2 to 3 feet. There wasn't even an odor, but I began to have a terrible headache, nausea, and my skin itching like I had rolled in a bed of poison ivy, so much for Janet Reno's "harmless" theory. I had to pack up and leave. I think that people make judgements like this first need to be put into a room with some of it.

⁵C and C=Command and Control ship, used to coordinate airmobile operations and communications with ground. The Commanders in Back usually were our Col. and the local ARVN Commander.

Wheeler circled back around and swung low over while trying to yell down at the C&C people, to warn that the whole place was mined booby trapped, and that the downed crew had already been rescued.

The next thing that Wheeler knew was that he had triggered one of the anti-aircraft mines and it had almost blown his tailboom off. The T/R drive shaft was severed and away they went again, around and round. The flailing drive shaft finished disconnecting the tail boom. He was about 25 feet over this clearing; it was about 15-20 meters across.

This was his first anti-torque failure and McMinn's second for the day. (I believe that there is an arc tab to be worn over the unit shoulder patch that denotes being "Anti-Torque Failure Qualified." McMinn and his observer would get theirs with two palms.)

Without any forward airspeed, he was committed to a spinning crash. The aircraft started settling, turning to the right. Before the aircraft hit, Wheeler had lowered the collective, then pulled in all that he had. That seemed to stop the spin somewhat but not enough correction to get any kind of flare in time. But hit level on a dike bank on its right skid and then tipped over on its left side.

The Loach was way too over loaded for a good emergency landing. When the rescued passengers in the back saw that they were going to crash again, they held on to whatever they could. The 1st observer was thrown out when they hit.

Luckily all of the rotor blades had been shed by that time so he escaped that danger. Still, this second crash landing didn't improve the condition of his face and nose at all. He was on light duty with a nose patch and a back injury for several weeks. Out of the two crews and two crashes, he was the only one really hurt.

WO C.J. Wheeler had been trying to warn the C&C about the Booby-trap and instead he was the one that had been shot down. The C&C landed there fat dumb and happy, walked around looked at the Trail Loach and took credit for the daring rescue and wrote themselves up for citations. Such is life... Well they did rescue both crews, didn't they?



D troop's "Trail Loach", WO C.J. Wheeler's aircraft.

**The Lead Loach, OH-6A, and it's pilot
Captain Hubert McMinn**



After Action Incident Analysis:

Victor Charlie, the "Enemy", had very few assets other than his brain. They were quick to understand what the "sniffer" aircraft could do. So they worked out a plan to use this against our "Hi-Tech" forces.

The camp site that the sniffer discovered was bogus, made to look like an inviting target complete with a multitude of their little home brewed anti-aircraft claymore mines. The VC had fighters in place to finish off any surviving aircrew members if need be. Targets like these were known as "Helicopter Traps."

Subject: Booby Traps or not. Maybe got CRS?

Date: Fri, 08 Sep 2000 13:59:53 -0500

From: "Hubert W. McMinn Jr."

Tony: "VC Heli-Trap." Interesting story but not completely correct according to my memory. Part of what I got hit with, was a 20mm being fired on me from the island.

I found myself holding back on shooting because I had wounded 3 little girls and their mother just two days before.

I don't remember any booby traps because I was busy. As I was spinning I knew my engine, bubble, most of my blades and tail rotor were gone. At that point I knew if we hit on the back it would break our backs, either side would kill one of us and in the front would get us both. At that point we hit the tree and in the water.

I was not knocked out, instead my foot was caught in the mess that was left of the chin bubble and I could not get out. I finally got loose and came up. But just before the action I had taken off my glove. A piece of steel slipped under my wedding ring and I again could not get out. I did get to inhale a good amount of the CS gas. (For years I couldn't walk through a gas chamber without a mask) I got out but was knocked silly,

My door gunner helped me out of the water. At that point Wheelers DG jumped from about 15 feet up to help me and my DG. We took off that 35 pound chicken plate. It had almost finished me off. We got to Wheelers bird and his DG got in and strapped down. My DG and I jumped in the back. As soon as Wheeler got the Loach up, off went his tail boom. We started spinning and my DG went out the door. From that he hurt his back and I crashed the second time. Wheeler was not injured at all. Take a look at the picture you have from the next day.

I remember that little action is as clear as if it just happen. BTW, I believe that other VC had begun chasing us at the time, but they stopped at the ship or because they saw C&C ship coming in.

I thought Wheelers DG really deserved something for his action and wrote him up for DSC of course he did not get it.

Tony Spletstoser wrote:

Mac: It was Wheeler who told me about the Booby traps and what they looked like. He had a photo of the VC KIAs lying up on the bank. I don't know how he got it, but he showed it to me.

The thing that done you in was that little membrane flex plate of a universal joint tail rotor shaft coupling that is located coming out of the transmission. It is like a 3" ring with a flex membrane welded on each side. The tail rotor drive shaft fastens to it on each side. It took a .30 cal and it ripped apart. You never had a chance.

As far as I know you were never hit by any of the Booby traps, but you set off a bunch. You were spinning so wildly they could have never hit you.

However, after you and your Observer got aboard Wheeler's aircraft, he set one off while climbing out. It blew a pretty good hole in his tail boom and that's why he went down and you the second time.

I used to have a photo of the tail boom. I think that I have photos of Wheeler's Loach, but the tail boom had been removed.

What ever I put in the story, I got from you and CJ. What I have done is combine the two reports, yours and Wheeler's.

Each of you saw or remembered things a little differently. But that's normal.

I haven't anything in my notes about you being hit with a 20mm. What do you mean?

McMinn continues: Speaking of tail rotors, I thought that this might interest you.

In Aug of '69, I was out scouting on an S&D mission. I had just shot up and killed a .51 cal position. Wheeler or Derosier was flying Trail, I can't remember which.

I pulled up after my first pass and lifted to about 200 ft. to make a second run. I don't know where the Cobra's were but they certainly were not looking. Up until then it had been a dry day. As I swung back and got on target, things went to hell.

This came to be the last crash of my first tour. My Loach started spinning with the body following the rotors. Anti-torque did not work at all. I went to auto rotate as quickly as possible but only had about

another 100ft. I pulled collective at 5' and crunched in on my skids. The ship started spinning again when I had pulled in collective to land. The shock of hitting on my skids went straight up my back and caused a compression fracture. Later I found out I had fractured the lower back really well, and tore the hell out of the soft tissue back there.

The Loach rolled over on the Door gunner's side and stopped. The Observer got out and climbed up to me and asked me if I was hurt. I told him my back was broke and he said "Sir, your back can't be broke because this thing is going to burn." Then he took off. (What I found later is that the C&C had landed nearby and he ran to the C&C ship to get help.

At least it felt like my back was broken since my legs were not working. I was not going to let myself burn to death. So I unlocked the seat belt and pulled myself up and out. Since the Loach was laying on its left side and my side, the right side of the Loach was up. I threw myself over and off the aircraft hoping to land as far away as possible.

I went over the side I made a slightly uncontrolled fall to the ground. When I hit the ground and my chicken plate cracked my jaw and put me unconscious. Fortunately the Loach didn't burn. If it had burned, the fire would have still got me because I had not made it very far. Our good luck was that we killed the .51 position on our first run and for some reason that .51 setup was there all by itself. No other Bad Guys around.

I woke up for a while when they were loading me into the C&C ship and then went back out. The Surgeon at the hospital who worked on me made me give him the right answers or my flying days would have been over right then.

Anyway, when I got back I found my tail had been cut off by a tail rotor drive shaft hanger bearing which had not been safety wired in. The Door Gunner on the C&C ship said that he got a movie of the whole thing and he was going to give me a copy but I think he got hit (WIA) and was gone before I got out of hospital.

The Lord has been good and I was flying again two weeks later. I had some problems later and still do but was still fit for combat and flight. No Profile in my medical records.

Although I did not know it at the time, my back had been broken. After I came home to CONUS, I started having problems. While I was still In-country, we thought it was a compression fracture. I was down for a week and then flew C&C for the remaining three weeks until I left Vietnam.

That makes three times I went in because of tail rotors. Given the fact of the number of ships we chewed up because of tail rotor failures, the number of aircraft tail numbers must be high.

I took seven of them to the ground of which only two were repaired and flew again. One of them was the ship my Trail died in. (Wheeler)

Because of these unfortunate events (which none were pilot error), it gave me a reputation for being unlucky and were to make it hard for me to get anyone to fly with me. In a way they were right, I was unlucky, but then again I was lucky, I'm still here aren't I.

Wheeler was killed after I left country. The story that I got that it was thought that his Observer pulled a pin on a Grenade with the wrong hand. (Pin in Left and grenade in right.) Just as he pulled it he was shot dead and the grenade dropped from his hand inside the ship into the bubble. That's all Wheeler got to say before it went off.

(Tony's note: WO Terry Derosier, Wheeler's Trail that day, had a little different version. Not that it makes any difference.)

I resigned in '78, and then went back in the Reserves in '81. They kicked me out in '98 as a LtC due to age "55". My 2nd tour was in F Trp. 4th Cav. but it wasn't D 3/5th. I quit flying when I came home and went back to tanks. I went to Germany in '74 after going to UT Austin. I commanded A Trp. 3/7th and then A Co. 359th Tk Bn. 9th Inf.

**From: Hubert McMinn Jr. Sept. 08, 2000
"D" Troop 3/5th Air Cav.
War Wagon 14
Dong Tam - Vinh Long RVN 69-70
To: Tony Spletstoser
Re: Questions about other Warwagons**

Ed note: I finally was able to reunite with Hubert McMinn with the help of Larry Little and Jerry Weese in 2000.

A "D" TROOPER RETURNS

McMinn Writes:

Concerning Ace, Ace was Rasbury's hero and he knows more about him than most anyone. You know Ace died several years ago. Cancer got him. As I understood it Ace had been a "WarWagon" and did some interesting stuff. Rasbury had a story on how Ace got wrote up for the DSC for something he did in the plain of reeds. I just had met Ace when they escorted out of country by two officer MP's at the order on the Div. Commander. He had extended two times before and this last request for an extension had been denied and he had ignored it. The MP's were waiting for him when returned from this last mission. His gear had been packed and in a waiting Huey. They took him as he was, still in his flight suit, handcuffed him, put him on board and took off for Tan Son Nhute

where one of the Freedom Birds was waiting. One of the MPs stayed with him until the airline crew was about to close the door, then he removed Ace's handcuffs and got off the plane just as they were pulling the stairs away.

Captain Blood
Re: Capt. Kickass

Date: Fri, 08 Sep 2000 13:24:49 -0500
From: "Hubert W. McMinn Jr."

Yes, in answer to your question, Who was Capt. Kickass? His name was Capt. Blood and he was brought in to be the Platoon Leader because the CO reasoned that I did not have enough time left in country to be worth the switch. It turned out that I was there longer than Blood was.

"Blood" was a good name because he shot him self down with a 40mm grenade firing and was wounded in the eyes. They medevaced him to the 3rd Field Hospital in Saigon. After he was treated he went AWOL from the hospital. Next they (he and his helpers) did is to strap four 2.75" rocket tubes on his Loach. On the first firing, he fired too close to the target and the rocket didn't have time to arm and it just stuck in the door of a Hooch without going off. The next one he fired locked up in the tube and took him for a spin. Those little rocket motors have a lot of thrust.

He was later wounded more seriously in another action and didn't come back. I don't remember how and left country. I think that he was in the unit less than three months. At some point he got hit again and was gone. I think it was after I got shot and before I broke my back in my last crash.

Everything changed when we left Dong Tam and went to Vinh Long. I left country two weeks later and was flying C&C on the day I left. I had just picked up one of my downed Scouts with my C-Model 50cal ship in a Hot L Z when I got word that I should have been out of country a month ago. My appeal for extension had been turned down because I was married

By the way, the combat we flew was the greatest rush any of us will ever get. In fact, I think that you are wrong. **It was better than sex**, if you lived. I have talked to several of the guys and all have agreed that after flying Scout everything else has been a let down.

My second tour and even command of three different companies did not compare. I think it also help lead to my getting out in 78.

By nature I am not a joiner, if there was such a thing as a former life I was most likely a Mountain Man or a Scout out on the plains. Attending reunions has not been something that I would do. But now I think I am very interested in visiting with the group. Mike Rasbury tried to get me to join the Association of Vietnam Helicopter Drivers for a couple of years. (VHPA)

The notes and stories that you sent have brought up things that I put away and have tried to keep away for a number of years. I had forced myself to forget just how much alive we all were doing what we did. If we gotten killed or wounded then, well that was just part of the cost. Now that we are older I think that we had to be nuts.

What have I been doing since '69? After the last tour I was sent to Ft Walters to command a Warrant Officers Company/

I had 2000 Warrants and if the Army had not needed them there would have been a bounty on them. I put several in Leavenworth along with two Captains. I did not complete my full 18 months before returning to Nam.

Gen. Mac, got me an RA based on my record in Nam and I asked to go back otherwise I might have killed someone in my company.

I was angry about being forced to return to the states and I found myself taking my unhappy feelings it out on my wife. I knew that wasn't fair, but that's what happens some times.

My second tour I was already a trained Cobra gunship driver but I still wanted to fly Scouts. After that my tour went a little better, I flew Cobra guns, I got in a Loach and could not take off-too old. Only took a few hits and no crashes. We were based up a Lai Ka. Except several firefights and hunting tanks across the border, this final tour was interesting but dull. Nothing like flying Scouts. I finished up my tour with one of the new 20 mm Vulcan armed Cobras and carried 2.75" FF, 5 pound Anti Tank rockets. We could go tank hunting into Cambodia across the border a couple of times. I missed having my little brothers along.

We flew in support of the 5th ARVN Armor outfit. They were a kickass Tank outfit in anybody's Army. They fought all the way until they were destroyed in late '71 in a battle north of Lai Ka. Some day let me tell you about lifting a tired over gross Cobra off the runway.

I left Nam and went to Ft. Knox for career course. Got there at the wrong time. Patton **the III ?**, had just taken over. I had to work my ass off in the new course. From there went to University of Texas which later became the start of the end of my active duty. That course cost me 18 months and did not let me get the training at the company level to command Armor.

I went to Germany and took over an Armored Cavalry Troop, then a Tank Company. What I did in Nam followed me in some of the things I got

away with. Like Nam I got a reputation of pulling success out of disaster but I did tick a few at higher levels off. The Division Commander liked me as did the local General, but some of the Staff was another question. Like when I went to the field I always had at least 22 tanks because I took a platoon of Germans with me.

In the course of my Tank Command, I rewrote part of the Armor Gunnery test and became very much loved by others for tables I added which incorporated Platoon and Company gunnery.

I came back to the States and resigned. I went into sales and then Financial Planning in New York. I made a lot of money and then returned to Texas and lost it all (+), in the early 90's. Went back into Health Insurance and have been working my way out of debt ever since and not doing a quick job of it.

Just last month in a joint venture I took over Central Texas for one of my companies and am now trying to build a region for them. What is going to happen is anyone's guess?

My wife (Carolyn) and I have stayed together now for 32 years. I have three children and four grandchildren. My kids are all married and two (my son and youngest daughter are in school).

My oldest son did 5 years in the Army as a Ranger and then as an Infantry LT. His feeling for the Army is not great. My middle daughter is in Japan with her Air Force husband (E-4). I got him in the Air Force by showing him how to cheat on the hearing test.

My life has been interesting but it seems the most interesting part was that period between Sept. 68 and Sept 69. Thanks for telling me about Wheeler's Trail. I did not know that Derosier had been killed. I was Derosier's first Lead, when Wheeler made Lead. Terry then flew Trail for Wheeler. I should have stayed with Scouts. We Scout pilots get nose bleeds above ten feet.

When I got back to the States, I got a letter that the 3/5th went to the Benchoy Woods got the hell shot out of them, lost every scout shot down and had to reform. A week after I left the VC got in at night and booby trapped our ships. I forget who but one scout driver doing a pre flight opened up the engine and was blown away.

Speaking of booby traps, you know about our ships at Dong Tam being Booby Trapped by the guys in search and rescue. Scout Leads at D 3/5 had a price on their heads at the end I was told mine was around 500,000P (Piastre) and my ship was worth 100,000P. We lost a Cobra and a Loach. Mine. I came back to Dong Tam with my Trail on board. My regular ship had been in the hanger being repaired and now it was ready, but instead of taking the backup Loach that I had been flying to my Trail, he took mine. It blew up over the Mekong right after take off. It was

believed to have been a grenade in the gas tank. He and the DG were not recovered.

Herb:

Tony writes:

I try my best, but I still make spelling mistakes, gross typos, and occasionally even leave words out.

What do you do for a living these days? I'm 73 years old and can still walk on my hind legs. I have three sons by my Vietnamese wife and one stepson but no Vietnamese wife anymore. I live on a farm here in central Georgia. I work at Robins AFB in the Avionics/Electronic Warfare section. I have one son still in College, another who is a minister of youth and education with a church. He is also in the Ga. National Guard and gets his Butter Bar this month. The end will be that will become an Army Chaplain. The youngest is Hai, he's 19 and is still in High School. I think that he has finally gotten the hang of studying.

The only bad thing about me is that the VA just discovered that I have diabetes. We are going to control it with diet. I have no problems yet, just a wake up call.

Thanks for the letter. Anything else that you can think of to add, please feel free to comment. One of the stories is already on D Trp's Web Site and the VHPA "War Stories" page.

Cheers, Tony O^ng Co.p

McMinn continues:

Later, I got word about Wheeler being KIA and that was the last until Mike Rasbury found me in 96 or 97, then Larry Little two weeks ago and now you.

By the way, have you found Nestor? A great Scout pilot. He left country in April or May 69. Never wounded but very productive. I flew his Trail until I made Lead.

Anyway, that's the story about me. Are you really 73? That makes you 40 back then. You had to be more than nuts to get tied up with us. I wonder who took the drinking skull home?

I really would like the complete book if you finished it or at least what you have finished and if you can an actual picture of the copy you sent me.

I lost mine over the years.

Thanks for seeking me out

**Hubert W. McMinn Jr.
LtC. Armor Ret.
Hubert McMinn ww14**

Tony writes: McMinn, could the story that follows be related to that same Loach that you wrote about?

**“THE BURNING”
SAVE THE LAST BULLET FOR YOURSELF
Aircraft Fire in flight**

All Combat Aircrews share one fear more than anything else, being burned alive. I wonder how many times in the course of battle have airmen chose an alternative. The following is a story of events that led to a tragic decision.

Mike McGuire wrote: During the winter of 1969 "D" troop had a rash of sabotage incidents directed at our aircraft. Of course we blamed VC infiltrators.

I was working in the hanger the night the Slick blew. I still get part of it coming out now and then. It keeps coming out of my back and front. Aluminum sucks. Before we started work on the Bird we gave it a thorough search for grenades in the fuel cell. Earlier that day we had found a grenade with the pin pulled and the spoon wrapped in tape in another Slick.

While doing their dailies on the flight line, the Scout crew chiefs had began to find pins partly pulled on the grenades hanging on the safety wire bridle. Scout Observer/gunners stretched the wire between the instrument console and the door frame to hang grenades on for ready access.

Luckily these were always discovered in time. Then, on 25th February, a Light Fire team from Dong Tam was en route to its AO, when one of the Loachs blew up and burst into flames at 1500 feet. At first everyone thought it was VC sabotage.

After that the company began posting guards and the crew chiefs fitted the fuel caps with little hasps and pad locks from the PX, because it was apparent that someone had been tampering with our Huey's and Loachs.

It was at this same time our First Shirt's had been busting the dopers, because of what the dopers were doing to our camp mascot "Spanky". He

had been born in the Troop. These dopers were getting "Spanky" high on smoke.

"Spanky" was son to the bitch, "Pepper." She had also been corrupted. Pepper learned to drink beer at the NCO Club. Spanky needed his smoke every night like Pepper needed her beer. Great mascots, Huh?

This caused the First Shirts to get into conflict with the airfield fire company that was next to us. It was a den of dopers. They were left to live in the tent barracks because they were so sorry. They were there due to being dopers and into drugs. They felt much mistreated.

The rest of D Trp lived in wooden barracks, enlisted and officers alike. This caused conflict with about every other group over there in one way or another, it seemed like. I think that we earned what we got though.

Then after "D" Troop Huey blew up in the hanger and the cruising Loach mid-air, it was that both were done by one of our OWN. Rumors and scuttlebutt led to a disgruntled GI. The 1st Shirt had been on his ass and some other losers in the Troop that had been doing drugs. The doper confessed. At the time, I hadn't realized how much drug use there was.

The Rest of the Story. Midair Fire

And now at this late date, up comes a new contact with some information relating to the D troop Loach that blew up mid air. This is the information Highway at work.

Down through the age of flight, fire in flight above all other calamities, has been the airman's major fear. From the time of WW I, 1915 even until now, the dread has never changed. And so it was in this story.

From: Johnny Hutcherson, former "D" Troop CE/Gunner with the Charlie model Guns and the D model Slicks, the Longknives.

Sent: Sunday, February 25, 2001 8:42 PM

Tony, I was with D troop 3/5 Cav. I served as a door gunner UH-1C Gunships, We soon got Cobras in so I transferred to the Slicks (Long-Knives) Bell UH-1D's. We had 5 at that time 66-00936 - 66-009367 - 66-00938 - 66-00939 and 66-16480. Aircraft #937 crashed on Aug.19, 1968, killing the crew chief and gunner plus two Sniffer operators. #936 was shot-down Sept. 26, 1968 while making a medevac, #480 was shot-down making a medevac. Then on Oct.18, 1968 #938 blew up in the hangar. Not

sure what happened to #939. I was the gunner on #936. We got new UH-1H's to replace the D models.

Were you with "D" troop at this time?

Johnny Hutcherson

Johnny: Actually I'm just a wantabe member of D troop. I was just a lowly civilian "photog" for the DOD, Aberdeen Proving Ground, taking pictures of bullet holes in Army Aircraft. I got the Vietnam in Feb. 1969. "D" Troop gave me a lot of business, a bunch of magnetasses. Rick Wait and Bill King have been kind enough to include me in D troop's festivities. I guess that makes me an honorary "D" trooper. Most of the guys that I knew were at Dong Tam and Vinh Long. How did you find me?

Tony; you were in Vietnam to help us which I'm sure you did. I was at Bear-Cat then Dong Tam. Rick and Bill came after I had left. However I know you may not have been on missions but you went through the same mortar and rocket attacks as we did at night. Your life was on the line also. I thank you for your work.

After I got out of the army I went to work for Bell Helicopter in Amarillo TX. There I had some pretty good laughs as I use to see bullet hole in the belly skins patched. We would pull the floor panels and find a bullet hole in a flight control rod. As young soldiers we thought we knew it all. We did check the flight controls. I guess we fixed what we saw. Later I returned to Vietnam as a civilian, then worked in Iran for 3 years. Take care, Johnny Hutcherson

***One more note: My best friend Tom Grose was K.I.A. today 2-25-69. He was my crew chief on a UH-1H then transferred to Loachs. The aircraft caught fire in flight. Pilot shot Tom and then shot himself. Pilot was Cpt. Frank Byrant. I have thought about this all day long. I had to tell someone. Sorry !!

Hutch: I understand, for me the 11th of July 1966 is my memory day. My best buddy, Capt. Jimmy Draper died at Angels 40 off Key West in a F104. I'll never forget him. We started flying together. He did 18 months in Vietnam and came home, then in less than a year was he was gone because of a training accident.

Tony, Jimmy will always be remembered by you and that is what counts. I had several friends killed in Vietnam in D troop plus my home town school friends. I grew up in Dumas, TX., a small town due north of Amarillo TX.

Three boys were killed from my little league baseball team. It was different with Tom Grose. He and I were very close. We would get mad at each other as friends do but soon we would be laughing about it. Now that is friendship.

Two years ago I called Tom's brother and spoke to him. That seemed to help me. I wrote a Article which was published in American Heritage magazine. I will send to you. The title is Christmas in Vietnam. Hutch

Hutch: You're right. Dong Tam was "Mortar City." I was attached to the 214th CAB, Hq & Hq Company and we had the best Mess Hall in the Delta with 162nd AHC. That made it worth while to stay there.

Do you know anymore of the circumstances around your friend's death? Loach's don't usually burn even when they crash.

I believe that I was there when it happened. Mike McGuire said that it was one of our own guys that did the deed. After that they put little pad locks and a hasp on the fuel caps. I've got a story about that. Mike helped me write it. Some of the D troop were into dope.

Hutch wrote:

Mike is a good friend if mine and yes he told me the same. I don't know. However the copter in Amarillo was not from the 9th Div. or D troop. So it may have been some V.C. which worked on base. That is my hopes anyway. I can not see one of our on taking the life of another D trooper. We fought for each other in D troop. Yes we had some guys that the C.O. moved to a tent back of the mess hall, which did not do the job our country sent them to do. Some say they were drug addicts? So who knows?

Yes Tony, we are pretty sure a grenade was put in the fuel tank. Pin pulled, spoon taped down, fuel eats tape, releases the spoon and the grenade goes off. This happened to one Huey in the D troop hangar in March of 69.

I heard it could have happened to another LOACH after I left. It even happened at the Bell Helicopter Plant in Amarillo, Tex. A person found the grenade in a fuel tank. They sent Air Force personnel came from Oklahoma City to help. The helicopter was pulled out in a open field and blown up. Any way I think it was a grenade. But I'm not sure. And you are right, I didn't see any LOACHS burn, but Hueys sure did!!!

I must tell you this. Not too many people know how Tom Grose and Cpt. Byrant died. We did not let this out. The Officers and a few EM know the truth. Gary Winsett and Dave Newkirk told me not to tell anyone. That was the way we found them.

However at the reunion in 1999 Gary asked me if I had told anyone? I said no. He told me it was time to let someone know. It was not healthy for me to keep this inside all these years.

I told my Doctor at the V.A. and a few people which was not in D Troop. But please DO NOT tell others at the reunion unless you speak to Gary first. I feel some may not need to know. But Gary is a wise man and he may say it is OK. I would trust Gary with my life as I did in Vietnam.
Hutch

[Tony: please do not put the way Tom Grose and Cpt. Byrant Died in any story. They both have family still alive. This would not be good for them to read. I'm sure you won't but just checking.]
Hutch

No sweat Hutch, if you still want to keep it quiet OK. I just wanted to show you how it fit in with something that I wrote in a BDR report 30 years plus the added info that I got from different sources in `97. I'll keep it in my files. It's History the way it was. Thanks for telling me about it.

However, I can't help but wonder what was going through the Captain's mind as he made himself pull the trigger. It was a final act of ultimate courage, God bless him I say.

I would think that both families would feel peace in the truth. One, the fact that Tom did not have to suffer the searing flames of the fire and two, that Capt. Byrant was a man who had the courage to carry out the act for them.

Thanks Tony, and yes Cpt. Frank Byrant was a brave man. He and Ace Cozzallio were very good friends and room mates. Frank was Cobra pilot and Ace was a Loach pilot. Sometime in late `68 Ace changed to Cobras and Frank changed to Loachs. I feel they had talked about what to do if something like that happened. I don't know that for sure.

I must tell you this. If not for Mike McGuire and the crew of UH-1D 66-00938, I would not be here today. I was the Gunner on 66-00936, 9-26-68 when it was shot-down. We were on the ground for several hours, receiving a lot of ground fire when Mike and his crew picked us up just as the sun was setting. You know we would not have lived through the night, for that is when the V.C. would have moved on us and all we had was four pistols. Plus 4 badly wounded men.
Johnny Hutcherson

Johnny; Were Gary Winsett and Dave Newkirk flying as part of the fire team that included Tom and Bryant's Loach?

I've talked about this story with several of my friends. They agree that it's a story that airmen would understand but possibly the surviving families might not. And I'm not sure how the insurance company's would look at it. So mums the word.

Sometime I'd like to know more about the day of the flight, the mission, and the witnesses' observations. Maybe you could OK the story if I changed the trooper's names and your unit. It would still be a true story.