

The Third of My Vietnam Stories

by Ron Durham, 28 July 2019

This is the third of my Vietnam stories. As before, they are all true. Sometimes some of the places, such as Fire Support Bases, FSB, or FB for short, are a bit foggy simply because we would occupy a location for short periods of time or for longer periods of time. We would sometimes set up firebases and leave them as soon as the next day, but usually we would stay for four to five days, but no longer than for a couple of weeks. Mostly, our artillery and ammo was hauled in by CH-47 helicopters. When we were at an airstrip, then the C-130's or C-123's would haul our guns, but only for longer distances.

Having been in-country (in Vietnam) for just a few weeks, and still new to the area, I was still considered a newbie. I had already experienced the dreaded inoperative radio incident. It was caused by faulty wiring between the ears of the operator, namely me.

I still had my 1:1,000,000 map, a 14"X14" map that covered most of III Corp, and it was not a map that was conducive to accurate navigation. I had flown from Phouc Vinh to Tay Ninh by following another helicopter that was headed that way, and of course, they followed the roads, so I could learn how to get to Tay Ninh. I faithfully followed every zig and every zag along the way for a few times.

The 1/30 Arty had an 155mm artillery battery on a FSB (Fire Support Base) or just FB Carolyn. That base was north of Tay Ninh and Nui Ba Den. The english name of Nui Ba Den is the Black Virgin Mountain. It is one of two mountains that stand by themselves very close to the Vietnam/Cambodian border. The other mountain is Nui Ba Ra, and it is located more to the east, at Song Be. In English, its name is the White Virgin Mountain. They are also called the two sisters.

I had traveled to Tay Ninh and up the road to FSB Carolyn a few times, so I decided to save some time and fly directly to FB Rosemary on my next flight.

I was in our operations room when I was told that I would have to fly to FB Carolyn to pick up a passenger who was to be sent to our rear echelon unit that was located at Bin Hoa. The city of Bin Hoa is east of Saigon.

I got my armor plating, water, LRRP rations and my emergency radio that worked, sometimes. I took them to the helicopter and loaded them up for my first direct flight to FB Carolyn, direct, in a straight line, no deviations, just there and back.

My crew chief was a person who kept our helicopter, his and mine, running in top condition all of the time. He even kept it clean. I would fly all day and the red soil would be in every crook and cranny. The instruments and radios would have fine red sand covering them every night when I would return, but in the morning the helicopter would be spotless again. There was very seldom a morning when the helicopter was not ready to go at an instants notice.

He and I talked about the helicopter and about the problems that the sand caused on the engine, and rotor blades. After that I told him I wouldn't be gone too long that day because I had only one mission to fly. I expected to be back by 1400 at the latest.

After giving the helicopter a good preflight, I put my body armor on, climbed in and strapped myself in. After calling clear, and my crew chief giving me the thumbs up, I cranked up the turbine engine and got up to speed. I then got clearance from the tower to move out of my revetment and to await takeoff instructions. I lifted to a hover and backed out of the revetment and set the helicopter down on the asphalt, I listened to the FM radio for all of the artillery fire and the other warnings, like the ARC LIGHT carpet bombing that the Air Force would conduct every so often, then I called the tower and told them I was ready for a western departure from the airfield. They gave me clearance, I took off and began my climb to 1500 feet and I was on my way to Firebase Rosemary.

Because the firebase was so close to the Cambodian border, and north of Nui Ba Den and Tay Ninh, I figured that my heading should be 305° , and that would take me a few miles south of FB Carolyn. Once I got to the road, I could turn north and follow the road the rest of the way. I was a little nervous, but not really overly concerned because I knew that I would have Nui Ba Den on my front and left for nearly the whole flight. Once I passed Nui Ba Den, I would only be about four miles from the firebase, so I still felt confident that everything would be fine.

Nearly all of the OH6A pilots flew without doors, most all of the time, because the weather was humid and hot. This was another day that the weather was again beautiful. It was about 85°F, and with the wind blowing around me, even with my chicken plate on, I was comfortable. So on I went, diligently watching the map and Nui Ba Den, to be sure that I was on the right heading. The only thing marring the beauty of the countryside on that day was the smoke from fires caused by the bombing and shelling that took place every day of the year, not only by the Americans, but also by the NVA (North Vietnam Army) and the ARVN (the South Vietnamese Army). The sun was up and behind me, so I didn't have any glare to contend with. I had the neutral density visor on my helmet, in the down position to make the light a little softer. After flying along peacefully for quite a while, I could see by the position of Nui Ba Den that I should start looking for the road running north and south. I passed over one road but I knew that it was too soon to be overly concerned that I had overflowed the proper road. After all, the road I needed to follow was a major road, and I knew that I could not miss it.

After a while though, I started to get a little worried, because I had passed Nui Ba Den a while back. I could still lean out and see the mountain, so with an unease that we feel when we have that niggling feeling of unease, I elected to continue on my heading for a while longer, anyway. I really started to wonder what the noises were that I thought I kept hearing. I wasn't sure if I was just imagining it, but it sounded like pop, pop, pop, burrr-burrr, pop, pop, on and on it went. I decided to climb a little more and keep heading in the same direction because I was sure that if I climbed higher, I could see the firebase.

After a little more time, I thought I saw a shimmer of light directly in front of me, but I knew it had to be very far away. I started realizing that my fuel was lower than I thought it should be, so I decided that after I landed at Carolyn, and after my passenger and I started back, I would land at

Tay Ninh and refuel for the flight home.

Still looking forward and to the North, for either the road or the firebase, and still hearing the pop's and burrs, and because my fuel level was getting to an uncomfortable low point, I decided that I should go back to Tay Ninh, which is southwest of the mountain Nui Ba Den, and refuel, and to make sure that I did not have a fuel leak. After turning around, I could see Nui Ba Den on the horizon and I realized that I was in Cambodia, not only in Cambodia, but far into a country that we were not permitted to enter, under any circumstances. Not only that, I was nearly to Tonle Sap Lake, which is north northwest of Phnom Penh, the capitol of Cambodia.

When I realized that I had made another vital error, and this time probably fatal, I was just a tad bit nervous. I pointed the helicopter at Nui Ba Den, dived for the ground and flew that helicopter faster than the red line, or VNE, velocity not to exceed, (Ha). I kept the engine temperature just under the yellow caution and then I would increase the power to fly mid-yellow for about four minutes and then back to the green zone again. I continued doing that to keep flying as fast as possible. I would fly over clearings and sometimes I would see hundreds of troops. They would be a shocked to see me as I was to see them. By the time they started shooting I would nearly always be out of sight because I was flying so low and fast. On that day, I saw more enemy troops than I saw the rest of my tour of Vietnam.

I finally realized that the pops and burrs were shots from rifles and machine guns shooting at me! I kept the airspeed up and the shooting got worse and worse, because there were more troops and less trees for me to use for cover, the closer I got to the border, of which, of course, I was on the wrong side of, I was so intent on watching the mountain, trees and my fuel gauge, that I did not have time to be too frightened. But, as anyone who goes through something like that will tell you, the shakes come after the adrenaline has had time to hit.

When I got close enough to Tay Ninh, I called the Tay Ninh tower and requested a direct approach to the fueling area. They gave me a direct approach and I finally landed and secured the cyclic and collective so I could get out and refuel without shutting down. I got out, opened the fuel cap and set the fuel counter on the pump to zero, because we were supposed to log all of the fuel we used at the airports, so they would know how much supply they had on hand. Well, after I finished fueling and logging my fuel taken onboard, I realized that I had only five minutes more of fuel before I would have had an engine failure due to just vapors remaining in my fuel cell. I jumped back into the helicopter and got clearance to take off to the North. I once more headed out to Firebase Carolyn. This time I followed the road until I had the firebase in sight. I called the Black Hat at FB Carolyn and got clearance to land. I requested that he contact our unit to have the passenger ready and waiting at the landing area. He returned my call and told me there would be no delays. I set up my approach and finally landed at Firebase Carolyn. I got out, made sure my passenger was ready, I briefed him, got him in the co-pilots seat and strapped in. Then I climbed in, strapped in and we got clearance to take off.

It was an uneventful flight back, because I followed the roads all of the way back to Phouc Vinh. Once we arrived, I parked in the revetment and my crew chief came out and asked me if anything was wrong. I told him everything was okay and that I just had a little diversion while gone.

After entering the headquarters building, I was asked by the Operations Sergeant, if everything was all right. I told him I needed my 1:50,000 maps. He looked at me rather funny and then he told me that the maps would be ready before my first flight the next day. True to his word, he had them for me the next morning, and while he was giving them to me, with a sly grin, he asked me how lost I had been. Let me tell you, I did exactly what any red blooded, young, new pilot would do. I lied, and told him that I had a problem with the fuel, but I was not lost.

The most difficult thing for me was to have to learn everything on my own in a hostile environment. Using the wrong map, flying at an optimal altitude for the enemy to fire on me, radio checks, and all the other things that most pilots had a chance to learn because they were co-pilots to experienced pilots, were learned by either making mistakes or by figuring them out on my own. Learning lessons the hard way is not easy, but the hard lessons sure do stick in the mind. They are the things a person never forgets. This was the second thing that I knew I would never let happen again. I have never been lost while flying since that day. Looking back, with all of the lessons learned without being injured or killed, made me a better pilot. I knew there were no recourses or resources other than me, so I learned the lessons of survival. That was hard in the beginning, but by the end of my Vietnam tour, I was a confident pilot.