



I Was Just Too Short

By

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**English 200
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This is a reproduction of the original paper.

I WAS JUST TOO SHORT

We were tired; we had all been up since four A.M. and now that we had finished our mission, some twenty sorties; we were ready to go home and call it a day.

I was flying as Aircraft Commander,¹ but actually Mach was in charge because he was an instructor pilot. I wasn't actually in need of a check ride but the company doesn't usually let any AC's go out and get into any kind of trouble when they get short.² I was down to fifteen days left, "in country." AC's get a little more jumpy when they're short, so they say, but still I didn't feel shaky. I never felt better. I had been "in country" for thirteen months already and nothing had happened to me yet so what could happen to me now. I was just too short.

I sure wish that Cockerham hadn't sucked me into that damned card game last night.

"Come on Tom! We need a fourth and you're the only one available. If you don't play we won't be able to play."

¹ Aircraft Command or AC is in charge of the aircraft no matter what the military ranks might be. The AC always sits in the left seat.

² Short is the term used for someone who only has a short time left in country.

I should have known better. I always get hooked into playing, "Just one more." And always followed by, "It's tied up now; you can't quit." I really am a sucker.

"Hillclimber 1-4,³ this is Phantom 3-0," comes in over the UHF radio.

I think and say almost simultaneously, "Oh no, I wonder what they have for us now."

Mack jokes in a sarcastic monotone, "I am sure that they will let us know."

I responded, "Phantom 3-0, this is Hillclimber 1-4; go."

Roger, 1-4, 3-0, I know that you're going to hate me, but I have a recovery for you."

"3-0, 1-4, what happened to the recovery standby bird?"

"1-4, 3-0, they got launched on a retrograde to Vung Tau and aren't expected back for a couple hours." There was a brief pause while the controller using the Battalion call sign reshuffled his paperwork looking for the pertinent information.

"This bird just went down south of Rach Soi and there are a dozen '6's'⁴ out there; I need a recovery bird fast; you're done and you're close."

I paused a second trying to think of a good excuse why we should not be the ones to do the mission and then answered affirmatively, "Roger, what is the info on the mission?"

³ This notation (1-4) is actually pronounced on the radio as, "one four," not fourteen. (9's) are also pronounced "Niner."

"1-4, 3-0, ok your contact is Blackhawk 6 on their UHF delta frequency and Tailboard is doing the rigging of the downed bird, so you won't have to do any inspecting of it. Contact Tailboard 1-6 on VHF on their Juliet frequency. The PZ⁵ is victor searia 8-6-7-5-9-2."

Roger, we have a good copy."

The flight path was changed while I was still talking on the radios and Mack was already calling Paddy Control changing our flight plan to get artillery clearance to the new destination, so I looked up the required frequencies and wrote them on our standard blackboard, the windshield, and then started to dial them into the various radios. Before Mack finished on UHF, I turned him off so that I could call ahead without distraction, "Blackhawk 6, this is Hillclimber 1-4." No response so I try again, "Blackhawk 6, this is Hillclimber 1-4."

Very weakly but understandably I hear, "Hillclimber 1-4, Hillclimber 1-4, this is Blackhawk 6."

Roger Blackhawk 6, I have you, but you are very weak; I understand that you have a bird for us to move."

"Roger that, we are still rigging it but will have it ready for you in about ten minutes. We've been having a little action down here so we have guns⁶ here to cover your pickup.

⁴ The call sign of "6" is usually reserved for the commander of the unit.

⁵ PZ stands for Pick up Zone and LZ means Landing zone.

⁶ "Guns" was the term used for a Cobra Gunship. It carried a dozen rockets and a mini gun that could shoot 6000 rounds a minute for short bursts.

"Roger that, sounds good. We won't be able to get there for at least ten minutes anyway."

Meanwhile, Mack had been calling the local artillery to obtain clearance into the area. All this time, I had been doing the flying so Mack said in the first break in the chatter on the four radios, "Do you want me to give you a break?"

"Naw. I need the practice." We both smiled at each other knowing that my flying days were numbered and my practicing days were gone.

"Well anyway I would like to do the flying since I won't be doing too much in college."

"OK, it's your show. I'll handle the radios; let me know when you want them turned off."

I rogered Mack and then said to the crew, "OK, gang we got known bad guys in the area so keep your eyes open."

Mack added from the endless flow of information on the radios, "But watch it because we are supposed to have gun cover. Let the Cobras do the shooting, unless you have a target. We don't want to shoot any friendlies."

From the back of the ship we heard a couple, "Roger that Sir's."

Again from the back, "Aircraft at ten o'clock low."

After looking and seeing at least three other ships, I responded, "Roger, I have about three of them out there at about three miles."

"Roger Sir."

On FM, I called again, "Blackhawk 6, this Hillclimber 1-4."

"1-4, Go."

"6, 1-4, we are now about five out of the PZ and we will stay at about 3-5 hundred (feet) until you clear us into the area.

"Roger that, ground crew says it may take another ten or so. They seem to be having some trouble with the rigging."

"1-4, Roger that."

"Well Mack it looks like standard procedures, hurry up and wait."

"No shit! And I had my mind set on a steak at the 'O' Club.⁷

"Roger that."

We continued to fly to the area where the aircraft density was highest and then through extensive crosschecking of the maps and long hard looking at the ground we located the two aircraft. It really is amazing how well a green helicopter blends in with a thousand square miles of green rice paddy. The only thing that caught my eye was the second aircraft's spinning white-topped rotor blades and the purple smoke grenade that they popped for us. This second ship was the one that had carried the crew into the area to rig the downed bird for extraction. Once we had our bearings and a pretty good idea as to the flight path that we would take in and out we just drove around in big circles, watched and waited.

⁷ 'O' Club is short for Officers Club. It was like a nightclub on the airfield for the Officers.

"Hillclimber 1-4, this is Tailboard 1-6. The ship is ready for extraction. I have two men on top of the ship to hook you up when you get into the PZ."

"Roger that, 1-4 is coming out of 3-5-hundred."

"Ok Mack, you have the radios from here on in but don't turn mine off till the chief starts to give me altitudes."

"Got ya."

When the Hook⁸ started down, then it seemed like everybody had to give everybody else a last minute instruction because the radios always throbbed with people telling each other what was going to happen in the next minute or two. After a while in the cockpit, one learns to pick out the information that is relevant and mentally block out the rest.

The Crew Chief says, "2-0-0 feet"

"OK Mack, get my radios."

He reached over and turned all my monitor switches off except intercom, and instantly all quieted except the constant wine of the forward transmission.

"1-5-0."

"How do you hear me chief?"

"Loud and clear Sir."

"I've got you same."

⁸ The aircraft we are flying is often referred to as a, "Hook," which is short for Chinook or CH-47; all are interchangeable names for the aircraft.

My intentions were to make the approach hot and steep into the area so as to minimize exposure time. Everything in the cockpit was looking green.⁹

"1-0-0."

I could see the ship much more clearly now. It must have had a tail rotor strike and spun into the rice paddy because the tailboom was damaged and its right skid was either broken or completely submerged into the paddy allowing water to run into the bottom part of the fuselage.

"5-0."

With all that water in the ship I knew it was going to be heavy. I could see the two hookup men on top of the aircraft covering their eyes in anticipation of the initial blast of rotor wash as this big 40,000 pound bird strained to come to a hover about twenty feet above their heads.

"4-0."

As the ship slowed and closed with the area, about half a dozen ARVN's¹⁰, which apparently were there for security, came into view.

"3-5."

I picked out a spot to use as a reference point from which to make my correction as the Crew Chief gave me directions to make the pick-up. He was looking out the hole in the center of the ship's floor at the aircraft, that we were about to lift out. The chief could see the load after it went out of sight from the cockpit. I was slowing to a fast walk as the

⁹ "Green" is shorthand for the needles are all in the normal operating range, which is painted green in the cockpit.

other bird went under the nose. Now I had to judge 25 feet further to put the hookup sling right over the two men getting ready to make the connection.

"3-0." Feet; sling is out." The Chief threw out the sling that had already been hooked into the hook in the belly of our aircraft to the waiting men on top of the load. The Chief paused as he compiled his directions, "Down five, right two, and forward seven."

I think, "Not bad."¹¹

Then I here a telltale crack and think, "Mmm! I wonder if that was what I think it was. It sounded like a round. A second, and third crack; Yup, we're taking fire."

The Chief directs me, "Hold everything. Hookup man has the sling; one of the guys just took off but the other caught the sling and is hooking us up."

A gunner interjected, "Taking fire from the right!"

Mack was talking a blue streak on the radios. If only I could find out exactly what he was saying and what they were saying back.

"Load is hooked; man is clear."

"Ok Chief were coming up," I responded automatically as I start pulling in the power.

The Chief countered after the aircraft started to rise, "Slings are coming tight; slings are tight."

¹⁰ ARVN's pronounced Arvin and it means Army of the Republic of Viet Nam troops.

I felt the tug of the nearly eight thousand pounds on the aircraft, so I continued to pull in power but it was heavy and I had to pull the controls up a long way before I could feel our prize begin to swing as it lifted off the rice paddy.

"She's off one."

Watching the engine torque gages, I pulled in more power hoping that the engines would give on my demand. They did.

"She's off five."

Normally, you are supposed to lift the load off the ground fifteen feet and then check and see if there still is two percent left of power on both engines, but I was only going to take it up to ten to do the hover check and an abbreviated one at that. But by the time I was going through about seven Mack was already pushing the controls forward to let me know to get us moving. Mack knew that when the other pilot was flying, one just doesn't touch the controls on him, so in explanation he flipped on the intercom and said, "Let's get out of here!"

"She looks about fifteen off and we just took a round through the recovery sling."

Mack immediately jumped into the conversation, "Will it make it or do you think we ought to put it back down?"

"I think she'll make it, Sir."

¹¹ As pilots get more experience they can get the middle of the aircraft within single digits making correcting and hookup a lot faster.

I was nursing the ship for all the altitude I could get out of her. There were roughly forty foot trees out ahead and I wasn't sure I could get her up high enough to keep the ship below from hitting them and if it hits the trees, then it could pull us all down. I was constantly crosschecking instruments and flight attitude to make sure that I had all the available power I could get and the best climb angle for the particular airspeed that we were passing through.

"2-0 off."

"That's not enough!" thinking as fast as a computer I considered alternatives. I couldn't let it hit the trees but I sure didn't want to stay here too long either. I saw a break in the trees off to the left, which was just big enough for the ship to go through if it was flying straight; The Lord must be with us. I was already making corrections toward the opening, but only so fast to prevent the load from swinging. I pressed for information, "Is it streamlining yet?"¹²

"Yes Sir; 2-5 off."

The trees went under the nose; I should have been lined up better! I waited, hoping not to feel anything unusual and nothing happened. We cleared them.

I relaxed just slightly as we passed through a hundred feet. "How's she riding Chief?"

"She looks ok Sir."

"Hey Mack, where are we taking this, Rach Soi?"

"Yup, we have to see if we took any hits in the ship and I want to see how bad that sling is too.

"Could you turn my radios back on so I can find out what has been going on?"

Mack summarizes, "Well it seems that Charlie¹³ was waiting for us. Why should he shoot at Hueys¹⁴ when he can get a Hook? But what I can't figure out is why the Cobras didn't do any shooting. What kind of cover can they give if they don't keep Charlie's head down?"

I suppose it's the same old story, 'Friendlies in the area.'"

Mack reflects, "I have been in Nam for three years and done probably over a hundred [Aircraft] recoveries and that one was the hottest yet. Someone even said that after we lifted out, they shot a rocket into the area."

As things started to settle down on the way to Rach Soi, I began thinking about going home. I reflected. "Won't be long now, of course it seems like I just got here. Wonder what college will be kike? I suppose that they are going to ask me if it was dangerous flying in Viet Nam. I really don't know what I'll say, because I can't remember being scared when I was flying here. I always feel comfortable in the cockpit.

¹² Streamlining is the term we used to describe the aircraft being carried in a nose forward position. The riggers were supposed to put a small parachute on the tail to force the nose forward.

¹³ Charlie was the term we used for the enemy.

¹⁴ Hueys are smaller utility helicopters. Several of the aircraft in the area as well as the bird we were recovering was all Hueys.

Actually, I think that I was more scared of the disgrace of failure at my first real endeavor on my own. But why wasn't I scared back there where all that shooting was going on? Didn't I know the consequences of what could happen? Yes, I knew, but the required action was well defined, and if something did happen it would not have been my fault. I guess that has been what has driven me on. I was always afraid of failure, and someone saying that it was my fault. That must be why I have worked so hard to be good at this. Coordination is not one of my God-given gifts and it almost cost me my slot in flight school.¹⁵ But I pushed hard and I made it.

"Now I am here in Viet Nam; I knew when I joined the Army to be a pilot that I would come here. I had to see it for myself. I guess I was curious to see whether or not I was a coward. But I still don't really know! Every time the going got rough, I knew what to do and did it without thinking about anything other than the right thing for me to do right then.

"They are going to ask me, 'Well now that you've been there, do you think that we should be in Viet Nam at all?' I really haven't thought too much about that. I guess all I really thought about was that if I wanted a thousand hours of flight time that I had to come here to get it. I do know now that this delta is a rich rice paddy and that if China really developed it, she could feed a lot of her people off this land, so if for no

¹⁵ Almost half of every flight school class flunks out or gets washed out. At graduation I was the youngest Officer in my class of almost 200 cadets.

other reason than to keep the Communist Chinese from gaining control of this area and becoming an even more threatening power, I guess I have to go along with the effort.

"But there is another reason that I am here. I guess I believe in a kind of big brother policy in foreign relations. If my brother came to me and asked me to help him to expel an intruder, I would first ask him what measures he had taken already, and if they were adequate and ineffective then I would assist him in the fight for what is his. The United States is a big brother to all the democratic countries of the world and when they come to us and ask for assistance we cannot turn our back on them. If we did, I am sure that the developing nations of the world would get the idea that Democracy was unreliable and Communism could offer a better bill of goods. Many Americans have worked, fought, and died hard to preserve the big brother status and prestige that the United States now possesses.

"Many people in my generation say that they have such high ideals that they would rather fight than go and fight. They say that Viet Nam is an unjust war, that it is an undeclared war, and that the Americans should leave immediately if not sooner. There are those who said the same things in all the wars in which this country has participated. Sure war is terrible. Sure Viet Nam has at times proven to be a not so worthy recipient of our assistance. The Americans come here and, for the most part, are through here after a year, and then they

go back to their peace in the states. These people are in the war for the duration and there is no going home for them to peace because they have never known peace. I think that if we who have prosperity and peace at home can help these people acquire the same things, then it is our duty to do so even if it means helping them thrust out an enemy or build schools and in my year here I have helped on both accounts. I hope that my generation did something toward the perpetuation of democratic principals and peace for the fee countries."

"Rach Soi Blackcat, this is Hillclimber 1-4."

"1-4, Rach Soi Blackcat."

"Roger, I have a recovered bird under me and I would like to set it down on the east end of the field for inspection. We took some fire out there and I would like to shut down and inspect our aircraft too."

"1-4, Rach Soi, Roger that, you are cleared to the south east corner of the field for set down and you can shut down on the north east corner. Try to get your blades clear of the active runway."

"Roger that."

Mack comments, "You sure aren't very talkative. I suppose that one shook you up a little bit since you're so short."

"Naw, I was just thinking about going home."

Epilogue

The story that you just read is true and accurate as close as my mind will permit over a ten-month period. I know that many people like to tell "fish stories," "fairy tales", "tall yarns", and just plain "Bull shit" about their own bravery in the face of the enemy, but I have tried to convey the facts of the event and my own thoughts or at least what I think I was thinking at that time. Where the facts were extremely vague, I substituted so closely typical information that it would not be far from being totally accurate. One example of my substitution is the radio calls and intercom chatter, which I have no way of reporting accurately but these substitutions are very close.

To further give the story substance I am enclosing a copy of the order awarding me my nineteenth Air Medal, which I received for this particular mission, after I was already back in the states and in college.

Signed

CW2 Thomas E. Leverenz

May 3, 1972

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
HEADQUARTERS, 1ST AVIATION BRIGADE
APO San Francisco 96384

GENERAL ORDERS
NUMBER 6607

"NGUY HIEM"

2 October 1971

AWARD OF THE AIR MEDAL FOR HEROISM

TC 439. The following AWARDS are announced.

MACLAREN, MACK E. CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER CW2 147th Aviation
Company (Assault Support Helicopter) APO 96215
Awarded: Air Medal Thirty-ninth Award with "V" Device
LEVERENZ, THOMAS E. CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER CW2 147th Aviation
Company (Assault Support Helicopter) APO 96215
Awarded: Air Medal Nineteenth Award with "V" Device

Awarded: As indicated in Standard Name Line

Date of service: 19 July 1971

Theater: Republic of Vietnam

Authority: By direction of the President under the provisions of Executive
Order 9158, 11 May 1942, as amended by Executive Order 9242-A,
11 September 1942, AR 672-5-1 and USARV Supplement 1 to AR 672-5-1
dated 10 August 1970.

Reason: For heroism while engaged in aerial flight in connection with
military operations against a hostile force: These men distinguished
themselves by exceptionally valorous actions while serving as pilots
of a cargo helicopter during an aircraft recovery operation near the
village of Rach Soi in the central part of Kien Giang Province. Upon
their arrival into the pickup zone, these men proceeded to hook up
a damaged helicopter despite enemy fire. After the hook up was com-
pleted, these men began lifting the damaged aircraft out of the area.
These men displayed extraordinary bravery and brilliant ability by
lifting the downed helicopter out of the field site at an extremely
slow airspeed through heavy enemy automatic weapons fire, and rocket
fire. Through their tremendous courage and sound judgement, they were
able to overcome obstacles and accomplish the mission. Their intrepid
actions and devotion to duty were in keeping with the highest traditions
of the military service and reflect great credit upon themselves,
their unit and the United States Army.

FOR THE COMMANDER:

OFFICIAL:


DAVID G. MATHIS
CFT, AGC
Asst. AG

R. JOE ROGERS
Colonel, GS
Chief of Staff

SSN Blanked for Security.