

“There are old pilots and there are bold pilots but there are no old, bold pilots.”

Mr. Ketchum, my flight instructor at the helicopter primary flight course, Camp Wolters, Texas, often said these words when he was talking safety to us aviation students.

“All In a Day’s Work”... a story about 22 July 1963.

By: [Charlie Ostick](#)

0425 – Reveille

0500 – Chow

0530 – Flight Line

0600 – Start engines and line up for take off

0605 – Take off (from Tan Son Nhut – that’s the main airport near Saigon in South Vietnam)

This day is about a mission for the Utility Tactical Transport Helicopter Company (UTT). The UTT was the Army’s first armed helicopter unit. You can see that we started really early on mission days by getting up and hurrying to the flight line. When we got to the flight line, we would perform our preflight inspections, load our weapons systems and brief our crews. Our flight crews at the UTT consisted of a pilot, a copilot, a crew chief and a door gunner. Often, when we went out on these gunship missions, we would have a strap hanger from headquarters or someone from a newspaper or a television station or a CBS reporter.

We started the mission just after we lined up for take off at 0600. The Hueys that we were flying were UH-1A’s, which was an older model, and the UH-1B’s, which we had brought in C-124’s from CONUS much earlier in the spring. The B models had more power and could actually hover with a fully loaded helicopter with a full crew and a full load of fuel on board. Now the UH-1A’s were a different story – they could hardly hover at all and we often struggled to get them off the ground. We would literally bounce along the ground because we could not hover without losing RPM. As we bounced and skidded along the hard runways we would get enough speed that we could go through translational lift. Translational lift is when the rotor blades get additional lift because of the forward speed of the helicopter. When you would hit translational lift you could actually get about 200 feet per minute climb and you could gain altitude. Then, as you burned off fuel, things got better and better in the A models. The B models generally could take off fairly well and complete their mission. On this day I was flying a UH-1B armed with quad machine guns – that’s four M-60C machine guns mounted on a flexible hydraulic/electric mount- and I had a load of eight 2.75 inch rockets on each side.

The mission was to support the ARVN (which stands for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam) at a little airstrip near Nui Ba Den. The H-21’s had flown up with the ARVN. While they were on a sweep north of the city the ARVN had captured an arms factory. During a lull in the battle, a couple of us pilots had taken a jeep and had gone over to the factory to have a look around. In this arms factory was a small, roughed out, crude classroom. In the classroom on a string across the front was a cut-out of a UH-1 helicopter – looked just like our Hueys. Tied in front of the helicopters at two helicopter

lengths was a bull's-eye on the same string. The instructor would pull the helicopter and the bull's-eye across the classroom and the students were taught to fire at the bull's-eye and not at the helicopter. This technique would thereby give them a two helicopter lead on a moving helicopter as they were firing at it. This is much like duck hunting, you don't fire directly at the duck in order to shoot it, you fire in front of the duck a couple of leads and you will probably hit it because the duck will fly into your buckshot. The same principle applies to shooting down helicopters. It works very well. You shoot a couple leads in front of them and guess what, at 60 -80 knots they will fly right into your bullets. This story about the classroom target practice will become more important later in this story.

We were still supporting the ARVN when they got into a firefight just west of the arms factory near Nui Ba Den. As we were supporting them with machine and rocket fire and had neutralized the target area. A bullet came into our chopper and shot off the anti-torque control pedals on my copilot's right foot. Needless to say his other foot went all the way out. We thought we had lost our tail rotor as the Huey swerved out of control. We had quite an exciting moment while we tried to figure out what had happened to our chopper and I regained control.

We had gone back to Nui Ba Den and refueled, rearmed, and repaired the pedal in preparation for another mission. In the meantime, a Vietnamese Ranger Battalion had been attacked just south of where we were at a little village called Ben Suc. I was serving as aircraft commander and flight leader of team of two helicopters. I had a copilot, door gunner, and crew chief on board. We had participated in several firing runs over this area against the Vietcong positions and we were doing a good job of suppressing their activities. Our platoon leader had been hit by hostile fire and he was forced to go back to Nui Ba Den. On his way back, he radioed and directed me to take over command of the platoon. I led several more attacks against the VC. We were directing very effective machine gun and rocket fire and we had neutralized many enemy positions. When our ordinance was nearly expended and we couldn't make any more firing passes, I volunteered to evacuate critically wounded Vietnamese Army Rangers from the battle area. We were landing to load the wounded less than 100 meters from the enemy firing positions. Just as we were preparing to depart and I was to applying power, a Vietcong soldier pops up along the tree line. He had a long-barreled shotgun. He pointed the shotgun directly at the chopper – it looked to me like it was pointing straight at me – and then he took two leads. You could just see him counting in his mind. He pointed the shotgun at the chopper and then he took two leads – he just went bump, bump - then he fired his shotgun in front of our chopper. My door gunner on that side was very effective and that particular VC soldier never fired again. To this day, I thank that VC classroom instructor for drilling into those Vietcong soldiers how important it is to take two leads when you are going to shoot down a helicopter. It doesn't matter that it is sitting on the ground and not moving but thank goodness for the over trained Vietcong. I think I am here today because of that instructor who was teaching that class.

We had pulled out of that landing zone with some difficulty because not only had they put wounded on, they had also loaded some dead soldiers on and we were probably

overloaded. But we were able to struggle out of the little clearing near Ben Suc and head back to Tan Son Nhut and safety.

When we landed on the flight line at Tan Son Nhut, I was not surprised but I was a bit concerned because there were seventeen bullet holes in our chopper. Almost all of them were in the tail boom because the VC had not yet figured out how to shoot down choppers. Some of the holes were in the rotor blades too. We got home about sunset. That was a long twelve-hour day. Later, I was presented a Distinguished Flying Cross for this action.



