

A STORY OF AP BAC

January 2, 1963

By: [Charlie Ostick](#)

These are the words that the 93rd Helicopter Company wrote in January '63 after The Battle of Ap Bac. They were sung to the tune of "On Top Of Ol' Smokey". (The words were found in a letter I had written to my wife in January '63.)

We were called into Tan Hiep
On January Two
We would never have gone there
If we'd only knew

We were supporting the ARVN
A group without guts
Attacking a village
Of straw covered huts

A ten-chopper mission
A hundred-troop load
Three lifts are now over
A fourth on the road

The VC start shooting
They fire a big blast
We off load the ARVN
They sit on their ass

One chopper is crippled
Another sits down
Attempting a rescue
Now there are two on the ground

A Huey returns now
To give them some aid
The VC are so accurate
They shoot off a blade

Four Pilots are wounded
Two Crewmen are dead
When it's all over
A good day for the Red

They lay in the paddy
All covered with slime
One hell of a sunbath
Eight hours at a time

An Armored Battalion
Just stayed in a trance
One Captain died trying
To make them advance

The paratroops landed
A magnificent sight

There was hand-to-hand combat
But no VC in sight

When the news was reported
The ARVN had won
The VC are laughing
Over their captured guns

All Pilots take warning
When tree lines are near
Let's land those darn copters
One mile to the rear

The characters in this story had call signs on the radio and they were as follows: The CH-21's (called Shawnee's) call sign was Mardigras, the HU-1B's (called Hueys) had three call signs and they were – the flight leader was Eagle, the A team leader was called Red Leader and B team leader was Blue Leader.

On January 2nd, ten CH-21's from the 93rd Transportation Company were escorted by five HU-1B's from the UTT Helicopter Co. They staged from the little airstrip at Tan Hiep. We were inserting the 7th ARVN Infantry into an enemy VC controlled area near Ap Bac that was kind of like the VC's hometown. A well-equipped and reinforced VC Battalion was there. Contrary to what had normally happened where the VC would engage and then flee, in a guerilla type warfare, this time they stood and fought rather than withdraw.

(These next two paragraphs contain excerpts from a Jan. 10, 1963 New York Times article.)

The Battle of Ap Bac was to have been a routine heliborne operation into the rice rich Mekong Delta. The quarry this time was a concentration of guerrillas near the village of Ap Bac, a canal side village nestled among coconut trees. Nearby the US helicopters landed their troops safely in three separate waves. Then as they wheeled in for the fourth time, recalled a crewman, "All hell broke loose." From camouflage foxholes behind the trees, hundreds of VC regulars loosed a deadly barrage of machine gun fire. Fourteen of the fifteen helicopters in this operation were hit. Of the ten banana shaped Shawnee troop carriers, four were knocked out of the sky. Of the five heavily armed Hueys in support of the CH-21's all were hit. One Huey lost its rotor blades and was forced to the ground and crashed. Aircrews from the downed helicopters were eventually picked up by the ARVN in armored personnel carriers and taken to a secure area where they were transferred to helicopters.

Under heavy Vietcong fire, government forces shelled the guerrilla lines and the Vietnamese Air Force came in with napalm and machine gun fire and bombs. But this time instead of scattering like they had been wont to do, the guerrillas held fast. They were well trained and well armed. Even after napalm, rockets, machine gun, artillery fire and rocket and machine gun fire from the Hueys, the VC held fast. That night the VC finally did retreat slipping through a cordon of about 2000 ARVN troops.

The story that I'm telling is from the perspective of the pilot of one of the five HU-1B Hueys from the UTT Helicopter Company that flew in support of the CH-21's at the battle of Ap Bac.

That morning, which was typical of heliborne operations, we flew from Ton Son Nhut in our Hueys to Tan Hiep that we were going to use for refueling and rearming and also for the pick-up zone. The landing zone was to be prepped by the South Vietnamese Air Force as well as our HU-1B gunships. We were to provide machine gun and rocket fire as the CH-21's landed.

We might could have known that this day, January 2, could be a little different, in that on the way down to Tan Hiep from Saigon we had engaged the VC in a very untypical operation. Normally, when we flew in Vietnam we either flew at either at or below treetop level or we flew at or above 1500 feet. The reason we did this is it is harder to hit a helicopter which is flying 90 knots along the treetop level than it is one that is just tooling along at two or three hundred feet. However, it is harder to navigate down at treetop level. The other alternative is to fly just out of effective small arms range (which is about 1000 feet) so you would choose to fly somewhere around 1500 feet so you could not easily be shot at by small arms. On this mission to Ap Bac because we wanted surprise and we didn't want anyone to know where our pick-up zone was going to be at Tan Hiep, we chose to depart Saigon and fly at or below treetop level down to Tan Hiep.

We had a flight of five HU-1B's (that was two teams of two and a flight leader). The flight leader's call sign was "Eagle" and the two teams were "Red Team" and "Blue Team". I was the flight leader of the Red Team. As we were proceeding to Tan Hiep that morning just a little after sun up, my flight of two Hueys flew over an enemy position that had about an enemy platoon that was fairly well out in the open. Now, in the past when we had flew over Vietcong they had scattered and left us alone. This time, contrary to their normal procedure, they rolled onto their backs as we flew over them and they immediately started firing into the air. This is an effective infantry tactic against a helicopter because as you roll onto your back and you start firing into the air the second Huey might fly into the bullets. We were lucky this time in that my wingman was flying about a hundred yards off to my left and not directly behind me (echelon left formation). We had already learned in our earlier operations in Vietnam not to fly in trail formation because sure as the world, if you ran across the enemy, they would shoot at the lead helicopter and they might hit the second one. So, in this case, I flew over this enemy platoon and as soon as they started firing I told my door gunner, "drop smoke," and he immediately dropped a red smoke canister out of the door of the chopper.

"Red Two this is Red Lead. From my smoke, 6 o'clock, 50 meters, enemy troop in the open. Circle to the right; follow my lead, fire machine guns and rockets at will. Over." "Red Lead this is Red Two. WILCO. Out." So immediately I did a steep right turn and my wing man followed me and as I came around toward the previous position where the red smoke had been thrown, I saw the troops still in the open firing at us. So we opened up with our quad M-60 machine guns, hosed down the area, fired a pair of rockets, and then broke off maybe 200 yards short of the target. My wingman came in behind me and did the same thing. We repeated this operation several passes – machine guns and rockets on each pass. It wasn't long before we could tell that there was no return fire and there were numerous Vietcong wounded and killed in the open field. So, after our last pass when there was no return fire, we noted our location, I marked it on my map and we

flew on to Tan Hiep. In the meantime, I had informed Eagle lead of what had happened, although he had been monitoring the radio anyway and knew what was going on. We flew on to Tan Hiep and refueled and rearmed.

You've seen the general description of the Battle of Ap Bac and this is how I was involved in that particular battle. CH-21's were escorted by our Hueys each time they went into the landing zone. Now the first time we went in we did strafe the tree lines and fired some rockets as the CH-21's landed. There had been no return fire in that entire operation until we were on our fourth lift and then the VC decided to ambush the CH-21's as they were coming into the landing zone. Now this is a very difficult situation as the ARVN were already on the ground and were moving into the tree lines and some were in the open field. There were armored personnel carriers coming down on the flank and then the VC decided to stand and fight. It causes a gunship pilot a lot of stress because you have to be very careful about friendly casualties so we were talking to the advisors on the ground (advisors on the ground were called "whisky" and "bourbon"). "Whisky" and "bourbon" were directing our fire into the Vietcong position and we made pass after pass and all five of us – Red Team on the left and the Blue Team on the right continued to orbit the battlefield and fire. Often we had to go back to Tan Hiep to refuel and rearm and immediately went back to the battle at Ap Bac. During one of the trips to the landing zone a HU-1B was hit and forced to land and the rotors were damaged so that they crashed near the downed CH-21's. So now we also had an aircrew on the ground under enemy fire and our pucker factor went way up. We had never lost an aircrew and we had never had a downed Huey up to that time. We continued to stay on station well past the landing of the CH-21's because of our aircrews on the ground, both Huey and Shawnee. It was getting dark when we finally were able to get our crews out of the area. They were rescued by armored personnel carriers coming in under protection of both Vietnamese Air Force and our HU-1B gunships. They rescued our crew and then we picked up our aircrew and flew them into Tan Hiep. One of our sergeants, a Sergeant Deal, a crew chief on a HU-1B, was killed in this action. To the best of my knowledge, he was also the first KIA that we had had in the UTT Helicopter Company.

The next day, we went back to Ap Bac which was really quite thrilling because we had been shot up the previous day but there were no Vietcong to be found and there was no ground fire. We recovered our downed helicopter by picking it up in pieces with a sling and took it into Tan Hiep. What a sight for us to be back at the Battle of Ap Bac.

You can see why the 93rd pilots went back and wrote some funny words to a song that we sang in the Officers Club about our battle at Ap Bac. In this battle, we had met the enemy and for the first time and they had stood and fought. While I was okay, they did shoot down four of the ten CH-21's, Shawnees, and they had gotten one of our five HU-1B's. So, all-in-all the VC had a good day and the ARVN and the US Army had a very expensive day.

"We flew into Tan Hiep on January Two.
We'd never have gone there if we only knew."



