

Bad Boys

Some Got Through – Some Didn't.

By [Captain Methane](#)©

Standing at rigid attention, my fellow Warrant Officer Candidates and I were summoned by our TAC Officer, a thin, menacing figure of a man we called **SIR!** Mr. Machina was a no-nonsense veteran combat helicopter pilot and a powerful Chief Warrant Officer, so it was only behind his back that we called him *Machine Gun*. Why our flight of thirty-five pilots-in-training were hurriedly called into formation was about to become clear.

Long before daybreak that morning, there had been a commotion at the PX store adjacent to our helicopter flight school barracks. A Military Policeman was making a routine security check of the locked facility. Spotting someone breaking into an entrance at the far end of the building, a challenge was shouted and a shot was fired.

The would-be burglar dropped dead on the floor, wiped out by the MP's .45 pistol slug, which had first ricocheted off the metal doorframe near the burglar's head. Turns out, the burglar was also a veteran combat helicopter pilot - another Chief Warrant Officer!

It was naturally a shock to those of us going through military hell in an attempt to achieve the coveted status of the fallen officer, who was revealed to have a large collection of *stolen guns!* Doing his best to explain how this could happen, Mr. Machina spoke with unusual passion...

“As a TAC Officer, it is my job to see that only the most disciplined, the most deserving candidates pin on the wings. The man who was shot this morning is an embarrassment to the United States Army. Every now and then, one of *these guys* gets through the system. *Somebody* screwed up here at Fort Wolters over two years ago. He shouldn't have made it through flight school in the first place - he should have been *weeded out!*” growled *Machine Gun*, as he paced right and left in front of our forty-man formation.

When his speech was finished and we were dismissed, many expressed their disbelief about what had happened so close to home. At my first opportunity, I double-timed over to the building in mention and took a look. There was a short line of us waiting to get a look at the infamous door. Sure enough, there was a deep telling gouge in the thick metal doorframe where the heavy slug was deflected into its intended target, at about nose level. It made quite an impression.

I was beginning to wonder about all the background checks we had gone through to get this far, where even a minor scrape with the law or a less-than-favorable report from one of our schoolteachers would spell doom for an aspiring aviator. How many of these jokers were getting through, I wondered?

Only two months before - during the non-flying phase of our training - a brand new candidate took a stroll one Sunday afternoon, out to the Main Heliport flight line. He had no instructor with him and knew *nothing* about flying one of the scores of OH-23s quietly sitting there. Picking one that he liked, he opened a flight manual that was in plain view.

Wherever Security was that day, he was undeterred as he buckled himself in and started down the checklist.

As things worked out, he managed to get the helicopter started, revved it up and began sliding and hopping around wildly, and in short order crashed hard at the edge of the ramp and burst into flames. An off-duty WOC by the name of Robert Davidson witnessed the bizarre incident and bravely ran to the rescue, earning himself a Soldier's Medal.

The would-be pilot made headlines days later when he pointed out to his commanding officer that he came to Fort Wolters *to learn to fly*, and *no one ever told him* he couldn't just walk out there and fire up a helicopter! As incredible as it sounds, he successfully avoided a military court martial with this ruse and was eventually allowed to continue training! (They corrected the *permission omission* in the orientation process, you can bet on that.)

Not very long afterward, someone noticed that there was a Hughes 269 sitting in several feet of water in a local Mineral Wells lake, not far from where the flaming OH-23 had crashed. A reliable source later divulged to me that the trainer's solo pilot became bored with boring holes in the sky and decided to unbuckle and switch seats in the 269 as he was flying. In the process, he fell out of the aircraft at low altitude, dropped into the lake, swam to shore and disappeared. The helicopter was discovered later in the shallow lake, all alone and fairly bent.

As for my class, most went on to graduate, transfer to Fort Rucker and eventually pinned on their silver wings. Among the exceptions was one of my roommates who couldn't hack flying instruments and had to accept the given alternative: "Welcome to the infantry!" Another decided that flying helicopters was too stressful and opted out - but I always wondered if the infantry was any *less stressful*?

And let us not forget the jubilant candidate who graduated with us that fine day and (many beers later) celebrated by sneaking into his ornery TAC Officer's office, whereupon he rifled the locked filing cabinet open and relieved himself upon the deep drawer of neatly typed files therein. In midstream, the lights came on above him and *guess who* was standing in the doorway with his finger on the light switch? *Infantry*, make room for one more.

Many of those aviators fortunate enough to survive Vietnam eventually got out of the military and made the awkward transition to flying as *civilians* - although some were more *civil* than others. One acquaintance of mine had a day job flying Sikorsky S-55Ts in Arizona near the Mexican border. Turns out he also had a clandestine night job flying *weed* across the border, and was making a sizeable haul one night with his landing lights switched off. Upon landing, his fragile rotor blades took out a light pole, just as he was about to cash in. A few years in the cooler, and he was back among us, civil as ever.

The last bad boy in this tale pulled off a stunt that should have put him in chains for a decade: Picture a heavily loaded, mile-long freight train working its way down a steep mountain grade somewhere in the great American West. A few hundred feet uphill from a railway tunnel, the train's engineer suddenly detects a bright light shining in his direction! He hits the emergency brakes, locking the engines' steel wheels in place as the train bore down on the tunnel, helpless to stop its momentum before impact.

Just as the engineer is about to jump, he observes that the light is attached to a French helicopter hovering over the tracks at the downhill entrance to the tunnel! Before the engineer can ID the culprit, the helicopter pulls up, disappears over the ridge and is gone.

By then, though, the damage to the train's traction wheels is done, partially flattened by the effort to arrest the lumbering locomotive and all those heavy railcars. The engines were unable to continue downhill, and instead, had to *back up* several miles to a suitable siding, an effort that totally infuriated the train's crew and its bankers. All the wheels had to be changed out and/or re-trued!

Every effort was made to pin the crime on a certain chopper pilot working on a seismic contract near the remote location, but they had no "N" number and the pilot swore up and down that he was elsewhere. And besides, what would be his *motivation* for doing such a reckless thing?

A reliable source thought he knew the answer: The trains came and went by the bad boy's motel room all night long and disturbed his slumber - that was his way of getting even.

(*Sheesh!*)

Primary helicopter training was moved from Fort Wolters to Fort Rucker, Alabama in November of 1973. The grand old Fort went from a once proud, rigidly-policed, freshly painted, bustling flight school to a collection of neglected old buildings with tall weeds growing out of cracks in the pavement. Gone forever was the daily buzz of a thousand helicopters filling the sky.

Mineral Wells took over control of some of the old Camp and renamed the facility Wolters Industrial Park. In the late 1980s, a Tennessee corporation by the name of Corrections Corporation of America leased a portion of the property to house 2100 prison inmates at what is called *Mineral Wells PPT*, for *pre-parole transfer* facility.

Now - more than ever - the old fort is an unhappy home for hundreds of *bad boys* from all over the country - a thought which must sour the stomachs of the honorable graduates who marched between the gate posts of our old alma mater.

The End