

CHUCK HUNTING IN THE U-MINH

From the book "HITS THROUGH THE CHIN BUBBLE!"

05-26-96 CHAPTER 12

by James Spletstoser

OH-6A s/n 67-16673
A Troop 7/1st AIR CAV.
Pilot: not recorded
Callsign: Blackhawks

26 June 1969
Dong Tam, RVN
APO 96370 SF

It was the 26th of June 1969 at the 9th Div. base camp, Dong Tam, RVN. A Light Fire Team from A Troop, 7/1st Cav were given a Search and Destroy mission in the U-Minh forest.

This team consisted of two Bell AH-1G Cobras and two Hughes OH-6A LOACHs. The Team and their Command and Control aircraft (C&C, a special radio rigged UH-1D) flew to a staging field at Kien Long near the U-Minh. This was to be their forward refuel and rearm point.

The Cobras were armed with: 7.62mm mini-gun; 40mm automatic grenade launcher in a computer controlled chin turret[1]; and serving as flying artillery, 2.75 in. folding fin aerial rockets in 9 and 7 round pods on each stub wing.

The two OH-6A LOACHs were armed with : 7.62mm mini-gun[2] on the left side with the observer (also on the left side) armed with a weapon of his choice[3], and hand grenades in a `frag bag' on the deck by the observer's feet and hung on twisted safety-wire line strung between the left door post and the instrument console.

The grenades consisted of CS, fragmentation, Willie Pete[4], in the frag-bag of extras, more grenades were included, plus the famous or perhaps, infamous `Baby Bombs', (home-made bombs, C-4 taped to a stick of TNT and used a common 5 sec. screw in hand grenade fuse, for `busting bunkers').

The LOACHs were used as Scouts on these S&D missions to fly down low, draw fire, and to generally stir up trouble.

Today's area to be patrolled was real Indian Country (enemy controlled territory), on the eastern fringe of the U Minh Forest, which was a low thatch of trees not more than 20 feet tall but so closely knit that a whole army could hide them.

Historically, for over 100 years, it was the hide out and training base for Vietnamese insurgents, guerrilla fighters and whatever various other anti-government factions who were in rebellion at any given time. For the last 40 years it had been the home of the Viet Minh and later the Viet Cong. This area was known to us as "Charlie's Training Camp."

During the 1st Indo-China War back in the early '50s, the French dropped a battalion[5] of Paras[6] into the U Minh. Saigon

French Army Headquarters' plan was to clear the area of all Viet Minh "once and for all." Unfortunately, those Magnificent Para's, France's finest, were never seen again.

This helicopter Fire-team had just left Kien Long, the staging field about 70 miles southeast of Vinh Long, and were headed out to their AO back toward the north, resolved to do the search and destroy type thing on any VC or NVA. They were out looking for fresh built fighting positions, and people in black PJ's, who were doing things other than just farming.

The aircraft and crew members in the flight kept in constant contact with each other over their radios and intercoms.

They had only been on station approximately 5 minutes when they spotted an individual running across a rice paddy with a rifle in his hand. They immediately engaged him, which resulted in his instant demise.

They then continued to conduct a visual reconnaissance of the canal line, flying at tree top level (30 ft.) with an airspeed of 65-70 kts. Next they happened upon two individuals digging a trench line along the side of the canal and observed their weapons lying beside the trench. It was safe to assume that they were also enemy, so the LOACHs again rolled in and dispatched them as well.

The `Trail' Loach was flying circles around the `Lead' as the `Lead' came to a hover to finish up these last two targets. It was then that `Trail' pilot spotted three individuals near a small tree line, which was running diagonally across a large open field of about 500 meters square. Since he was in a much better position at the time to engage, he started his attack while notifying the `Lead'; consequently the `Lead' took up the `Trail's wing position.

Trail had let his airspeed become excessive and was too fast to accurately place fire on the people running down the tree line. But he came in close enough with his fire that he scared them into hiding behind a group of three banana trees. Though this was a very thin tree line, he was unable to see them when he got on the opposite side of it.

"V-Chuck" had previously prepared camouflaged fighting positions that were unseen by the scouts and had dropped into them for cover.

The Trail/wing pilot, called the Lead aircraft, now flying in Trail, and he advised him that he had lost his visual on the VC. Since the Lead was on the opposite side of the tree line, he and his observer had them in sight and advised the trail of this. The Trail then flew around the end of the tree line to join the Lead, so that they could concentrate their attack on the VC's front instead of trying to engage them from behind[7]. While still flying at tree top level, the Lead and Trail Scouts had reduced their air speed to about 80 kts.

The Scout Lead closed within 100 meters, flying at this airspeed along the edge of that tree line. He began his attack a

bit early and when he attempted to use the mini-gun, he got a jam. He informed his observer of the malfunction and asked him to get the Bad Guys with the CAR-15 as they flew by. The pilot hoped that this should at least shake them up a bit until Trail aircraft got into position.

When the `Lead' aircraft was 50 meters away from the VC position in the tree line, the observer opened up with his CAR-15. This `Charlie' was not your average rice farmer boy and wasn't about to pass up good opportunity. When the Lead-Scout observer began firing, three lines of tracers came from the Charlie position almost simultaneously. The Loach was taking hits all over the left side.

The Lead pilot called that he was "receiving fire" and broke to the right. As he did so, he felt the tail rotor get hit and saw one of his anti-torque pedals get shot off. As both aircraft tried to break contact, they began receiving automatic-weapons fire from all around the edge of this tree line.

Obviously there were more than just three VC in there. The VC had .30 cal. belt fed machine gun positions on all four sides of this large field and everyone of these guns were now engaging them.

The Scouts were taking so much heat from the gun position on the left, that at first they were not aware of the others.

The Fire Team had gone out looking for trouble and `sure enough' had found it. Here were two \$900,000.00 LOACHs of a bad-ass fire team had gotten an easy 3 enemy KIAs[8] but were now having to run for it. As the Fire Team broke contact, the Cobras came in to suppress the enemy positions.

The Lead Scout had flown two or three hundred meters away from the contact when the cockpit filled up with smoke. The pilot recalled that recently two LOACH's had gone down in flames, and so he felt that it was logical to assume that fire was imminent. Now the aircraft also began losing power, the pilot decided that it was a good time for them to leave the AO. As he looked over his shoulder, he could see that the rear compartment was soaked with transmission oil. Consequently, the pilot elected to make a precautionary landing soon, but as far away from this place as possible.

In the midst of their "tactical withdrawal," the Lead Loach's windscreen bubble exploded, sending shards all over the pilot and his observer. They checked each other out and decided that neither was hit and continued on. The loss of one side of the windscreen solved the smoke problem in the cockpit, but it played hell with the OH-6A's aerodynamics by making it a real bear to control.

They had headed in the direction of Kien Long, seeking to put as much distance as possible between them and those angry green tracers. The two LOACHs flew approximately 500 meters past these

tree lines from their initial point of contact into a large open field.

There the Lead pilot set it down and turned everything off. He and his observer got out and immediately started removing the radios and the mini-gun.

The crew had gotten out one radio when they began receiving fire from the tree line directly to their rear. The pilot of the Trail aircraft had landed near them, slightly nose to nose in order to load up the other Loach's equipment, guns, and the crew. The Trail's observer got out with his M-2 carbine and started returning fire toward the enemy positions to the rear of Lead's aircraft. At this time the Trail aircraft started receiving fire at it's Six from the opposite tree line. Now they were being shot at from both sides. The "Lead" pilot took his observer's CAR-15 and returned fire in that direction while the observer was still getting the last radio out.

Though it had seemed like forever, they finally got out the radios along with the mini-gun plus ammo, the CAR-15 ammo, a couple of grenade frag bags and loaded all of it into the other aircraft. The four of them then took off in the overloaded LOCH and flew over to the Kien Long staging field.

In order to recover the LOACH, our forces then attempted an insertion of a troop Lift of four aircraft to secure the area. The gun-ships (Cobras) had been providing accurate fire along the tree lines with the idea being to hold down any aggressive action until such time as they met up with the slick flight.

This suppressive fire did not seem to have been very effective, as all of the slicks took hits and only two of them were able to land and put off their troops (ARVNs). The others landed in a more secure area about one klick away, unassed their troops and then returned to Kien Long.

These four aircraft later had to be repaired `in the field' where they were staging, before being safe to fly back to Vinh Long.

About the time of the troop insertion, an afternoon monsoon came up and the Cobras and Slicks had to leave the AO for about an hour. Before departing, however, the ARVN Cn'C had left nineteen ARVNs to guard the downed LOACH.

When they returned an hour later, all nineteen ARVN were dead. They had been stripped of their clothes, weapons, and boots. The mystery, there did not seem to be any further damage to the downed LOACH than before they left. Only the original forty-six separate bullet entry holes from the initial contact. Someone had opened the engine compartment doors and it was suspected for awhile that it may have been booby-trapped. This was checked out and found to be clean.

The Cn'C ARVN Colonel, then called in an ARVN Armored Cav[9] unit to support them. It took the Cav about four hours to get their APC's

through using the best crossings of the streams and canals. After arriving, the Cav unit (400 men) sat all night with the downed LOACH. During this action the ARVN took an additional five KIA and 100 wounded.

Apparently the VC or NVA were in such a position that they were able to break contact at will. Our forces did not know how many enemy troops there had been or how many of them had been killed, if any. The VC had kept the ARVN's occupied in a fire fights for as long as it suited them.

By the time that the LOACH was gotten out the following afternoon, the ARVN had enveloped the VC positions. They then searched the area, finding only a few blood trails and several damaged weapons, including two RPD machine guns.

"Chuck" had the ability to withdraw from the engagement at any time, but instead he had fought a modern, air supported army with armor to a standstill and won.

Post Script: This may not be verbatim, but it's the best that I can do considering the condition of my memory.

After Loach #673 was recovered it became a 'hanger queen' for several months. It was deemed not economically repairable. There was too much main structural fuselage station and tail boom damage along with electrical wiring bundles that were too bullet cutup to make repair worth while.

However after these units left Dong Tam, D Troop 3/5th acquired the remains and the paper work. A few more months went by, and D troop had rebuilt themselves a reliable little Hash And Trash bird. The D Troop maintenance and the LSI civilian contract mechanics had taken one of their own shot up hulks and 673 and spliced them together.

The Hughes Tech Rep came by and told them that there was no way that this could be done without factory jigs. He said that it was going to be always out of rig and never fly right. The D Troop's Maintenance Officer informed the Hughes man that they had already made two Hash and Trash trips to Vung Tau (150 miles) and back already.

The 3/5th Cav used the tail number of #658 as it had been the largest part of the rebuilt airframe on their books.

OH-6A #658 continued to give good service. Maintenance had given up on ever using it as a Scout again because of the many electrical problems in the mini-gun control circuits.

My job kept me on the move, traveling all over the Delta and Saigon area to collect Aberdeen's Battle Damage Reports, so it was about six months later before I noticed that #658 was missing from it's tie down near the D Troop's Maintenance shop office. I asked one of the men about the Loach. The Spc 5 crew chief told me that it was a sad story but that I needed to speak to the Captain about it. I was told that the Captain had just returned from a

little R&R at Vung Tau and was sacked out over in his hooch recuperating. I stopped off at the O'club to pick up a cold six of 'Bud' and then headed for the Captain's quarters.

I knocked, he growled, "Come in." I entered and handed him a cold Bud and sat down. I said, "Good afternoon Captain. Remember me?"

He said, Yeah! So what's on your mind?"

I said, "Tell me about Loach 658."

"Oh that poor unlucky bird," he said, "I've got all that's left of it over there in the corner behind the door." I looked behind the door, all that was there was the vertical fin, T/R gear box, and a tiny bit of charred tail boom.

The Captain continued, "You know that we kept 658 around just for Hash and Trash for a long time, but at last there came a time when we needed a Scout Loach really bad and we couldn't get them to send us a replacement for any reason. So the men in maintenance worked on the mini-gun electrical for a day and a night and finally got it working.

Old #658 flew beautifully on S&D missions for weeks; then one afternoon at one of those forward rearm and refuel points, the pilot hovered over to the POL fuel bladder to top off the JP-4. Then #658's luck ran out. You know those sheets of rubberized material that they stake down around the bladder to keep the sand and debris from blowing up all around and blinding you? Well, one end became unstaked, the downwash caught it, and it blew up into the tail rotor.

The pilot tried to keep control, but at a hover with no tail rotor, it's impossible. So #658 crashed on the edge of the POL bladder, and the pilot and observer rapidly egressed the Loach and made it to a drainage ditch just as the whole thing went up. I went down there to investigate the accident and that fin was all that was left."

We sat there awhile in silence drinking up the rest of the 'Bud' and then went to the O'club. And that's the end of this story..

Moral of this tale: Any national leader who would entertain the thought of sending troops, aircraft, etc. to fight against a dedicated guerilla army in it's own land (the Serb-Croatian-Bosnia mess for example) needs to do a review of cost-efficiency.

NO. 1: No one will thank him or his nation for it.

NO. 2: A lot of good guys will get killed.

NO. 3: Material assets that taxpayers have to pay for will be wasted.

NO. 4: He will probably lose. Croatia will be the same before and after except for more dead bodies, theirs and ours.

[1]Pilot looked at target to aim weapons

[2]Fires 4000 rnds. per minute

[3]M-16, CAR-15, M-2 carbine, M-60 machine gun.

[4]white phosphorous.

[5]400-600 men.

[6]paratroopers, soldiers with parachutes, usually the elite troops of a country.

[7]Note: All of this switching from Lead to Trail and Trail to Lead is based on the view that the aircraft attacking the target should always be covered from behind. The switching comes about as targets of opportunity are discovered by either aircraft of the team.

[8]Killed In Action.

[9]Better than your average ARVN unit; elite troops.