

CHINOOK CRASH at FSB Keene 21 November 1968

by Gary B. Roush



On 21 November 1968, the 242 ASHC was resupplying fire support base Keene south of Cu Chi near the Plain of Reeds in support of the 2nd Battalion 14th Infantry 25th Infantry Division. I was the aircraft commander of Chinook CH-47A serial number 66-19019 and Captain Roger P. Olney was the pilot. SP5 Alfred T. Calderon was the crew chief in the flight engineer's position for this flight, SP5 Robert W. JeWell was the flight engineer in the right door gunner position, and SP4 Bruce A. Knieff was the left door gunner. CPT. Olney was new in country.

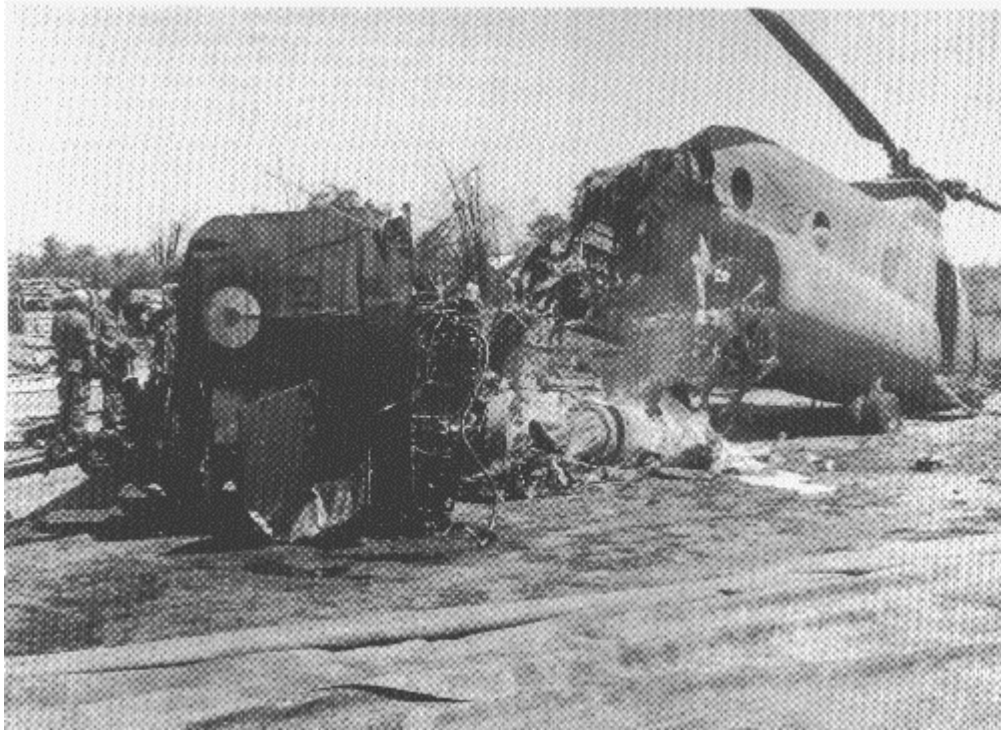
At that time, which was about 6 months into my tour in Vietnam, I had accumulated over 700 flight hours in Chinooks with over 400 as an aircraft commander. Being one of the few commissioned officers in the company, I was generally assigned to fly with the new higher-ranking officers for in country orientation.

We had an internal load of 16 grunts and several bags of mail plus an external load from Cu Chi. CPT. Olney was flying at the time and I was working the radios. We first set down the external load then hovered over to the resupply pad to set down to unload the internal men and supplies. To hold down dust during the dry season, this Fire Support Base had placed a heavy Neoprene pad on the landing area and held it in place with sand bags. I noticed as we approached that the pad had split down the middle exposing the dirt underneath. CPT. Olney hovered to the pad and set the back wheels on the ground. I lifted my feet to engage the brakes (the Pilot not flying worked the brakes since the Chinook would roll forward as the front wheels were lowered). Just as the front wheels were touching the ground, I noticed out of the corner of my left eye that the left half of the pad was flying up toward the aft rotor. The Chinook's 110 knot rotor wash was always kicking up poncho liners, empty sandbags, and small tents, so we routinely looked for loose objects. This pad, however, was so big that it never occurred to me that it would blow up in the blades. I grabbed for the collective to pull pitch but it was too late. The pad hit the aft rotor on the left side. There was an instant severe vibration so I knew we had a serious blade strike which automatically meant a shut down. At the same time the caution panel lit up so an emergency shut down was in order so I immediately pulled both flight levers to stop.

CPT. Olney being new was turning the switches the wrong way so I hit him to keep his hands away from the controls. I was most concerned about the fuel valves, fuel pumps, and generator switches which are on the overhead panel.

The vibration quickly stopped and the front rotor was coasting down normally so I assumed there was no major problem. CPT. Olney, however, immediately got out of his seat and quickly left

without saying a word, his "chicken plate" (ceramic armor chest protector) crashing to the floor. This was very unusual since both pilots normally stayed in their seats until the rotors stopped. The pilot who flew in the right seat had a rear view mirror so he could see back through the companion way into the cargo compartment. After I completed the shut-down procedure, I looked to see why he left in such a hurry and was shocked to see the Chinook was on fire and it was up to the companion way. **I was trapped!**



As I experienced several times in Vietnam, during periods of pure terror, training takes over and everything fortunately happens in slow motion. I remembered being told in flight school about the emergency escape door each pilot had which was operated by a black and yellow striped

handle located just above my head on the left. I knew exactly where it was because that is where I always hung my Kodak instant camera. I grabbed for the handle and jerked down. To my horror and surprise the handle broke off in my hand and the door did not pop out like my training said it would. "**Now,**" I said to myself, "**it is time to panic!**" "**No - wait,**" the voice in my head started again. "**If the emergency handle fails then the door can be kicked out!**" Leave it up to the Army to think of everything. No sweat, just kick out the door. Well I kicked and kicked but nothing happened. This was not surprising, now that I think about it, because there was not much room to kick. "**Well this is it, I am trapped,**" I thought, "**I am going to die!**" My training has run out. Not only have I crashed but now I am going to **be burned alive!**" This gave me a new meaning to the phrase "crash and burn." "Well, I will take one last look at my fate" - Surprise! the fire had backed off just enough for me to get through the companion way and over the right door gun. "**Let's go!**" the little voice said, "**Let's get the hell out of here!**" That is what I did. At the time it seemed like this all took about an hour but in reality it probably lasted about 20 seconds.

Now to take inventory. Everyone got out. Thank God! One grunt had scratched his face and the flight engineer had sprained his wrist. He also was soaked in hydraulic fluid and was very lucky not to have caught on fire since he was standing under the aft pylon when it separated and caught on fire. In fact, it all happened so fast that his intercom cord was burned in two before he could

say anything on the intercom. What a relief and what a fire! The aft rotor and aft pylon had separated from the fuselage with the result of exposing gallons of oil and jet fuel to the hot turbine engine exhaust causing the instant fire. One aft rotor blade was thrown 110 yards. Fortunately, the pad flew into the left side of the aft rotor that pulled the hub and transmission away from the front rotor and fuselage instead of into them, which a blade strike on the right would have caused. Also, fortunately, because I got the fuel valves off so quickly the fire did not get into the fuel tanks which still had about 2000 pounds of JP-4 in them and could have caused an explosion or much bigger fire.

As I was trying to figure out what to do next, from out of nowhere a young Lieutenant General appeared with a photographer in tow. Apparently he was flying in the area in his Huey and heard about the accident on the radio. He asked who was in charge of the Chinook and was directed to me. By this time I was in a nearby bunker because ammunition carried on the Chinook was cooking off and I was afraid the fuel tanks would explode. After I convinced the General that I was in charge even though I was a Lieutenant and the pilot was a Captain, he said, "Let's go put that fire out, Lieutenant." I said, "Sir, this thing might explode any minute and, besides, those are M-79 and M-60 rounds cooking off in the fire that you hear." He said to me, as we backed toward a bunker, "don't you have fire extinguishers on that thing?" I said, "Yes sir, but they are little tiny things that last about two seconds and that's a big fire!" All this time the General's photographer was getting some great pictures of the General with this burning Chinook in the background. I guess I finally convinced him that the Chinook was a lost cause because he began directing his energy toward the fire support base commander. He started asking questions about why he did not get resupplied by road instead of by air and other embarrassing questions. This gave me an opportunity to slip away.

I went looking for a radio to call Cu Chi and inform my Company Commander of my predicament and see if we could get something to put out the fire. Shortly a Huey and a Chinook showed up from Cu Chi. The Chinook brought a large airport-type fire extinguisher from the Muleskinner ramp that was successfully used to put out the fire just as it reached the fuel tanks.

CPT. Olney and I climbed into the Huey for the embarrassing ride back to Cu Chi. To my surprise I had the emergency handle and my camera with me which confirmed to me that in an emergency you took with you only what was in your hands or attached to your body. My chicken plate was missing but I had my pistol. As a result, I continued to wear a .45 caliber pistol instead of switching to an M-16 rifle like some of the other pilots did. As the Huey climbed out of the LZ, I tried to take a picture of the wreckage but my camera would not work. It did not matter, however, since the battalion safety officer confiscated all the film from all of the cameras at the fire support base that yielded a full sequence of the action except for the exact instant of the blade strike. I was surprised at the number of pictures. A battalion clerk later gave me 8 x 10 size blow-ups of several of the pictures to add to my emergency handle souvenir.

As I recall, the accident investigation found me partially at fault for not exercising proper care in a hazardous situation and found the ground commander partially at fault for improper maintenance of a landing pad. My guess is that the ground commander got more grief than I did because of that General showing up. I was flying the next day and never heard anymore about the accident except for a review with the accident investigation officer and a routine check by the flight surgeon. The damage came to \$1,290,504.40. I was glad the Army did not make me pay for it.

The good thing was that all 16 passengers and the crew of 5 did not get seriously hurt. The bad thing was that 5 or 6 bags of mail from home were lost in the fire. What was left of the Chinook was hauled to the 539th General support Maintenance company located at Phu Loi and cannibalized for parts.

Eight days before this accident I was so close to an air strike in an LZ that my Chinook got hit with the debris from the bomb blast. Three days before this accident I called a Mayday because of a complete electrical failure. Two days after this accident I nearly drowned in a swimming pool after my crew threw me in because we got shot up that day. Seven days later I got shot at by an American GI because my Chinook blew dirt in his first hot meal in weeks (turkey dinner for Thanksgiving). Eight days later my Chinook was completely surrounded by enemy tracers at tree top level at a Vietnamese village on the Cambodian border nicknamed Diamond City without taking a single hit. After these events I decided that I was not going to get killed in Vietnam. After living through all of this, I could live through anything!

Flying has been described as hours and hours of boredom interrupted by moments of terror. In Vietnam, flying helicopters in combat was hours and hours of excitement interrupted by intense periods of extreme terror.



242 Assault Support Helicopter Company *Muleskinner* crest.

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