

THE FANS IT HIT

This is a short, true story about a single secret mission behind enemy lines during the Vietnam war, related by a participant and dedicated to those who hope history might serve the future as well as they served their own time.

This mission was for the MACV-SOG, Special Forces PHOENIX Project, working out of Kontum in the central highlands. They called it the Forward Operations Base, Number Two. We called it “Fuzzy Old Box, Douche.” T.H.E.Y. were the Higher Echelon Yahoos – honchos hiding in some Saigon bunker ordering up the missions WE flew, W.E. being the Winged Expendables, the 170th Assault Helicopter Company based at Camp Holloway, Pleiku. We flew the fans the shit hit and FOB-2 was dedicated to defecation.

The missions we flew in support of these special operations were highly hazardous and had been top-secret until TIME magazine published an expose claiming that it was illegal for us to be going into Laos and Cambodia at that time, 1968. Yet we continued, and the routine became something we could depend on – something more certain than surviving.

For instance, every morning that Ernie saw his name on the schedule for FOB, he puked. And every night that Phil found out he’d be on it again, he’d launch into his regular argument about how only volunteers could be sent on top-secret missions, reminding anyone who’d listen that he definitely was NOT a volunteer.

But even if it were true that only volunteers could be sent on such missions, there would have been no shortage of men wanting to go because these were the sort of missions that provided an opportunity to develop both personal and teamwork integrity unmatched in most military ventures. You could depend on that, and on attaining a sense of professional satisfaction few men ever know.

The typical task was to insert or extract small recon teams whose specialty was harassing enemy operations in the tri-border area of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. These teams were usually composed of about a dozen men: Green Berets, native mercenaries, CIA and various other observers/players.

The aircraft allocated to FOB-2 on a daily basis for these missions consisted of eight army tactical helicopters (“Hueys”), four of which were for troop transport/assault (which we called “slicks”) and two pair of gunships. There was also an air force FAC (forward air controller) with two accompanying air force attack or fighter aircraft.

As an example of how these missions were executed, the day we are remembering here just happens to be one which required the full routine and it went like this:

Sunrise, December 1st, 1968: eight helicopters, a B-52 bomber, the FAC and his fighters were all converging on the southeast corner of Laos. At 0600 hours, the B-52 blasted a hole in the triple-canopy mountain jungle, a hole into which, as soon as the smoke cleared, we were supposed to insert a ten man special recon team.

The FAC, whose call-sign was “Covey”, was already there and reporting that the hole was fast filling with fog. But if we beat it, and the team were to make premature contact with the enemy, the fog would prevent us from being able to provide effective air cover or extraction if that became necessary. So we aborted and all the early morning mission momentum was put on hold while we returned to our staging area at Dak To to await word from Saigon on whether to continue when it cleared or to scrub the mission.

The element of surprise was lost. We had come close enough to make our intentions obvious and we knew the enemy would be using this brief respite to arrange an appropriate

reception for our return. We also knew they probably were not really happy about the way that B-52 had interrupted their breakfast. Any survivors in the proximity of a B-52 strike would suffer multiple hemorrhaging orifices and gruesome burial details searching for the shredded remains of their fellows.

Prior to shutting down at Dak To, we dropped in on the rifle range there to exercise our weapons and our frustrations. Then we set about doing all those things troops do to avoid dwelling on the inevitable which Saigon soon confirmed: this mission had high priority and would go forth as soon as possible. Meanwhile, Covey stayed on station over the hole to report on the weather and sent his two sidekicks back to Pleiku to refuel and standby.

On this particular day, instead of the usual second pair of gunships, we had a guest gun-team that was new to the operation which was a pair of AH-1G "Cobras" from a unit whose callsign was "Panther." These are pure gunships, not modified Hueys. They are sleek and mean looking, faster and more maneuverable, with a crew of two and weapons systems comparable to the Huey gunships but without the additional firepower and extra eyeballs of crew chief and doorunner of the Hueys.

Our tactics on these missions were determined by so many different factors that it wound up being mostly gut instinct. Due to terrain and altitude and not knowing the condition of the LZ we decided to split the ten man team in half so the two slicks going in would have plenty of power in reserve if needed. The other two slicks would go along as chase-ships for whatever went wrong. Covey would mark the LZ (we called it a door) with white-phosphorous rockets for the Panthers who would then "prep" the door with flachette rockets. Then the Bucs (call sign of the Huey gunships) would set up a daisy-chain pattern over the door (a swooping, oblong circuit flown so that one was always covering the others backside) to cover the insertion of the team.

As the sun continued climbing, so did the temperature and our certainty that the fog would soon burn off, exposing the hole and the illusion of peace we'd been faking. All the busyness of our earlier self-imposed chores had slowed to a near halt. We were about as ready as we would ever be. Waiting only weighted our worries. We were itching for action. Everything was getting hotter and we'd rather be flying than wondering what fate awaited us.

There were just too many "other" things to worry about besides the insertion of the team such as the distance back to friendly turf if we had to return on foot with all the enemy between, random artillery barrages, other B-52s dropping invisible lethal loads, Soviet MiG's buzzing us, and the gremlins of mechanical malfunctions.

Finally at about ten o'clock, Covey radioed that the door was opening and should be clear by the time we arrived. He also called for the return of his partners from Pleiku. The pair of Bucs, being the slowest, departed first, followed by the four slicks, and then the Panthers whose Cobras were fast enough to overtake all of us en route.

As we headed for the border and climbed to an altitude commensurate with our fear-factor for the day, about 10,000 feet, we also began to exercise fairly strict radio silence, not for fear of being heard, rather for fear of not being able to hear the faint telltale radio "beep" that would indicate our formation had been targeted by radar-controlled anti-aircraft guns. This single tiny beep would be our only warning and if we were lucky enough to hear it, we would instantly scatter and later regroup in orbit over our objective.

This time we arrived without incident just as the fog finished clearing. The door was in a shallow, southward-sloping canyon about a kilometer above a small valley. We knew from our previous excursions in this neck of the woods that the area was a major intersection on the Ho Chi Minh Hiway, and had numerous heavily defended enemy support facilities. So we chose a

more awkward but safer approach to the door, coming downhill from the north.

In order to further limit our exposure time in the deadman-zone (the airspace in which we were most vulnerable to groundfire), we would remain at altitude until the guns had set up their daisy-chain. Then we would drop out of orbit at max descent speed and hit the deck far enough from the door to have time and space to decelerate before dropping into the hole.

And what a hole it was. From altitude, the LZ looked like the proverbial doorway to hell. It was stump-strewn, mud-splattered and still smoldering with wisps of fog and smoke. Covey had marked it. The Panthers had doused the perimeter with millions of those wicked little flachette nail darts. Then the Bucs moved in and reported that it didn't look any better up close. It was big enough for two slicks but obstacles made it safer for us to go in one at a time.

Our tactical technique for maintaining max approach speed and minimum exposure meant that when we hit the deck we would be too low and too fast to know exactly where the door was. So the Bucs would radio "bingo" and break into a steep turn each time they passed over it. Also, one of the chase ships in orbit overhead would call out vectors on our heading and closing-distance.

As the designated air mission commander, I had chosen the dubious privilege of being the lead insert ship. Number two slick, piloted by a guy we called "Ski", was to time his approach to arrive right on the heels of our departure, dropping his half of the team in the same spot as their partners, or so we hoped. The Bucs, as usual, were flying at an altitude that would test for hostile intentions. There were none indicated. So they set up their daisy-chain and called us in.

Some say the art of dodging bullets has to do with getting from point A to point B without having been, at any time, at any point, in between. The approach I made to this particular LZ was executed in a manner that was meant to defy death, confirm Hollywood and prove reality is fake. A quantum leap, so to speak.

Because of the dynamics of such an approach, it was my crew chief, Bob Rooney, the best there ever was, who issued final instructions on where to point and how much pitch to pull in order for us to drop into the hole. The hole was so deep and we'd come at it in such a way that I didn't get a close look at it until we began to level out and settle below the tree tops. Then when I finally saw the mess we were dropping these men into, I had the copilot shut off my radios so I could hear what the team had to say about where they wanted to be put down and better concentrate on avoiding the deadly tree stumps when maneuvering to that spot.

We got them in and ourselves out without incident. But as we were coming out, and my copilot flipped on my radios again, I heard a chase ship talking to the Bucs about covering a rescue.

Chalk 3 was going in to rescue any survivors of Chalk 2 which had miraculously managed to crash-land after being shot down. They had crashed in a clearing on the opposite side of the east ridge of the canyon in which I had just dropped off the first half of the ten man insertion-team. Chalk 3, depending on the situation, might need to pick up nine men in addition to his four man crew. A heavy load, probably under heavy fire.

The Bucs quickly shifted from covering the door to covering the scene of the rescue effort, and just as quickly reported receiving heavy groundfire themselves.

The first half of the team in the door, having only their FM radios and no knowledge of what had happened, now reported receiving sniper fire and wanted to know what was holding up the other half of their team because the delay was keeping them in the LZ exposed to the sniping. Then before I could even answer, we got a call from a similar team somewhere else on the same

frequency pleading for an emergency medevac for one of their men who was in the process of bleeding to death.

As I was responding to both teams that we'd run into a bit of trouble, one of the Bucs covering the crash rescue was hit bad, wounding one of the pilots and knocking out most of their weapons systems. But they hung in there to provide as much intimidation as possible to help thwart the ground assault the chase ship reported converging rapidly on their location. Likewise, the original half-team in the door reported things getting much hotter there with increased sniping coming from every direction.

When the chase ship finally reported all aboard from the downed #2 and began his departure from the site under siege, we could all hear in the background of his transmission the intense groundfire of the assaulting enemy forces. But they got away and under escort by the crippled Buc team, they headed for the medevac pad back at Dak To. Then I called in the Panthers to cover our extraction of the half-team still in the hole and hollering to get the hell out.

We had climbed back up to a safe orbit over the area where the last chase ship and the Panthers had been loitering. And now as the Panthers swooped in to set up cover for the extraction, we had a moment, blessedly brief but seemingly suspended in time and space, peaking on adrenaline, to contemplate our fate. And it didn't look good. Everything we had not wanted to think about, like how the enemy might be preparing for our return, returned in the "worst scenario" way. The stuff had definitely hit the fan on this one, but we didn't have long to worry because the Panthers soon had their pattern established and reported ready for our return engagement.

As radical as our first approach had been, I don't need to tell you what this one was like. Besides, I think I had my eyes closed. And then, just as we were decelerating to drop into the door, Panther lead hollered that he'd lost his wingman and to abort. This, I don't mind the least admitting, was all the excuse I needed to avoid going back down in that pit again. So I took it, instantly lunging from the tail dragging deceleration to a nose-down acceleration right on past the hole, headed down canyon, hell-bent for leather as they say.

Panther lead said he couldn't see where his wingman went down. But at that same moment, I spotted him dead ahead, buried deep in elephant grass beside the river at a double bend we called "the bra." So we dove straight on for it, calling for Panther lead to follow and cover us. The one healthy Buc broke off from escorting the wounded and headed back to help out. But we arrived at the downed Cobra so quickly that we even beat Panther lead to the scene and moved right in hoping to get there before the enemy arrived, if they hadn't already done so. This seemed more possible the closer we got because we could see the cockpit was empty but we couldn't see the crew.

Whatever the reason for their having gone down, they'd made an excellent forced landing with no apparent damage. But the absence of the crew made the scene seem spooky. Then as our rotorwash began laying down the elephant grass, we spotted them crouching beside the ship, waiting with extremely anxious expressions on their faces. We hovered up as close as we could to their position and they began a mad dash to get aboard. However, due to the depth and tangle of the grass, they were obliged to play a frantic sort of leapfrog game, running over each others' backs and flopping down to make a path. But they were soon aboard and we got out okay despite the withering hail of enemy gunfire directed toward terminating the escape of potentially prime prisoners from right under their B-52 bloodied noses.

As we were pulling out, Bob reminded us that we were not supposed to leave to leave any evidence behind at the scenes of our covert crimes, or equipment the enemy could use against us.

So he asked for permission to hit the Cobra which still had half its ammo and fuel aboard. Like I said, he was good and he got it. When he hit that sucker, it went off like a small ammo dump causing us all to give a whoop of joy for the simple fact of having hit at least something, that the enemy was not the only one scoring that day. And the explosion probably also helped cover our exit by giving the enemy something to worry about besides stopping us.

Now it was the remaining chase ship's turn to get involved. This was Phil and he was in the last slot because he had a very new crew and they weren't likely to be needed unless things got this bad. So reluctantly (yet with a deep sense of relief for not having to do it myself), I called for the newly created Buc-Panther team to cover Phil's extraction of the five men still in the door who had been hollering like bloody hell since they saw my flyby but didn't know another ship had been shot down. There was also the problem of that fellow on another team who was still trying not to bleed to death while waiting for us.

Now if you take a moment to consider Phil's situation, you may see who was the real hero of the day. It was Phil and the men with him orbiting alone up there, watching the rest of us get chewed up by the invisible demons swarming around the smoldering pit, that mutilated grave the bomber had dug and we were desecrating. The rest of us had been too busy to be scared. Whereas Phil, having followed the score, had time to contemplate the odds against getting those five men and his ship back to Vietnam. Bad odds, real bad. But it had to be done and he was the one. So as soon as the gun team set up their cover, he did it.

As afraid as I had been on our second but aborted approach to that deadly doorway, I could well relate to what Phil must have been feeling. We all could because we had all been down there tangling with those demons, and were now safe to look at what our comrades had left to do and it didn't look good. We were an audience not breathing. We watched him enter the hole. Then we heard him key his mike and could hear all the background noises but not voices, just the noise. It seemed like time had stopped. Then, very clearly, too clearly, we heard a fifty-caliber machinegun open up on them. But still no voices and stranger still, no sound of return fire coming from his doorgunners.

Finally we could see him coming out and heard him yell at his panic-frozen doorgunners "Well shoot back goddammit!" And they did for about twenty-five rounds each before their weapons jammed. Then it was just the sound of the fifty-cal still poking at them but getting further off until it quit. Then Phil realized his death grip on the control stick had also been squeezing his radio transmit switch. So he relaxed and it went quiet.

The relative radio silence that followed these tense moments seemed somehow ancient or religious. And then, sure enough, an angel spoke to us. It was an air force fighter jock somewhere high overhead who'd been watching and listening to the whole thing. They were always up there covering us, but almost never spoke to anyone except Covey, who had also been silent throughout these events. And when this silence was broken by the strange sound of an alien voice, it was eerie and what it said caused an even more profound effect on us.

He said, in a tone of incredulous admiration, that watching us perform was an honor, and that the courage and finesse we demonstrated down there doing our thing was intensely impressive. End of transmission. Return to silence. An eternal sort of silence. One that would last forever. Empty, yet full.

We all got back alive. We only lost two legs below the knees of one man who had been perched in the door of Ski's ship when it was hit by the large caliber exploding round that knocked them down. But he would live, and so would the gunship pilot who had been hit. The rest of us could count on coming back to do it all again. We could depend on that.

And as soon as we refueled and re-armed, we went right back out, eating cold canned C-rations for lunch en route, and got that fellow who was still bleeding but alive, out there beyond the border.

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And as soon as we refueled and re-armed, we went right back out, eating cold canned C-rations for lunch en route, and got that fellow who was still bleeding, but alive, out there beyond the border.

So there we were again, same day, same hostile turf, same sort of locos on the loose, needing our insanity to transport theirs. The shit these sneaky-petes could get into, and keep coming back for more, was outrageous. But then there we were, right along with them. This stuff made you old in a hurry. And having to hover over some hole that was too small to land in while they tied a wounded man to the end of a rope that would then have to be threaded back up through the trees in an excruciatingly slow hovering climb that exposed us to god-only-knows-what next, until the dangling body is clear of the tree tops and we can move out for a place to put him down safely, roll up the ropes, and head for a medevac pad... Well, it just made for a hell of a long day. I think you know what I mean.

Covey's Skyraiders expended everything they had on the area of our earlier grief and failed to destroy the remains of the downed slick, which so aggravated their egos that they went home, re-armed, and returned to try again. And failed again, which caused the rest of us not to ridicule their marksmanship. Rather, it only served to confirm that the crash site (which no one had seen before it became that) was created just for the occasion by some sort of super-benevolent force that was still in effect protecting the spot like a force-shield.

The dangling rope trick extraction of the wounded man went without a hitch and we all returned to Kontum for a debriefing. We had lost a Cobra and a slick, had a gunship shot up, inserted, extracted, medevac'd, rescued, from through hell and came back with all "hands" accounted for. And none of us cared that we had not accomplished the objective. We had survived and that seemed success enough.

At the debriefing, everything was okay until the HMFIC Lt. Col. happened to mention that THEY had suspected there might be an anti-aircraft battalion just where WE had happened upon it. The fact that they had neglected to warn us of this singularly significant bit of intelligence was, to put it more kindly than they deserved, an act of homicidal negligence. And me, well, it was just too damned late in the day to be kind. So I went for the colonel's throat.

And we were left to our own devices and deviations which I should take a moment to describe while we are waiting for the fog to burn off.

Covey was what the civilians call a Cessna Skymaster, a small twin engine airplane with a single pilot, whose job was to spot and mark targets and coordinate airstrikes. He carried half a dozen rockets to help do this. His high powered partners were usually A1E Skyraiders, which are WWII vintage prop-driven, close air support craft that often carried the infamous "beehive" antipersonnel bombs.

Our assault helicopters were Bell UH-1H "Hueys" which we called "slicks" because of

how they'd been stripped of all excess weight so they could carry as much as possible which was usually no more than a dozen troops in addition to the standard crew of pilot, copilot, crewchief and doorgunner. The crewchief and doorgunner each had an M-60 machinegun, whereas the pilots had only their sidearms which made for some intense moments whenever a pilot would spot a target no one else had seen. Our unit call sign for the slicks was "Bikini" and the front of our ships had paintings of a buxom blonde in a bikini posed beside an oriental dragon.

Our gunships were the "Buccaneers" or "Bucs" for short and their logo was the traditional pirates skull and cross bones. These ships, C-model Hueys, were a slightly smaller version of the slicks with the same crew configuration. But they were so grossly overloaded with weapons and ammo that they had to take off and land like airplanes. Hovering was nearly impossible unless they had expended all their ammo or most of their fuel first. And in addition to the two standard M-60 doorguns, they carried a variety of other weapons systems: miniguns, rockets, grenade launchers, and whatever else they could get off the ground, like hand, smoke and gas grenades, homemade bombs, and miscellaneous other destructive devices of dangerously dubious design.

THERE'S LOTS MORE, but for elsewhere, later.