



Flying the Huey All Alone

By

Eric Bray

Can Tho, RVN

12/69 - 12/70

Every once in a while, the 307th Combat Aviation Battalion out of Can Tho which had operational control over the 162nd AHC even though the 162nd AHC was assigned to the 13th Combat Avn Battalion out of Soc Trang, came up with a mission for some 'brave' young pilot to fly about once or twice a month. It was to fly as an Aircraft Commander on an *ASH & TRASH* mission with your 'peter pilot' who was generally an U.S. Army captain that had flight orders and was assigned to some sort of liaison duty over at the navy's Binh Thuy Airfield. He needed flight time to get his flight pay and keep current.

You would get the mission from operations and then walk down to the Vulture Roost to get the aircraft assigned to you for the day's flight. You would start the pre-flight check of the aircraft all by yourself and eventually the crewchief would ask you who and where was the other pilot that would be flying the mission with you that day.

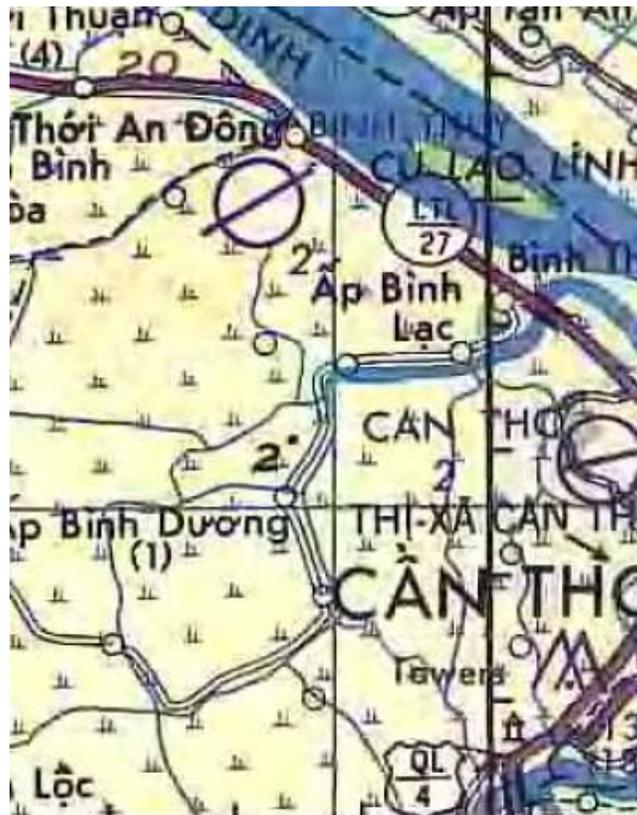
If I knew the crewchief well enough to tease him by pulling his and the door gunner's leg, I would tell them that we were short on pilots and I was going to fly today's mission all by myself. You would get reactions ranging from total disbelief & apprehension to some crewchiefs who saw this as their BIG chance and would ask you if they could get some stick time as your unofficial 'peter pilot' for the mission. They were always either relieved or crestfallen when I told them we would be picking up the other pilot at the Binh Thuy Airfield.

In our company the AC flew the missions in the left seat. We figured the peter pilots has been through instrument flying training more recently than any of us so they were probably more efficient at it than we were so they should have the more complete instrument panel in front of them.

It is rather awkward starting the UH-1H from the left seat because you had to hold the cyclic with your right hand or both knees and reach over with your left hand to push the starter button on the collective of the right seat along with also pushing the rpm governor button too. I would start the engine and call the tower for permission to hover out to the runway to take off. You would get some strange looks from flight crews walking by as you started up the aircraft parked inside its revetment.

Once I hovered out on to the runway, I would take off flying the Huey all alone. You never realize how many blind spots there are on the Huey until you try to fly the aircraft with just one pilot in the cockpit area. The crew chief's and door gunner's eyes became very important as you enter the traffic pattern looking out for other aircraft that was entering and leaving Can Tho's traffic pattern too.

Flying a Huey all alone is a strange feeling because you haven't flown in an aircraft with just one pilot since your days back at primary flight school in the good old TH-55 primary trainer and you had never flown an aircraft as large as the H model all by yourself.



I would leave the Can Tho traffic pattern to immediately enter the Binh Thuy traffic pattern because they were just a few miles apart. Landing at the heliport at the base of the tower, you would really get some strange looks from the foot traffic that passed the aircraft as it sat at idle there on the heliport. I was given a FM frequency by the operations officer on which to contact the 'peter pilot' so out would go the call and in about five minutes later the pilot would come out to the aircraft and climb into the right seat.

We would introduce ourselves to each other and then I would brief him on the mission for the day and then off we would go into the 'wild blue wonder'.

Most of the time the mission for the day was to work out of a main base like Ca Mau and fly supplies to all of the outposts in the base's sector of control. You would take in the maximum load the UH-1H could carry and drop that cargo off at a base and go back and get some more either for that base if they were to receive more cargo or move on the next base to receive the next batch of cargo.

Sometimes the people running the operations for the supply mission would ask you to do something that was a little strange and stupid like suddenly fly a one ship combat assault with NO gunship coverage to a spot on the map that showed nothing was there. They just wanted to mistakenly use the air assets assigned to them for that day's supply mission as a "jack of all trades" aircraft.

I was always amused when I refused to fly their unauthorized and illegal combat assault and they would go over to the 'peter pilot's' side of the aircraft and ask him to order me to fly their mission because he was generally a captain that outranked me a WO1. However, the 'peter pilot' would always inform them that I was the aircraft commander in charge of the mission and he was just along for the ride. They would just leave that aircraft shaking their heads wondering how a warrant officer could be in charge over a captain.

We would always discuss what would happen to us both if we flew their crazy mission and something happened to the aircraft or to any member of the crew. The question was how much time we would spend as guests at Fort Leavenworth, KS if we didn't get ourselves killed first.

I always let the 'peter pilot' fly most of the mission because the mission was probably the only chance he got to fly all month. When the mission was over he would fly us back to Binh Thuy Airfield and land at the heliport. We would shake hands and he would exit the aircraft and go inside the building there by the heliport.

Now I had the chance to fly the Huey all alone again. I would hover onto the airfield and take off to head back to the Vulture's Roost. Once I left the Binh Thuy traffic pattern, I would take the long way around to Can Tho Army Airfield just enjoying the sites of the country side. It feels kind of good flying a UH-1H alone at low level at the end of the day; you could kick the pedals to put the aircraft slightly out of trim to let a strong breeze blow through the window as you crossed the runway's center line to enter the traffic pattern on the downwind leg. You would land at the Vulture's Roost and hover into your aircraft's revetment; again getting strange looks by any personnel passing by your location as they saw just one pilot flying and exiting the aircraft and start the post-flight inspection of the UH-1H.

At least once or twice a month the 162nd AHC had an AC that had the ability to fly over and back from Binh Thuy Airfield flying the Huey all alone for a brief 10 minute flight that was only time a non-member of the maintenance platoon had a chance to do so.