

GOIN' to WORK

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Up and dressed at 0400. There is not much interest in breakfast

Briefing at 0500. Where/when/who/etc. Nothing exceptional today. It is just another day for us.

We are at the ships for preflight at 0600. There is the light, easy banter of men familiar with each other and comfortable with their tasks.

We form up on the runway at 0700, do our commo and engine checks, then depart to the pick-up point. The air is still cool and clear. VN is beautiful in the morning sun as we depart Bien Hoa in a flight of four Hueys. We are chalk two in a trail formation of four, as briefed. The formation is tight. Experienced hands hold the controls, each relying on themselves and others and the skills they have developed.

We land at 0730 for the pick-up. The troops are traveling light today. They have lots of ammo, maybe a sock full of C-rat cans for lunch, but no rucks. They expect to be home by dark. Their faces are young, but they are seasoned vets, as we are in our two different worlds of the same war. (I began my Army time in the infantry, but I am glad to be a pilot now. Some of the grunts say they would hate our job. Helicopters make targets far too large. Besides, some of them may have been first on the scene of a crash that burned and viewed the ugly results.) They climb aboard and settle in.

The bird is different as we pick up. It is heavy and the air is hotter now, providing less lift. We wallow with the weight. It is the same for all four of us as we start our take-off run. Very careful. Easy. Nursing it along trying to be smooth so she will not settle back to the dirt. Fly, damn you! There are two fully loaded ships behind us that would plow into us if we had to abort the departure. We are looking for the slight shudder in the rotor system that indicates the blades have found the clean air they need for improved lift. There. Now. We rise and know the load can be carried.

Over the flat rice paddies of Three Corps north of Saigon at a thousand feet now. That puts us above small arms range, but without too much altitude to lose at the destination. The countryside is beautiful, as it always is to me. The fascination of being young and in a strange place doing just what I am happy to be doing still brings wonder. Looking at the faces of the troops, they range from boredom to distant abandon. Few register fear or concern. What good would that do? They are just going to work, like we are.

The radio chatter picks up as we approach the landing zone. The lead flight has taken fire and the LZ is hot. Our company's gun ships are on station and are working the

nippa palm trees that line the area with 2.75 inch rockets and minigun fire. Slicks from the lead flight were hit, but all got out and the grunts made it to the wood line.

Our flight banks right for final approach over the small river that is our final check point. The LZ is as advertised, a small clearing with waist-high elephant grass. The nippa is dense and lines three sides. No troops are in sight as they have already cleared the area. There is purple smoke in the LZ to indicate the wind direction. The wind is light, which will not help slow us on landing.

On final approach now. The chatter slows on the radio. We see the gun ships making their race track patterns to work the palms and provide mutual covering fires for us and themselves. The formation is tighter now, both for the small LZ and to help with a quicker departure of passengers. The gunner and crew chief open fire on the palms with their M-60 door guns, one on each side. We feel the concussions up front as much as hear the shots. Tension is everywhere. It can be seen in the little jerks as the lead pilots fight their rotor wash for control, see it in the heightened concentration of my copilot, and sense it as the troops see the ground rush up toward them. The lead aircraft pulls back to kill his speed and not overshoot the LZ. Damn! That causes an accordion effect back throughout the flight as each subsequent aircraft reacts. Two hundred meters. Fight for control! Watch out for his tail rotor! Our world narrows down to this one little piece of Viet Nam and what we are doing.

Close now. The troops are out the door before we touch down. Good and bad on that one. Good for the short time that we will have to stay on the ground, but not so good for the lessening of control as the load shifts left and right. These are experienced soldiers. They exit, form a line, and vanish in the grass as they move off about their business.

“This is lead. Coming out!” There is no need for anything else to be said. We lift out, easily clearing the obstacles this time as we are much lighter without the grunts on board. Our door guns are talking again as we sail over the palms. I wonder what they have to shoot at, as I can see nothing.

The flight back is uneventful as we calm down. There are more beautiful Viet Nameese scenes and more light banter. The day holds another load of passengers and another sortie.

I recorded the mission presented above in a series of photographs in 1970, but it is representative of all the Huey missions flown by Army aviation throughout the war years. The UH-1 came along at just the right time to allow the new tactics developed for the Viet Nam war. Army Aviation began the war as flying jeep drivers and emerged as warriors of the sky. I am proud to have played a small part in that transition. It was quite an adventure.