

## Guilt Trip

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We spent the day northeast of Tay Ninh escorting CH 54 Skycranes moving 155mm howitzers from the Tay Ninh base camp to a new fire support base. It was interesting for the first or second lift. The 'Cranes were huge. We could see dust being kicked up hundreds of yards away as they hovered in, picked up their loads, and then climbed gracefully back to altitude. We drilled endless circles around them, hoping that someone would take a potshot at them, but no luck.

The vibration from the aircraft, the constant chatter of the three radios in the earphones of the flight helmets, and the lack of action soon combined to cause semi consciousness.

Staring at the first stage jungle growth, occasionally glancing up at the only mountain in our area of Operations (AO), Nui Ba Dinh, the Black Virgin, I thought of home, food, a shower, food, a cigarette, and then came back to food. I wondered momentarily if I could get away with using a heat tab in a can to heat up some C-rations on the floor of the aircraft, smiled at what the pilots would do when they realized what I was doing, and then dismissed it.

We were on our last load out. Glancing at the fuel gauge in the cockpit, I realized we would have to get fuel again before returning to Lai Khe. The thought of landing and shutting down in the dusty POL point at Tay Ninh was disheartening. But, hey! Dau Tieng was sort of on the way home, and Rod was there.

"Hey, Sir, instead of refueling here to go home, can we stop at Dau Tieng? I've got a buddy there with the Black Widows; maybe I could see him."

Looking at his watch and then his map, Mr. Lewis glanced over shoulder and gave me a thumbs up. Minutes later, the Artillery Commander gave us our release; and we were on our way.

I grew up with Rod in the south suburbs of Chicago. He was two years older than me. We had been in the Boy Scouts and later the Explorers together, and I was the one that talked Rod into going to flight school when I was home on leave from Basic during the summer of 1965.

I had looked Rod up within days of returning or maybe he came looking for me. I was still trying to patch up my fading romance with the girl I had gone steady with during junior and senior years. She needed to drive all the way down state, to

Southern Illinois University, to register. Rod had already spent his last two years there and offered to not only drive us, but help her get around.

We got up early, it was three-hundred-mile trip, and left in Rod's old Packard. It was a great big hulking monster that had a million stories created in and around it.

We had gone camping in northern Wisconsin, endless Dunes trips to Lake Michigan, and taken advantage of the living room sized rear seat on a dozen occasions.

Kathy dozed as Rod and I talked. He asked endless questions about the Army and basic training. I answered what I could and made up answers that made me look good to the ones I didn't know. Mostly I raved on and on about going to the Aviation school at Fort Rucker. I mentioned the Warrant Officer flight program and how disappointed I was that I couldn't get into it because of my poor vision.

I think Rod knew right then and there what he was going to do. He had already mentioned how bored he was with college. Rod never was a big party man. I think I only saw him drink a beer once. And in our group, he always the most level headed. If you really needed somebody to talk to, Rod was the guy to see. He always had a serious side, no matter what was going on.

We finally arrived, visited all the spots on campus, and I probably realized then that I was going to lose Kathy. I don't remember it happening; but, later, I knew this was the last time we were actually "together." I would see her one more time, at Christmas, but she was already going with someone else. As it happens, he was a good friend that I never learned to talk to, again.

But leave was soon over, and I headed for Mother Rucker and the aviation maintenance courses. I got a letter from my mother in mid October and learned that Rod had enlisted and had already shipped to Fort Polk for basic. I got one letter from him there and another after he was in primary flight training at Fort Wolthers, Texas. I remember being amazed by his handwriting which was a little, tiny scrawl. I don't believe I had ever seen it before, and I dismissed it as just one of those idiosyncrasies that we all have.

It was probably a year later that I learned from my family that he was in country. Not only in country but close! Dau Tieng was between Lai Khe and Tay Ninh, and we often refueled there.

But one thing or another always occurred, and this would be the first chance to drop in on him.

The closer we got, the more excited I became. I had just made Specialist Five and was pretty proud of the stripes. I already was on my first extension and feeling pretty salty. This would be the first time that I felt I could talk to Rod as more or less an equal.

As we approached Dau Tieng, I was struck by the similarity of their flight line and ours. They were living in a rubber tree plantation just like us, too. Their revetments looked pretty empty, but maybe they would be back before we had to leave. And maybe he was laying around his hootch or at the "O" Club on a day off. I was really grinning in anticipation.

"Dau Tieng, Crossbow 37, a light fire team, two miles north for landing."

"Crossbow 37, Dau Tieng, you're cleared for straight in, no traffic reported. Altimeter at two niner niner five, winds from the west at 5. Say intentions."

"Uh, Dau Tieng, 37 request refueling at the Black Widow pad."

"Crossbow 37, Dau Tieng, hover taxi to the Black Widow pad from the active approved. Good day."

"Crossbow 37."

And we were there. We kicked up a little dust hovering in, but it quickly settled. I jumped down and cranked Mr. Lewis' door open so he could get some air. The pilots quickly went through the checklist and shut down. Mr. Lewis got down, removing his helmet and running his hand briskly through his hair, trying to restore the circulation.

"How long you going to need, Bud?"

"Beats me, Sir, Operations is right over there, if it's okay, Johnny can fuel, and I'll just run over and see if he's here."

Mr. Lewis waved his approval; and I went around to the other side and told John Sharp, my gunner, what was going on. He looked just as beat as the rest of us, but he nodded and then waved the approaching fuel truck over to my side of the aircraft.

I squared away the shoulder holster holding my Browning Hi-Power, a pistol that was very much envied. I made sure the red scarf around my neck, that all the Robin Hoods wore, was straight and then tried to casually stroll over to Operations.

Opening the screen door to the Quonset hut, I was struck by the similarity to our own. There was a PFC behind the counter posting entries into flight records, who looked up as I came in.

"Hey, PFC, I'm Spec 5 Harton of the 173rd at Lai Khe. I've got a buddy from home in your unit, and I want to check and see if he's here, WO Rod Davie."

The look in his eyes didn't register with me. I was too busy looking around for something that we didn't have. I didn't even catch the hesitation on his part.

"He's not here, they're all on TDY up north, I don't know when they're coming back."

That's when it registered. As soon as he started talking, I felt the disappointment. I looked into his eyes and saw...pity.

"Oh, great! Maybe next time, thanks, I'll see you."

I stood there for a moment, staring right into his eyes; and, as he stared back, we both shared a horror of what was happening. He knew I realized, but I couldn't ask. I backed towards the door, keeping my eyes on him, hoping for a reprieve; but I bumped the door open, spun around, and headed blindly back to pad.

I was in tears by the time I got to my ship. Johnny had already finished fueling, and I guess he had found out from the fuel truck driver. He was standing there as I approached. I was really fighting to hold back my emotions, to bury them as I had already learned to do, and it probably would have worked except Mr. Lewis came around the tailboom and just held out his arms and pulled me in. I lost it and sobbed openly--giant, wracking sobs that convulsed me.

I was crying for Rod, and I was crying for me. I couldn't show him that I had grown up, and I had accomplished something. And I couldn't tell him how sorry I was that I talked him into being killed.

I learned later, in a letter from home, that it was a midair, at night, with his wingman. I pray God it was fast.

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## RODNEY OWEN DAVIE

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