HEROES: THE 'VULTURES' OF VIETNAM
FIRST IN & LAST OUT

By Robert M. “Bob” Shine "Vulture 17"
162nd Assault Helicopter Company
U.S. Army Helicopter Pilot, 1968-1971

The following story is dedicated to some of the bravest men the U.S. military has ever witnessed; the helicopter pilots and crews who flew during the Viet Nam War. The machines came in many shapes and sizes, as did the men who flew them, and each service had its favorite, but the one they all had in common was the HUEY. I'd like to relate some of the adventures with which I'm familiar as a Huey Slick H-Model pilot in Vietnam.

Vulture helicopters on patrol flying formation over the Delta in SVN 1970.
The scenery as the crew chief saw it.

To get a feel for who these men were, go to a local high school graduation and picture that class of young men, just out of boyhood, at 18 and 19 years old, going off to war to fly million dollar aircraft at 150 MPH with people shooting at them, trying to kill them and these same men flying into that machine gun fire repeatedly to get the mission done. It's a sobering scenario.

They became men because of the job they did and the selfless heroism they performed on a daily basis. Many thousands of helicopter crewmen were wounded and/or killed before their 21st birthday, the legal age to drink and vote during the Viet Nam War. One out of every five pilots was killed or wounded.

There wasn't much these brave young men wouldn't do when it was required of them. The missions were many and varied, with too many hours and days without much rest and a lot of missed sleep. Gunships acted as protection for rescue and medivac ships. Slicks carried troops, supplies, ammo, wounded and dead. They sprayed Agent Orange, Blue, and White to deny the enemy hiding places in the jungle, and were told the stuff was not harmful. Getting shot at and shot down was not an uncommon occurrence. And they flew in any and all types of weather, sometimes with disastrous results.

Helicopters and the Viet Nam War are synonymous, especially the HUEY. Made by Bell Helicopter the machine was first called the HU-1 by the Army. In Army jargon the letters stood for "Helicopter, Utility" and for those of you in the service you know how they love their acronyms.

The author takes a short break from a combat assault mission somewhere in the Delta near the Seven Sisters Mountains, in 1970

As with the Jeep of WWII the word derived from the letters GP for "general purpose" so in staying in the tradition of making words out of letter sounds, the Bell Turbine Helicopter became known as the HUEY after the cartoon character "Baby Huey" and the shape of the aircraft only helped to confirm the name. The letters of the machine were later reversed to the present UH-1, another command decision.

The 162nd Assault Helicopter Company used H-Model Hueys for its Slick platoons who were called VULTURES. The Gun Platoon used C-Models and was called COPPERHEADS. These

models were used from 1968 until the unit was deactivated in 1972. Less powerful B and D models were used before that time.

The Huey was, and still is, a most amazing aircraft. It first saw service in 1962, when most of the future pilots were still in grade school. The pilots and crews counted on this thin skinned (think Coke can) machine to get them out of dangerous situations and the grunts, for whom the helicopters existed, loved the sight of an incoming ship. It could mean food, beer, ammo, clean clothes, or a ride to R&R or a replacement and a ride home!

The Huey was pushed well beyond its safety envelope many times out of combat necessity or simple mistakes. It could do 110 degree banking turns, get in and out of some very tight places and it also made one hell of a tree trimmer when the need arose.

One mission I was on was a combat assault with a flight of five slicks into a hot LZ in the U Minh Forest, a very heavily defended enemy stronghold in the Delta. The ARVN (Army of the Republic of Viet Nam) were in very heavy contact and wanted out fast. Our flight of five approached the LZ to discover that only three helicopters could fit into the hole in the trees at one time. That left the last two aircraft hovering over the tree tops waiting for the first three ships to get their passengers loaded and get out.

A lone Vulture arises at dawn from Can Tho Airfield 1970

No one wants to be the last one out of a hot LZ. The ARVN were highly motivated in vacating that very hot LZ so, not wanting to wait for the two hovering Hueys and not caring what the word overloaded meant, as many as could fit piled on the three aircraft. One of the best pilots I know, CW2 Coonrod, came limping out of the LZ with 21 troops and the four crew for a total of 25 people on board! Eight troops was a normal load. Watching the Huey claw its way into the sky from the rear, I could see the rotor blades slowing down due to the maximum power requirements. Coonrod later said his rotor RPM was bleeding off rapidly and by luck (and I add much skill) he was able to get the thing flying and away. The sight of arms and legs sticking out of the open cargo doors was unforgettable.

CW2 Easthouse and I finally got our turn at the LZ and still being shot at; we picked up the last remaining troops. We each got three!

The battle damage these machines could take was amazing. I had my ship blown up by a rocket from one of my gunships on a defoliation run. "Luckily" for us it was only the 10 pound high explosive war head. If it had been a 17 pounder it would have blown us apart. I headed to the Medivac pad at Navy Bien Thuy to drop off wounded crew members and then back to our base at Can Tho with more shrapnel holes than we cared to count. It was pouring fuel and Agent Orange defoliant very heavily from all the holes.

By the time we got back to Can Tho, a five minute flight, I couldn't see out of the windshield due to the brown colored Agent Orange. I started to shoot an approach to what looked like the runway, only to be told by the tower I was headed for the South Swamp just to the west of the active (runway). I had to stick my head out the side window to see where to land at the end of the runway where the tower directed us. The ship never flew again.

Then again, one well placed bullet in the engine, transmission, or tailrotor could bring the ship crashing down in flames. Many did. The only armor on the Huey was the pilot's seats and the "Chicken Plates" the crew wore on their chests. Some crew chiefs and gunners also sat on one. These would stop small caliber projectiles. One problem, of many, was that the enemy didn't always use small calibers. They also used big calibers, rockets, or mortars. They also wired artillery shells in the trees to detonate when the rotor wash hit the tree branches. I learned to fly slumped WAY down in the seat, thank you very much.

Most pilots in my company carried pistols in cowboy type hip holsters. These were twisted around so the gun and holster rested between the legs when seated. A false sense of protection at best, but better than nothing. That part of the anatomy is very important to a 20 year old or for anyone aged 5 to 85 for that matter!

Hueys have long been doing maneuvers not thought possible by a tilt rotor machine. In an autorotation (as in losing the engine) it could safely touch down and still have enough inertia in the rotor system to pick the ship up to a hover and do a 180 degree pedal turn and land again. It could autorotate and land backwards just after take off from a tight LZ if there were no place to put the ship down straight ahead or to the sides and no time or altitude to make a 180.

I know of one pilot, someone near and dear to me, who decided to do a little showing off to anyone willing to watch. The scene of the "demonstration" was a airfield in the Delta called Ben Tra. The helicopter took off and accelerated along the runway to the maximum speed of 120 knots (about 150 MPH) and the pilot slowly pulled back on the cyclic to initiate the climb and not promote mast bumping which can snap the rotors off the helicopter (not good!). It was a beautiful smooth climb out. As the ship neared the apex of its climb, I noticed I could look up and see the runway that had just been behind me in the overhead "greenhouse" window. A very unusual sight in a helicopter! I figured it was a good time to nose the aircraft over into level flight again, NOW, only to discover the cyclic and foot pedals had gone limp and lifeless.

ARVN troops waiting for their ride into a hot LZ at Ben Tre in 1970.

The helicopter was now hanging by its nose in mid-air about 150 feet off the ground and as pilots of all aircraft know, gravity always wins. What saved the crew's bacon was the superb flying ability of the pilot - read LUCK. By pulling in more power on the collective, the torque of the system spun the body of the helicopter to the right and straight back down the runway, right back the way it had just come. During the short dive the controls came back to life and the helicopter pulled out of the very steep dive, leveled off and climbed away. It was a thing of beauty. And a lesson learned the hard way.

Everyone watching and the crew were very impressed! One of my fellow Vultures (#10) watching from the ground later told me "I thought you were dead." Since the saying of "no old bold pilots" didn't arise out of nowhere, it was a learning experience for many. And a maneuver not repeated by one suddenly much older and wiser Aircraft Commander.

The missions were many and varied but they came down to either Combat Assaults or Ash & Trash missions. The A&Ts were usually dull delivery type flights, but as with everything in Viet Nam even they didn't stay dull for long. I was told that a radar sight on the Cambodian Border needed parts for its ground radar ASAP. It was located on a canal line near the West coast of the Delta.

Taking off and heading there wasn't much of a problem. It was night and starting to rain. It got very dark as we approached the site and the wind was picking up quickly. It went from very dark to pitch black. I circled the compound, but those circles turned into large ovals due to the very strong wind. I set up the approach, shooting for a small hand held flash light on the ground. It felt like trying to approach a lightning bug in a pitch black room. The airspeed indicator showed 40-50 KTS and we were just barely creeping up on the light. As we landed, without a landing light, we could see the rain going by parallel to the ground. We knew from the type of station it was that there were antennas all around us but it was too dark to see. The only instruction we received from the ground personnel was where not to head.

We departed and headed back to Can Tho. We were on total instruments due to the poor night time weather conditions so I decided to give Saigon a call for a vector back home. He gave me a heading and we were flying along fat, dumb and happy at 2000 feet. This is where pure luck plays into the picture. I knew we were in the Seven Sisters Mountain region and that Nui Koto went 5000 feet straight up out of the rice paddies. I also figured that Saigon wouldn't put me into a mountain. Almost dead wrong!

Just by pure chance, luck, or our time not to go, a flare ship on the other side of the mountain lit one off to illuminate the mountain for a Cobra strike on that side of the mountain. It silhouetted the mountain in front of us. We saw, to our horror, that we were headed directly into the side of the mountain at 120 Knots! I immediately pulled in maximum power and banked sharply up and to the right. I can still see the tree tops brushing against my chin bubble as we flashed by.
I climbed away from the mountain which was being pretty well lit up by the guns and flareship and called Saigon to let him know he had just vectored us into a mountain. His reply, "Well, you didn't give me your altitude!" A couple more new lessons learned on that flight.

Being the new guy in country you were next to the lowest of the lows until you had proven yourself. Also being new meant you flew as a "Peter Pilot" to do what you were told when, where, and how high, by the Aircraft Commander (AC) who was the "Captain" of his ship.
I was still a Peter Pilot and we were up by Moc Hoa on the Cambodian Border flying support and combat assaults with the ARVN in the Plain of Reeds. We were told that morning that the VC had captured a mini-gun (capable of firing 2000-6000 rounds per minute).

The day started off bad when, in a two ship formation, we were to pick up found weapons. The lead ship was on approach and swerved to the right on short, short final. I then saw why! He had landed next to a pile of mortar bases and tubes to extract. This left me landing next to a pile of dead ARVN with no body bags on them. They were piled on the ship like so many bloody sticks of cord wood. Their arms and legs twisted or missing in many grotesque positions, rigor mortis had set in. The smell was indescribable. I looked back to see the gunner cringing in his gun well because of the dead ARVN that was staring right at him with wide open dead eyes.
Because of the wind rotation in the helicopter we were soon covered with various bodily fluids from the dead men, and it was still morning. We didn't smell good all day. And it's a smell you never forget.

After returning to the rest of the flight at Moc Hoa we mounted up to go extract the company of ARVN we had dropped off in the LZ earlier. My AC was letting me fly in the chock 2 position of a flight of five. We were in a V formation when the whole windshield and both side windows filled up with tracers all around us!

As the flight started to climb away I noticed that as I was pulling in power to stay with the flight, we were going down. I told the AC this and he took the controls. We continued our semi-controlled landing while still taking mini-gun fire. The crew chief stated bullets were ripping up through the floor between us and him. We managed to land in the Plain of Reeds and were soon chest high in swamp water that smelled like a sewer.

We got the radios out along with the guns and another Vulture Slick flew in to pick us up. I sat on the edge of the open cargo door with my legs hanging out as I emptied my .38 caliber Smith and Wesson revolver back at the enemy position. Small consolation! We were dropped off at the end of the runway at Moc Hoa, cold and smelly, but alive.

It was getting darker by the minute and an operation was underway to recover the downed H-Model. Soon it was too dark and our guys lost sight of the ship. The VC didn't. They managed to sneak up to it and blow it up. Then it was real easy for our guys to see it, it made a grand million dollar bonfire, one that I never got to see because we were still waiting on the ground a Moc Hoa until the operation was completed.

One of our missions was to take two COPPERHEAD Gunships along with a VULTURE Slick (I was the AC at 20) who would be the command and control ship (C&C) and pick up a local "Back Seat" familiar with the area to be hunted. We headed for an area East of Can Tho on the Mecong River and soon found the bad guys and they were willing to fight. The guns rolled in and made repeated gun runs into the trees.

One of the gunships got hit and shot down. He managed to land in a small clearing in the trees along side the river. With no hesitation on our part we went in under fire and returning fire got the crew, guns, and radios out, fast. Now we were the ones who needed the help. We didn't like leaving good C Model gunships. After all it only had a few bullet holes in it, so we put in a couple of calls to get some extra help and get the "Charlie" Model lifted out and returned to base for repairs and to fly another day. Those things weren't cheap.

First I had to get a flight of five Slicks to get troops into the LZ to secure the aircraft. Along with the Slicks came their own Cobra Gun Ships, my Copperhead was still on station and fighting mad. A Chinook Heavy lift helicopter had to be called and since these Aircraft were and are very expensive more gunships came along to help keep things calm.

So here I was a 20 year old CW2 Aircraft Commander in charge of more than 100 men and 14 aircraft. I was using so many different radios with their different frequencies I had to have my pilot (name forgotten with apologies) dedicate himself to turning the radio knobs to the right people at the right time. He did a great job and I'm happy to say the ship was recovered and no one was hurt. Everyone did a fantastic job! I was later told by this same pilot that he had written me up for the Silver Star, but because I didn't write myself up for it I didn't get it. We weren't really big on "Atta Boy Buttons" in the 162nd. The real Heroes of that day were all the flight crews and ARVN on the ground who made it all possible.

HERO is still a word that has meaning and substance, unlike the words "star" or "superstar" which is overused to the extent that someone who has 15 minutes of fame on TV becomes a "Star". The word Hero does apply to those men who manned their helicopters and fought in spite of the unpopularity of the Viet Nam War and its politics. They did their duty with honor and courage.

These men didn't get to be called men because of their age. Some of them started flying for the Army at 18 years of age and were flying combat at 19. They were considered "old men" in the group around 23 years old or older.

Most were proud to have been there and done their duty and most would do it again in a heart beat if we had to. It was the most intense time of our lives. Of course, in our 50's and 60's and in some cases 70's, it is probably best left up to the younger generation to earn their wings and "fly above the best." Heroes in the making; America can be proud.