

# THE DAY THE MEDIC SHOT THE BAD GUYS

**APRIL FOOLS DAY, 1970**

**1 April 1970.** Somewhere north of QL9, the east-west road through Dong Ha to Laos. North of the artillery firebases such as Alpha 4 and Bravo 1, not that far from the DMZ, Demilitarized Zone, separating North and South Vietnam. Aircraft Commander 1LT Gary L. Brink, Co-pilot Warrant Officer 1 Robin (Rob) Halvorson, Crew Chief Specialist 4 Tommy Johnson and Medic Sergeant First Class Frank E. Crockett are on a mission to evacuate wounded in UH-1H 67-17627, one of the original Huey helicopters that deployed overseas with the 237<sup>th</sup> Medical Detachment in November of 1968.

Brink remembers "We had an early afternoon mission to pick up a wounded infantryman but we kept getting shot at; we tried a couple of times to get in, but there was just too much incoming." But Halvorson thought he saw a way to get in on his (right) side of the aircraft so he asked for the controls.

Approaching at treetop level and high speed, Rob had spotted a draw, or depression in the ground, that he thought he could use to their advantage. Settling into the low spot, Rob remembers "We were sitting on the ground with the blades maybe only a foot off the ground at the tips, but it gave us the protection we needed and we got the wounded on board. Just as we're lifting out, what appeared to be a B40 rocket whizzed straight across the nose of the aircraft, one side to the other. It's almost as if it went by in slow motion" but, of course, it was at "full speed". (Ed. This author has been told by more than one Vietnam helicopter pilot that they observed the enemy take aim at their heads, and even though the aircraft was sitting on the ground with no movement other than the blades turning. The enemy would then aim in front of the aircraft and finally pull the trigger. Apparently, these young soldiers were taught to take a bead on the pilot, then lead the aircraft before firing. However, it seems that it was never explained to them that they should fire in front of the aircraft only when it was flying, not stationary on the ground!)

Brink and Halvorson were able to depart the area with no further enemy fire and were on their way to the hospital with their patient when a call came on

"Guard". (The VHF, Very High Frequency, radio has a position for transmitting and receiving "on Guard". When the VHF selector is turned to Guard, a crew can make a radio call and every aircraft within many, many miles of that radio hears the transmission, unless they have specifically disabled Guard reception. As Dustoff crews, we always had the selector on "Guard Receive" as one never knew when an emergency call would come in. Of course, being young and stupid, full of urine and vinegar helicopter pilots, occasionally one would hear a transmission such as "This is God on Guard, the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav sucks!" Of course, not to be outdone, a crew might then hear a reply such as "God on Guard, say again, you were cut out by a Mayday!")

The emergency call on Guard was from a Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol, LRRP team, that was in trouble. Brink answered with his DMZ Dustoff 7-Zero-7 call sign...the reply was "Hey Dustoff, we've got a mission for you!" "Where are you" was Brink's question. "Can't tell you, where are YOU at?" You can't tell me? Brink is thinking how do I know which way to go? He replies to the LRRPs "I'm just north of the firebases" was Brink's reply. "How are we going to find you?" "Just head North!" Uh, oh; 7-0-7 was already only a couple of clicks away from the DMZ and they want him to go closer! So they head north and before long, they cross the river in the middle of the "Z". "I just crossed a river" with both parties knowing full well "which" river he was referring to. "Just keep coming north." The crew of Dustoff 7-0-7 was now in North Vietnam.

As they neared the pickup site, another call to the LRRPs (pronounced "lurps") sent a proverbial chill down the spines of the Dustoff crew. The LRRPS were now whispering on the radio, a sure sign that the bad guys were very close! "What are your casualties and have you received recent hostile fire? From what direction?" typical need-to-know questions asked on virtually every mission to the guys on the ground. "No casualties at this time, but we hear voices about 20 meters to the north" was another whispered reply.

Twenty meters??? Wait a minute, that's roughly the length of a Huey, and that's how close the enemy is??? And we are supposed to come in, land and load them, all without "disturbing" the bad guys??? No way! The LRRPS would not pop a smoke grenade to mark their position, but they said they would flash a mirror or lay out a red panel to mark the LZ. Finally locating

the red panel, the attempt to land, as always, was made and here is what happened:

Brink spotted the ground guide; usually the guys on the ground would stand with their weapon over their head to show the pilots exactly where they wanted them to land. "I had been to a party with most of these guys just a week before" Brink recalls. "For some reason, the RTO (Radio Telephone Operator) was this big Indian guy, (Native American) and was almost always the ground guide. It seemed like either myself or (WO1) Bob McKeegan were always flying first up when they got in trouble." Immediately as they touched down, Brink saw the the ground guide "freeze" and then drop to the ground. Brink called to the guys in the back to get the ground guide, and then, almost immediately, the crew of Dustoff 707 started taking fire. "We had to have landed in the middle of the bad guys, there were NVA (North Vietnamese Army) all over the place but the good guys were there and it was a hell of a firefight" said Halvorson. Brink remembers Johnson dragging the ground guide back to the aircraft and Crockett now found himself very busy trying to get everyone onto the aircraft.

Halvorson looked out his door window and saw an NVA soldier with an AK-47 pointed at him. "The guy could not have been more than 14 and he fired his whole clip at us. Had I not been on the controls with Brink, I could have fired my .38 pistol at him and hit him without aiming, he was so close." The young enemy soldier was not done, however, and as Halvorson was congratulating himself on not being hit, the teenager loaded another clip and emptied that one into the helicopter, too! Again, Halvorson got lucky and was not wounded, probably saved by his armored seat, but as this was going on, things were heating up in the back of the Huey.

The LRRPS were jumping into the back of the aircraft while being shot at and one of them was hit in the head, sending blood and brain matter all over the inside of the aircraft, even onto the windshield. "Apparently the round came from the back of the aircraft, through the engine compartment" Brink stated. At that exact moment, Halvorson caught movement out of the left corner of his eye; "Lt. Brink's legs were flying out and I saw his head slump forward. With all the debris on the inside of the windshield, I thought for sure Gary was dead. There was even hydraulic fluid spraying around the inside of the aircraft. It was one of those moments where I thought to myself 'Oh, shit, Oh, shit, Oh, shit!'"

Lt. Brink, picks it up from here. "I got hit in the heel of my boot with a bullet which sent my limbs flying. Realizing the situation we were in, I tried my best to assume the best possible fetal position, considering I needed to get my feet back on the controls! If I could have crawled inside my helmet, I would have!" In fact, Gary Brink's helmet *was* grazed by a bullet from behind, "just as I tried to pull myself into that fetal position" he recalled. Had he not done so, who knows what that bullet would have done.

In the back of the aircraft on the right side, Medic Frank Crockett has by now pulled his .38 revolver from it's holster and has begun shooting in an attempt to protect the LRRPs who are also shooting and trying to scramble aboard the rescue helicopter. During this brief melee, Crockett is hit with a bullet.

On the left side, Crew Chief Tommy Johnson of Texas began grabbing more bodies, pulling the one LRRP who is now dead, and then the others who are now wounded, across the hard metal floor of the cargo compartment. "Sometimes we had to stack them like cordwood" he remembered, but this time it was just get them on so they could get the heck outta there!

Back up front in the cockpit, Halvorson, still thinks he is the only pilot alive in the aircraft when he gets a slap on the back of his helmet from one of the LRRPs, shouting "GO,GO,GO!" Of course, all of this rescue so far has taken place in just a very few seconds, but Dustoff 707 is still on the ground. It's time to pull pitch. Halvorson calls out "Brink's been hit! I've got the controls!"

Whether it was because both pilots were actually on the controls or because there was still some hydraulic fluid left in the helicopter's system or whether it was pure adrenaline pumping through their bodies, Brink and Halvorson were able to lift the Huey out of the LZ, making a left turn as most of the NVA seemed to be to the right. A Huey with no hydraulic assist is like driving your car when the power steering goes out, only worse. One pilot can work the controls when this happens but it is extremely difficult; two pilots on the controls are better, but it's still very difficult. Crew Chief Johnson knew they were still in trouble, however, as "the aircraft was all over the place as we took off." He could tell the pilots were having trouble with the controls, it was not a normally smooth departure.

And Johnson had his hands full, too; one of the LRRPs was not inside the aircraft yet when they took off. With the soldier's feet on the skids and only one hand holding onto a litter pole, Tommy reached outside the aircraft and grabbed the guy by the belt to haul him in. "I was halfway outside the aircraft myself", he said, "but I was tethered in to the aircraft so I knew that I wasn't going anyplace! If that guy had lost his grip on the pole, he would have been a gonner."

Clawing for altitude, the Aircraft Commander (AC) Brink says to Halvorson "I'm OK. You're fighting me on the controls". Halvorson now realizes that Gary is, in fact, OK and is flying the aircraft, so he let's go of the controls. Brink comes over the intercom again "You're fighting me on the controls!" Halvorson speaks back over the intercom "I'm not on the controls" but realizes that he is not transmitting, he can't hear himself in the headset; he can only hear the others. So he holds up his hands towards the left seat, showing he is not on the controls. Brink's reply? "Oh!"

Now out of immediate danger, but now flying a very badly crippled Huey, Brink tells Halvorson "Call Quang Tri and tell them we need a straight in (approach). Tell them to clear the area and get the crash trucks ready. Have them call the hospital and let them know we're coming. We won't be able to land at the hospital" as he continued to fight the controls. Rob pulled the microphone away from his face and mouthed the words to Gary "I have no commo." Noticing that the AC is not quite understanding him, Halvorson pulls out his grease pencil, and finding a clear spot on the inside of the windshield writes "I have no commo". As it turned out, not only did Rob have no commo, only a very few of the instruments on the control panel were working, but at least they had the airspeed indicator and altimeter still indicating properly.

In the back of the aircraft, Crockett and Johnson are tending to the wounded, with Crockett ignoring his own wound. Johnson, monitoring what is going on over the intercom, noticed the message on the windshield. "Why don't you use your survival radio, Mr. Halvorson?" Early in the history of the 237<sup>th</sup>, for over a year, DMZ Dustoff crews were short on equipment and had to fly these single ship, single engine aircraft missions with no emergency radios whatsoever. But fortune was trying to smile on this crew, and Halvorson pulled out his emergency radio to call Quang Tri tower. They

needed a nice long paved runway to put this puppy down and their home base at QT was the ticket.

Grabbing the hand-held radio and transmitting on Guard, Halvorson alerted the tower to their situation. "This is Dustoff 7-Zero-7 on Guard, north of Quang Tri about 10 miles out. We have multiple wounded on board, no idea of their condition, no hydraulics, and no instruments. We need a straight in. Clear everything, I need to be first in line." It was about this time that Gary noticed one of the few instruments still working was the engine temperature gauge "And it was running pretty hot!"

All appropriate measures were immediately taken by the tower controller. Dustoff 707 was in serious trouble, they were fighting to stay in the air, yet they were still 10 minutes away and limping home. Of course, transmitting on Guard alerted every other aircraft in the area and it wasn't long before the crew of 707 heard "This is Pachyderm 38, Dustoff, we're at your 9 o'clock and we're bringin' ya home!" Of course, it was somewhat comforting to know someone else was there. Pachyderm was the call sign that the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division Chinook helicopters used, and there was more to come. Soon the Huey crew heard "Dustoff 707, this is a heavy fire team at your 3 o'clock; were takin' you home, too, buddy!" Now they had 3 Cobras covering their butts!

Halvorson remembers "There must have been 27 helicopters and fixed wings following us to QT. Yeah, I'm probably exaggerating a little, but not by much!" As they approached the runway at QT, the tower called back with landing approval and "The hospital wants to know how many wounded you have." "I don't know, several" was Halvorson's reply. "Just clear the runway." Still very busy on the controls, Brink is setting up the Huey for a long, low approach to the runway, the best way to make a landing with no hydraulic power. The pilots continue their narrative "About the time we have the runway in sight, we get a call from this Command and Control General from the 5<sup>th</sup> Mech" (5<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Division, which DMZ Dustoff supported for most of it's time in Viet Nam). He's in his Huey and is also following us. He's telling us 'This is Red Devil 6. Boys, just remember your training, just like flight school. It's gonna be OK, just rely on your training' and Rob is thinking 'Just be quiet and let us fly the darn thing!'"

Well, the boys did remember their training and with both pilots on the controls, they were able to put the Huey down on the runway, skidding to a

halt, skid shoes smoking and smelling of that distinctive odor all Huey crews remember from practicing those emergency procedures. They were able to put it down, under control, with no further damage. The 18<sup>th</sup> Surgical Hospital had their ambulances waiting and took care of the wounded, including Medic Frank Crockett. Also of note, perhaps because of his actions during this mission, WO1 Robin Halvorson was made an Aircraft Commander the next day, having proved himself under heavy enemy fire. Incidentally, there is no record of any medals being awarded any of the crew on this mission, except Crockett who probably got a Purple Heart. After all, they were only doing what they were supposed to be doing; it's what they were trained for. And they were all volunteers.

That same day, 1LT Brink filled out an after action report, detailing the mission for headquarters. "It was tough. I knew those guys we picked up and now at least one of them was dead. Some of them I had just met at the party." What was even tougher was this: when 67<sup>th</sup> Medical Group found out 7-0-7 had crossed "that river", they grounded him! He was temporarily not allowed to fly because he violated the agreement with North Viet Nam. (Like the NVA honored the agreement!) But when Red Devil 6, a one star general, heard about the grounding, he overrode it and Brink was back in the air.

Months later, Brink noticed his legs were itching a lot. While scratching them one time, he noticed that he pulled out a piece of the ceramic that surrounded his armored seat. "I didn't even realize those pieces penetrated the skin. I was pulling stuff out of the back of my legs for years after that!" The seat was stopping the bullets but the rounds were disintegrating the coating and sending shards into his legs; he didn't even realize it at the time.

The Helicopter? Oh, that! As a Huey is shut down, the normal procedure is to wait two minutes at a reduced RPM to let the engine cool down. Being the good pilots they were, Brink and Halvorson were waiting out the cool down period when the engine suddenly quit. Looking at each other in disbelief, they couldn't figure out what had happened. As the crew performed a post flight inspection, they found the problem with the engine- there was no oil in it, a bullet hole had drained it all. Remember it was running hot on the way home? The engine had seized after landing, as good fortune had continued to smile on them; it just as easily could have quit in the air rather than on the ground. Further inspection of the aircraft also showed no transmission oil

(the oil cooler had taken a hit) and no hydraulic fluid, as would be expected. Oh, yes, and 121 bullet holes. Yep, they counted one hundred and twenty one incoming rounds in 6-2-7.

Since the Huey was still virtually intact, the common practice was to sling load it to the repair facility at Red Beach, on the west side of Da Nang Harbor, about an hour flight away. Poor ol' 627 was rigged for it's inglorious ride South, having already served the 237<sup>th</sup> Medical Detachment for just under two years, and having flown for them a very honorable 1,212 hours.

A few days after her last landing, and having saved literally thousands of lives over her career, 627 left the ground one more time as the Chinook that was sling loading her headed for the coast and the flight to Da Nang. But somewhere over the choppy South China Sea, 627 broke loose and was lost over water, never to be recovered. Whether the loss of this very heavily damaged Huey was intentional or not is anyone's guess, but 67-17627 always brought her crew home, even when she was terribly wounded. It was a fate she certainly did not deserve; however, one could argue that at least she was buried at sea!

One final note. When I started researching another mission, I was told about Crockett having to fire his weapon to protect his patients. I had to know more about what happened. But the pilot who told me about it wasn't sure who else was on board except Halvorson. When I caught up with Halvorson months later, he told me Brink was the AC and who the crew chief was. "I know the crew chief was TJ on this mission. He had that Texas drawl and he carried this great big honkin' screwdriver in his tool kit, biggest one I ever saw. He used it to intimidate POW's when we picked them up. It was Tommy, for sure!" When asked about the screwdriver, Johnson said "We knew the POW's might go for our personal weapons and I didn't want any bullets flying around inside my helicopter, so I would just grab that screwdriver and make sure they saw it." And that's no April Fool!