

# Picking up Dead Bodies

By CW2 [Bernardo S. Paez](#)

A & B Companies, 4th Avn Bttn., 4th Inf. Div.

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We were assigned to support and resupply an ARVN Battalion. I can't remember where we were. It must have been a fairly secure firebase because we had a chance to shut down the helicopter for a while.

I got to talking to the American FO, (Forward Artillery Observer), who was assigned to the ARVN unit. I don't remember his name. I remember that he was a black 1st Lt., slender, about 24 years old. I don't even recall what our conversation was about, only that he showed me the tent where he bunked.

As luck would have it, we were assigned to support the same unit the next day. When we landed, I went to report to operations. I noticed some ARVNs struggling to put a body into a body bag. The body was in a fetal position. They were pouring some kind of liquid on the knees as they were straightening them out. I thought it was to loosen the joints, but I might have been wrong. Maybe they were just cleaning something. I got close enough to see that the body was of the 1st Lt. that I had been talking to the day before.

An ARVN who could speak passable English told me that they had been attacked the night before and that the Lt. had been shot in the chest with a 50 caliber round. They loaded the body bag into the helicopter and asked me if I would go into the Lt's tent and pack up his personal belongings and take them with the body.

I remember entering his tent. There was a folding table next to his bunk. I packed his duffel bag with his clothes and then started filling up his laundry bag with the stuff on top of the folding table. I remember some pictures and only have a hazy memory of the other items. The memory that has stuck with me all these years is of a half empty, small box of Tide soap. I recall that clearly. Odd what the mind chooses to remember.

I don't even remember dropping his body off at graves registration, but we had to have done it.

On another occasion we were assigned to pick up 10 dead NVA and to take them to Jackson Hole, (a firebase close to the Cambodian Border). I was told that they were going to take pictures of the dead bodies and make leaflets saying this will happen to you if you don't surrender, or something to that effect.

A unit had been in a fierce firefight the night before and I was told the fighting had been so close that they had fired Beehive rounds into the perimeter wire. Beehive rounds are artillery shells filled with thousands of steel darts. They can strip every leaf if fired directly at a tree.

They had found 10 bodies the next morning. All the bodies were naked except one. That one had green boxer shorts, exactly like the ones we wore. Some of the bodies were missing arms and legs. I remember one with a big hole where his right shoulder should have been. You could see inside his rib cage. The bodies had leaves, twigs, and dirt sticking to them. The grunts out in the field loaded 5 bodies for the first load. They treated the bodies like pieces of meat. They just threw the bodies into the helicopter. I can still feel the helicopter rock when the weights landed. The body on top was facing down and had its legs toward me. They pulled on one of his legs and his ass opened up to reveal green shit smeared on his butt cheeks and inner thighs.

When we landed at Jackson Hole we were directed to set down at an empty area close to the perimeter. There were 4 EM, (Enlisted Men), who had been detailed to unload the bodies. They had on masks, yellow rubber gloves, and yellow rubber aprons. They were a squeamish lot. They would pull on a body and step out of the way hoping it would roll out. It was taking them forever.

I asked the co-pilot to hold on to the controls, got out and climbed into the back of the helicopter. I threw the bodies out at the feet of the EM.

When we returned with the remaining 5 bodies, the EM did a lot better job of unloading the bodies. I didn't have to help them.

Later I reflected on how callous I had become. It was either that or have nightmares.

On another occasion, we monitored a radio call for all available Blackjack Aircraft to assemble at Duc Co, (a Special Forces camp with a dirt runway and fuel bladders). We responded and set down headed to the west on the right side of the dirt runway. We were 7th in line, behind us, 2 other Blackjack aircraft. Our Company Commander, (CO), was waiting for us at the extreme west end of the runway.

As the aircraft commander, I went up to the front of the line to receive the briefing.

Our CO called us in close and started the briefing. There was a unit about 15 miles north that had gotten into some bad shit. They had blasted a tight "one ship" LZ and we were to resupply them and take out the wounded. There was still heavy fighting going on to the north. He called out 6 aircraft numbers and mine was one of them. All the rest of the aircraft were dismissed to return to their previous assignments.

The CO continued the briefing. He gave us our call signs, the radio frequencies of the ground units, told us jets were bombing to the north of the LZ and that there was still sporadic fire around the LZ. He illustrated on his map the pattern we were to fly and where we were to hold until our turn to go in. We were to load up ammo, water, and C rations here at Duc Co and take them in. We were to take out the wounded first and the dead last. Since it was a "single ship" LZ, we were to daisy chain orbit at 1500 feet southwest of the LZ and just as we saw the ship on the ground start to clear the LZ, the

next ship in line would go in. He cautioned us to be alert for enemy fire as some Medevac ships had received fire and had been hit.

This was the first time I had really felt fear before a mission. I felt a deep sense of dread. Most of the time I had just reacted to what was happening around me. This time the reality set in that I could lose my life. I walked back to my aircraft on heavy feet.

The members of the mission hovered our helicopters sideways onto the runway and when we were assembled we took off in single file. Upon arriving at our IP, (Initial Point), we set up our orbit at 1500 feet.

Upon leaving our turn in orbit, we had to make a rapid circling descent, straighten out, and come to a hover right over the LZ. Then we would have the crew chief and the door gunner guide us down about 30 feet. We took out the wounded and their personal belongings. There were some of our dead lying in the LZ wrapped up in ponchos. We only had enough room to land in approximately the same spot every time we went in. I was flying left seat and as we set down I could see a poncho wrapped body almost underneath the chin bubble.

The second time we went in, the wind kicked up by our rotor blades had blown off the poncho of the dead body. We landed right above the corpse of a black soldier about 22 years old. His face was right underneath the chin bubble. As they were loading the wounded, I kept looking into the dead soldier's face. I remember thinking that his family didn't even know he was dead. It filled me with deep sadness. Not about him, but about his family. I remember thinking his family doesn't know that he is dead.

As we were circling at 1500 feet for our third pickup, the crew chief on our left side opened up with his machine gun. I looked down at where his tracers were going and I saw two lights blinking at the edge of a tree line. I saw his tracers spraying around the two lights and the one on the right blinked off. The group of lights- 50 Caliber tracers- coming up from the ground grew bigger and changed colors as they got closer to our front. They were pastel lime green and then changed to pastel orange. The lights started off real small and then got as big as golf balls as they suddenly grew big in size. They also seemed to slow down as they passed in front of us.

My awareness triggered in and I realized 50 caliber machine guns were firing at us! A 50 caliber round can do serious damage!

I recalled reading an article that if you wanted to fall quickly out of the sky in a helicopter, to press in full right pedal, (to counter the loss of torque), bottom the collective, and turn the helicopter on it's right side to spill all the air underneath - A violent maneuver to be sure. I did just that and we fell like a rock. I gained control of the helicopter on the way down and hovered straight down into the tight LZ. I got on the emergency frequency and radioed the coordinates of the location of the 50 caliber machine guns several times. Nobody acknowledged.

The dead body and face I had contemplated before were no longer there. Someone else had taken him out. That image is burned into my mind to this day.