

The V.C. Were Predictable Too

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Captain at the time

Lucky Star??/Starblazer 21

We should all remember from basic training the warnings our instructors preached to us about not becoming predictable.

The warnings from infantry basic and AIT schools went like this: “When patrolling, never use the same trail when going in and out of an area. Mister Charlie will take advantage of your laziness, set up an ambush or booby trap, and really ruin your day.”

My Vietnam veteran instructor pilots repeated the same dire prediction in flight school. They lamented that “you will pay dearly” if you make the mistake of using the same approach into and out of hot landing zones. During my tour in Vietnam I observed instances when violations of these warnings were made both by our pilots and soldiers, and also by Mr. Charlie. The results were, as you might expect, predictable.

I was stationed for most of my tour at LZ English with the 61st Assault Helicopter Company (AHC). LZ English was located by the village of Bon Song in Northern Bin Dinh Province. I flew both lift ships and B Model gunships for the unit from September 1969 through September 1970. Our unit’s home station was at Lane Army Helipad by An Son, a small village located a few miles northwest of Qui Nhon. Our lift ship call sign was “Lucky Star,” and the gunship pilots were known as “Starblazers.” Our unit patch contained a design showing two dice with a 6 and a 1 (a good number to roll when gambling) along with a shooting star. The helipad at LZ English was known as the Crap Table.

We flew missions predominantly out of LZ English in support of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, including their LRRP unit known as November Rangers. We also support the herd at LZ’s North English, Mahoney, Uplift, Two Bits, Pony and Tape. Our primary area of operations included the An Loa Valley, Happy Valley, Sui Kai Valley, and Crow’s Foot Region. The An Loa Valley was a major infiltration route for the NVA during my time in Vietnam. We sometimes ranged west to An Khe and Pleiku in support of the 4th Infantry Division, and also flew in support of the Capitol ROK Infantry Division. The 61st AHC also participated in the excursions into Laos and Cambodia.

I’m not sure about other pilots, but one of the least significant things to me during my Vietnam tour was the day of the week. Aside from payday and major holidays, the day of the week had no significance at all. Sometimes a chaplain would be available and you would think that it was Sunday, but not always. On occasions, such as before large combat assaults, the chaplain would provide services regardless of what day it was.

During my tour, LZ English experienced mortar attacks on a frequent basis. After a period of time we realized that the attacks almost always occurred on Thursdays. The mortar rounds originated from the base of the ridgeline that lay to the west of the LZ. This ridge ran

from south to north and separated LZ English from the Loa Valley. The attacks would begin just a few minutes before sunset. Another significant fact was that the mortar rounds always impacted on the helipad and then the shooters began walking rounds from west to east across the LZ. Naturally, anti-mortar artillery and 50-caliber fire would pound the location where the rounds were being fired from. Unfortunately, we never seemed to be able to eliminate the enemy mortar position. During my tour, numerous patrols and LRRP team missions were inserted into the area in an attempt to locate the exact firing position, but always to no avail. Things became so predictable that on Thursday evenings we would normally have a person sitting on top of our Tactical Operations Center (TOC) bunker to watch and listen for a possible mortar attack. When the first enemy mortar round was fired, we had approximately 22 seconds before the first round would impact. This gave us time to sound the attack alarm and head for our bunkers.

One final predictable point eventually became obvious to us. Of the many helicopter revetments we had constructed on the Crap Table, two specific revetments always seemed to take close hits during a mortar attack. It got to the point that if we didn't have many helicopters at the helipad at the end of the day, those two specific revetments would remain empty. But if the helipad was completely full and all revetments had to be utilized, we would try to park our most expendable ships in those two locations.

Near the end of my tour, probably July or August of 1970, my gunship team was on primary stand-by at LZ English. Shortly after supper, the scramble alarm was sounded and we ran into the TOC to be given our mission. We were being scrambled to cover a dust-off helicopter that was needed for an emergency medical evacuation mission to the northwest of LZ North English. A platoon from the 173rd had been ambushed and they had two seriously wounded soldiers who required evacuation. At that time it was normal procedure to cover dust-off missions when enemy fire could be expected.

Our team consisted of two B Model Gunships fitted with rockets and mini-guns. To the best of my memory, on that day my Light Gun Team also included Warrant Officers Frank McFadden (DAT), Donald Woods, and Dennis Patterson. We scrambled into the air and awaited the dust-off to lift off from the LZ English medical pad. The flight time to our location was only 10-12 minutes.

As we arrived on the scene and made contact with the friendly unit on the ground, they informed us that they had not taken any more enemy fire since initially being hit. They popped smoke, which we immediately identified, and upon receiving verification from the ground that it was their smoke, we set up a race track pattern allowing us to provide continuous cover for the dust-off ship while it made its approach for the pick-up. The medivac extraction site was in rice paddies with a small village located about 100 meters to the east. The medivac pick-up went off without any problems, and we escorted the dust-off ship out of the LZ and headed back towards English.

Since the mission had gone off without a hitch, we began talking among ourselves and the fact was brought up that this was Thursday evening, and that's when we might expect a mortar attack on LZ English. We decided against immediately heading back to English and instead headed up the valley behind the ridgeline to the west of English. We checked our

watches and decided it was about the time that the enemy usually started his mortar attack on our home station.

We gained altitude and climbed over the ridge and LZ English came into view some two to three kilometers to the east. As we look down the ridgeline, we observed the first flash from the enemy mortar tube. It couldn't have been a more perfect situation. Here we were, fully loaded gun team, with an enemy mortar position just beginning its attack directly below and in front of us. We immediately opened fire on the target and then set up our race track pattern.

We poured 2.75 inch rockets and 7.62-mm mini-gun rounds into the enemy position. Our rounds hit the target and we were rewarded with two secondary explosions and a lot of smoke and fire. It looked like we completely neutralized the enemy position during our first two passes. At the time we opened up on the enemy we also contacted our operations at LZ English and informed them of the situation. They told us they had witnessed the contact and directed us to stay on station to provide cover for a reaction force that would be inserted. Within 15 minutes we were able to escort the reaction team into the location.

The next morning we received word, as expected, that the mortar position had been set up in the draw. The hill to the east of the draw, facing LZ English, protected it from direct fire and almost all anti-mortar fire. The reaction team credited us with two KIAs and two POWs. Our forces recovered the mortar tube, base plate and some mortar rounds. Better yet, we had finally found their launch site. The position was beneath two inches of water in the solid rock streambed. The VC had chipped out locations in the streambed to place the base plate and mortar tube legs, and had etched out a number of holes to allow them to shift the direction of fire. No wonder they were so accurate with their rounds. They literally had our location etched in stone.

The next day a team of demolition specialists from LZ English were taken to the location. They placed explosives in the streambed and destroyed the site. It was never used to attack us again.

As I was warned in basic training and flight school, being predictable will eventually ruin your day.