

“ The Rest of the Story... “

“By direction of the President of the United States...the *Distinguished Flying Cross* is awarded for exceptionally valorous actions while participating in aerial flight evidenced by voluntary actions above and beyond the call of duty...his actions were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit, and the United States Army.”



These words are not the ones I would have conjured up to describe the events surrounding any action in which you are getting shot at, however, as another of my colleagues had observed about our year in Viet Nam, “Great guys and a fun place.”

That was also my first impression of the 334th Aviation Company (Aerial Weapons) when I first arrived in Bien Hoa, Vietnam in early September 1969. After my graduation from flight school, in June, I had attended the aircraft qualification for the AH-1G Huey Cobra in Savannah, Georgia. Man had just walked on the moon, and I was a really cool new Cobra pilot, molded in the image of Chennault’s Flying Tigers, and on his way to battle the “wily, elusive, yellow hordes of communism”.

Yes, now I was invincible. I had a new flight jacket, shiny new wings, and my badge of courage Cobra patch. To quote Dan Grossman of the 48th Blue Stars, “little did I know that for better or for worse, for all the fun times, for all my personal ups and downs, I never expected to have had some of the best times of my life intermixed with many of the worst nightmares of that life.”

There is a real bond among air warriors. But since man first strapped a gun on an aircraft, we aerial gunslingers have been different. Oh yes, we’re all pilots, but “gun pilots” take that dashing, daring, death dealing, devil may care, white silk scarf image a step further.

The 334th was divided into three gunship platoons, the “Playboys”, the ‘Raiders”, and the “Dragons”, a maintenance platoon, the “Gun Runners”, and the headquarters platoon, the “Sabers.” The 334th and its predecessors had built a solid reputation for themselves, dating back to July 25th 1962, when advanced elements of the Utility Tactical Transport Helicopter Company (UTT) arrived at Tan Son Nhut Air Base. The 334th was the first fully armed helicopter unit in Vietnam.

Flying with the 334th AHC in III Corps during the period from September 1969-September of 1970 was, to say the least, interesting. The terrain varied from flat marshy rice fields in the southern portion, close to the Mekong River, to rolling hills and rubber plantations, left over from the French occupation years, in the North. The unit supported everyone. American’s, Australian’s, New Zealand Kiwi’s, Vietnamese, Thai, and Special

Forces units all requested our support. After three months, a pilot would work with almost every unit in the Corps. The one thing that never changed though was the tenacity of the enemy. It never ceased to amaze me how much firepower they could muster in the middle of nowhere. We owned the day, they owned the night.

I remember my “rite of passage” in the drinking of the “Green Dragon Cocktail” at the Bien Hoa Officers Club, and later being advanced from being a “Peter Pilot” front seater to being an aircraft commander. I don’t, however, remember much after I finished vomiting up my rite of passage. In the interim there were days and days of flying and learning how to stay alive. Lessons on how not to get fixated on your target during a rocket run, and fly into the ground, especially at night. Lessons on how to apply immediate actions emergency procedures to avoid spinning into the ground after losing your tail rotor. Lessons on which hospital to take a wounded co-pilot or pilot too in the event he got shot during a mission. Above the shoulders wounds went to the 21st Evac Hospital, and below the shoulders wounds went to the 93rd Evac Hospital.

One could go on forever on incidents, and operations that were experienced but perhaps this story will speak to the many similar actions that synopsise the Vietnam experience for some of us Dragons, Raiders, and Playboys of the 334th Aviation Company (Aerial Weapons). Sometimes we did incredible things and overcame unbelievable obstacles and still came home to laugh about them over a beer in the club. Sometimes we weren’t so lucky.

Probably the most important mission that the 334th had at the time were their scramble teams. These consisted of Cobras fully prepared and ready to cover anyone in III Corps anytime of the day or night. Within five minutes after receiving the call for assistance, the Cobras were in the air and on their way. Scramble missions were never routine, because the same exact conditions never occurred twice.

It was a day just like any other day, except today we would “standby” and scramble if needed from a little airstrip close to Tay Ninh. After an early get-up and an “aviators breakfast” of a cigarette and a coke, we took off for Tay Ninh. We would shut down and monitor our radios until we were needed. We knew that if we went it would be into Cambodia. President Nixon had announced to the world during the last week of April 1970 that armed forces of the United States were to cross the boundary line separating South Vietnam and Cambodia to destroy enemy supply caches and base camps. That decision had a tremendous effect on the entire world. Nowhere was it felt more acutely than by the aviation units like the 334th.

We arrived at Tay Ninh with our fire team of two Cobras, shut down and waited for something to happen. Being the second oldest of the four, at 21, I also happened to be the Flight Leader. My wingman, Larry Pucci, was 19. Our front seat co-pilots, Wayne Hedeman with Larry, and Johnny Almer flying with me, had both been in Vietnam for some months and were already seasoned pilots. As seasoned as we were, however, we were soon to get bored of just waiting, and began to play. Our attention turned to throwing rocks at a smoke grenade we had tied to a tree by the safety pin. As mid-

morning approached the temperature began to rise into the mid-90's and of course the humidity was already at 100 percent. No one had yet hit the darn grenade. As we continued to smoke and joke we removed our shirts to "catch those rays", and stay somewhat cooler.

Finally, someone hit the smoke grenade and out popped the pin, followed by a little puff of smoke. There was much disappointment, however, when no colored smoke appeared. Next, two things happened almost simultaneously. The radio crackled to life with our order to "scramble" our aircraft to a location in Cambodia, and we were hit with the invisible vapors of the riot gas grenade we unknowingly exploded. Being hot and sweaty and being exposed to riot gas is not an exciting experience on the ground, but when you have to go fly, well...

So with eyes burning from the gas we managed to get off the ground, and off we flew in search of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) mechanized Infantry Company, with American Army advisors that was in a hot firefight with a reported battalion of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars. Twenty minutes later we identified the location of the ARVN unit by their signal smokes. These were smoke grenades that units would "pop" and we would identify the color. The enemy was sometimes clever in that they would wait till the friendly elements would pop their smoke, and then pop the same color smoke to confuse us. Today however, we didn't have any problem finding the location of the enemy. Angry red and green tracers were coming at us from everywhere.

I immediately radioed to the unit on the ground that we would begin our rocket attack oriented on a West to East azimuth. So in we dove, rockets flying and mini-gun spraying bullets at 4000 rounds per minute. I had a good fix on the "bad guys" that were shooting at us; however, as I broke off my rocket attack I saw out the left side another anti-aircraft position. Suckered! About the same time I saw the gun emplacement the enemy rounds just started coming in the cockpit just like in the movies. Plexiglas was splintering, warning lights coming on, #1 and #2 hydraulics "out" lights, and my wingman reporting to me over the radio that I was on fire! Great, thanks for confirming that I'm in deep doo-doo!

The bullets, remarkably, missed the human targets, but had taken a terrible toll on the aircraft. We were going down. Your first thought is to get as far away from the enemy as possible, but Cobra's don't fly to well without hydraulic pressure to the flight controls, so all I wanted to do was get the aircraft on the ground. Just about the same time the controls began to freeze up, from not having any hydraulic fluid left, we touched down. We threw open our canopies, jumped to the ground, and ran as fast as we could over to a bomb crater. It was here that the two of us realized that we had no weapons. I had not put on my survival vest prior to takeoff because my tearing eyes made me forget to do anything but get the helicopter started and taking off. My front seat, Johnny Almer, had his vest with him, but had dropped his pistol upon leaving the aircraft. So all we had managed to escape the aircraft with was one survival vest and one survival radio.

What an ignominious end! I'm thinking, "we'll both be shot dead in a bomb crater." Just like the end of the "Bridges at Toko-Ri" when William Holden and Mickey Rooney get shot. Well, not just yet!

It suddenly occurred to us both that we were not really that far away from the good guys, so, after peeking about we scurried out of the bomb crater and ran the hundred yards to the ARVN position. What a relief, friendly faces. Now it's time to get back in the game. With the aid of the infantry companies radio we reestablished communications with our sister aircraft. They had been orbiting some ways off waiting for the situation to cool off somewhat. I'm sure the commies were dancing about after their victorious shooting down of our aircraft. Eager to get back into the game Larry Pucci in our wing ship wanted to know where the bad guys were that shot us down. I told him the machine gun, which we referred to as a "high speed 30 caliber" (7.62mm machine gun on two wheeled cart), was located at the corner of the tree line we were attacking. So Larry brought his Cobra about and lined up on the long axis of the tree line and began his attack.

Whoomp! Whoomp! Whoomp! The 17-pound High Explosive rockets threw mud, trees, and enemy up in the air. What an awesome sight. As was customary of our tactics, the front seat copilot would begin to "cover the break" with 7.62 mm Mini-gun, spraying the area with bullets at an ear shattering rate of 4000 rounds per minute as the aircraft broke around for another pass.

Halfway through the turn though, the mini-gun stopped shooting. I radioed to Larry. "Everything okay?" Through the crackle of the radio I heard him say, "Front seat is hit." I radioed back "How bad?" His reply sent shudders down my spine. "I don't know", Larry said, "All I can see is a hole in the back of his neck." Because the pilot and copilot sit in tandem in the Cobra, it is difficult for the back seater to see anything below shoulder level of the copilot in the front seat. Larry radioed me that he was breaking off and heading for the hospital in Tay Ninh. A thirty minute ride with someone who is slowly bleeding to death and there is nothing you can do about it.

This is one of the times we weren't so lucky. Wayne Hedeman died enroute to Tay Ninh. He was old. Twenty-two years old. A graduate of the University of Hawaii. We used to kid him about what a Major in Agriculture and a Minor in Soils was all about? The aircraft he was flying in took one hit. The armor piercing round entered on the left side of the aircraft, went through his Jugular vein and out the back of the neck through the spine. More than likely Wayne Hedeman never knew what hit him. The aircraft flew back to our home base where the small hole in the side was patched and the blood was washed out. We would need the aircraft the next day with a new crew and a new mission.

Wayne's luck ran out as so many others did during those years. The youth, the life, the blood, just ran out. Those of us who are left, however, know that "their actions were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon themselves, their units, and the United States of America.