

A Routine Autorotation

by [Dave Baggott](#)

On March 18, 1971, we took off from Tuy Hoa Airbase in one of the 21st Signal Group's Hueys, callsign Manifest 593, on a routine ash-and-trash mission to Dalat. I was Aircraft Commander, CW2 Gary Blanton was Pilot. Sp4 Jim Faulk and SP5 Lucas were door gunner and Crew Chief, respectively. We had a full load of 'Souls on Board' with our crew of four plus nine pax, including a Lieutenant Colonel. We departed the airbase as a flight of two, paired with another 21st Signal Huey which was bound for Nha Trang. As we turned south we were talking with the crew of the other aircraft on the company VHF freq. I said I would like to take the scenic route out over the water, around the point formed by Vung Ro Mountain. I was a short-timer with only a month left in my tour, and I hadn't been over the South China Sea in a long time. The other AC said they would take the shorter route through Vung Ro Pass. So we parted ways.

I was on the controls as we set up to do the DEAR (Daily Engine Analysis Report) Check. A DEAR Check was performed during the first flight of each day. It involved leveling off at 1,000 feet and 60 knots, and recording EGT (exhaust gas temp) and the N1 Tach readings. Gary noted these in the logbook as he read them off. I don't recall the numbers, but I do remember commenting that we have a strong engine, as the numbers were a bit better than usual. As we started the climb to our cruising altitude, I pulled in power to reach a rate of climb rate slightly faster than our normal climb, but well within the Huey's capability.

As the coastline approached a few moments later, there was a sudden loud noise and the aircraft yawed; I instinctively lowered the collective and entered autorotation. The sound that I heard at the time was like shoving a yardstick into a big fan. Lucas said later that from his seat in the hell hole, right by the engine, it sounded like a shotgun. Almost simultaneously, I heard Gary on the radio: "Mayday, Mayday; Manifest 593, engine failure, 2 miles south of Phu Hiep" (Gary had already experienced two engine failures while solo-piloting OH-58s; I'm not sure I would have had the presence of mind to make that Mayday call.)

Thanks to luck, good Army training and the grace of God, almost before it had registered on my brain what was going on I had made a 120° turn into the wind and lined up on a seemingly endless beach. Moments later we cushioned onto the sand.

Lucas and Faulk did a great job of offloading the pax and moving them away from the aircraft, then dismounted the M-60s to set up a defensive perimeter, although there was no sign of human presence anywhere around. Lucas popped open the cowling to see the extent of damage – a large hole had blown in the compressor section, with pieces of compressor blades and housing scattered on the engine deck.

I was impressed with the fact that before the rotor had stopped turning, there were at least two fixed-wing aircraft orbiting over us, and our partner Huey had turned back from the Vung Ro Pass to assist as needed. A Dustoff Huey arrived shortly. We had no injuries, so they merely collected our pax and took them back to Tuy Hoa.

We were still near enough to base to talk to our operations office on the FM radio. One person in Ops said later that it was the first time they had ever heard me get excited. Well, besides the engine failure,

I had to report that the tide was coming in, and each wave washing over our skids was causing us to sink a bit! We needed a Chinook to lift us out. The longer it was delayed, the more concerned we became, and we started removing the radios and anything portable. At long last a Chinook arrived and we watched 593 being slung back to base while we hitched a ride on the other Huey.

Since we touched down without damage, it was quickly determined to be an “incident” rather than an “accident” which could have grounded me pending an inquiry. As it was, we were simply assigned a different Huey and we were soon on our way again to Dalat.

I’m not a swimmer, and in any event escaping from the pilot’s seat of a Huey in the water would not be an easy task. I’ve often thought back on this day, that if the engine in Manifest 593 had held on for another two minutes or so we would have been down in the choppy waters of the South China Sea, and some of us likely wouldn’t have survived; I surely wouldn’t have. I’m always grateful that circumstances gave me a chance beyond March 18, 1971 to have a wonderful family and a fulfilling career. For the remaining month of my tour in Vietnam, I always flew IFR – as in “I follow roads”!

