Terror in the Salt Flats of Phan Rang
By Raymond N. Judycki

65-7967 photo by Don Joyce

On October 6, 1967, the 179th Assault Support Helicopter Company was ferrying one of its 16 Chinook CH-47A models – serial number 65-7967 – from Pleiku to Saigon, where it would be turned over to Air Vietnam, Inc. for major overhaul. LT. Jesse Hamilton – maintenance officer of the 179th – was the aircraft commander and pilot on this mission. In addition to the co-pilot, crew chief and flight engineer, there were three passengers on board: an Army officer, Bell Helicopter tech rep Coalby Brown, and myself. Awaiting our arrival in Saigon was Chinook CH-47A serial number 66-19075. This particular aircraft had recently been on display at the 1967 Paris Air Show.

I was a civilian technical service representative, or "tech rep," employed by the Hamilton Standard Division of United Aircraft Corporation. The basis for my being in Vietnam during the war was a one-year contract between my employer and the U.S. Army Aviation Materiel Command. This contract assigned a "GS-12 equivalent" grade to my position, and specified that I was to "advise and instruct on the maintenance and operation of the Hamilton Standard fuel control on the T-55 engine utilized on the CH-47 helicopter." On December 1, 1966, after a very steep descent to avoid enemy ground fire, the C-141 that I boarded at McGuire AFB in Wrightstown, New Jersey, landed at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon. I reported to the Customer Assistance Office at Headquarters, U.S. Army, Vietnam (USARV), and from there I was stepped through "in-processing." It was here that I received an extension on my travel visa, my identification and non-combatant cards, and my ration card. I then reported to the 34th General Support Group. They wasted no time scheduling my indoctrination and training. I spent the next nine days in Vung Tau, first receiving general followed by detailed "in-country" briefings on the procedures and problems related to Hamilton Standard jet fuel controls within Vietnam. While in Vung Tau, the 34th sent word that I would be assigned to the 179th Assault Support Helicopter Company at Camp Holloway in Pleiku, but I would also

support the Chinooks and Sikorsky Sky Cranes of the 1st Air Cavalry in An Khe. For the next 10 months I supported primarily the 179th, but also the 228th Aviation Battalion and the 15th Transportation Battalion at An Khe.

On October 6, 1967, I was itching to get a decent haircut, and I wanted to talk with Major Briscoe at the 34th about procedures for "booking out" upon termination of my contract late the following month. Major Martin of the 604th Transportation Company at Camp Holloway issued orders authorizing me to travel to Saigon and back using military transportation. I usually flew on Air Force fixed-wing aircraft when I traveled in-country, but the timing of LT. Hamilton's flight was perfect. He agreed to take me along and I volunteered to sit in the right door gunner position. They were short-handed and there would not be a right door gunner on this maintenance flight.

The weather was good when we departed Camp Holloway in Pleiku. This led the pilots to choose an overland route. When we got to Ban Me Thuot, however, there was a front in our way. We landed and waited a few hours for it to clear, but it did not. The pilots considered continuing the overland route using instrument flight rules, with a promise of visual flight rules between layers, but ultimately they decided against it. We backtracked to Tuy Hoa, but the same front at Ban Me Thuot extended all the way to the coast, so we flew low-level to Nha Trang and Phan Rang. From my side of the aircraft, I watched the water buffalo, cows and goats running away from the whipping sound of our rotor blades. We were flying close enough to the ground that I could see what looked like smiling faces on the peasants below. I waved to them and they waved back.

It had been a typical day in Vietnam – typical for a tech rep anyway – until we were about 12 miles south of Phan Rang, in an area known as the Salt Flats. While flying along the railroad, our aircraft was struck by enemy ground fire, and in a heartbeat everything had changed. The Chinook jerked violently, causing the sky felt (ceiling upholstery) in the cabin to fall down. This thrust the three passengers into total darkness. From the ground our wallowing aircraft must have looked like a huge bucking bronco in the sky. Through my headset I heard the copilot, Jake, yell, "JESSE'S BEEN HIT," and a split second later he was hollering desperately about a map that was spread across his lap and hindering his ability to regain control. We managed to quickly re-secure the sky felt and I looked out of the window to get a sense of how bad things were. Hydraulic fluid was squirting in all directions. With two long steps I bounded into the cockpit and found Jesse slumped in his armor-protected seat with blood streaming down his face. Jake was maneuvering frantically to stabilize our out-of-control aircraft that was, without a doubt, going down in a hostile area.

From the moment we were hit, Jake began issuing MAYDAY calls to any aircraft in the area. He also called out ditching instructions on the intercom. Jake managed to land safely about a mile and a half from where we took rounds, and about 50 yards from a village. Coalby and I hustled Jesse out of the cockpit and onto the webbed seats mounted alongside the fuselage. Jake shut down the aircraft and came back into the cabin to check on Jesse and take an arms and ammunition inventory. He told us to expect the worst. We had two 7.62-millimeter machine guns on door mounts, two M-16 rifles, one M-2 carbine

rifle, and two 45-caliber pistols. I manned the right machine gun, but our aircraft position relative to the village was such that the front of the aircraft was unprotected. The right-most traversing 30 degrees of the left gun, and the left-most traversing 30 degrees of the right gun, covered the left and right flanks of the village, but the two fields of fire did not meet, hence our frontal vulnerability. I yanked at the mounting pinion to remove the gun from its mount, but it was jammed. I looked over at the other gunner and saw that he, too, was struggling unsuccessfully with his gun and mount. People from the village swarmed to the edge of its fenced-in perimeter. We waited in silence for the first shots to be fired.

I asked Coalby, who was holding his towel as a compress over Jesse's head, if the bleeding had slowed. When he momentarily lifted the towel, I observed a graze that was two and a half inches long and about a quarter-inch deep. For a split second I saw a white groove in Jesse's head before it filled up with blood. Within three or four minutes from issuing the first MAYDAY, a Huey UH-1B approached from the rear and landed. Coalby and I carried Jesse, with his arms over our shoulders, to the waiting Huey. It only had space for two and Jesse asked Coalby to accompany him. Within seconds they took off and disappeared from view.

When I returned to the Chinook I found Coalby's briefcase. I knew he was planning to purchase plane tickets for his wife so she could meet him in Bangkok during his R&R. I also knew that the money he set aside for the tickets was in his briefcase. My attention quickly turned to the three armed men in military uniforms that were walking toward us from the village. As they could have been Viet Cong, and we were scared, it was very difficult not to fire upon them before they fired upon us. When they reached us we saw that they were ARVN soldiers – two were officer grade and one was enlisted. The enlisted soldier, who spoke English, told us that they had 100 men, and their assignment was to protect the village from the Viet Cong. They promised to protect our aircraft, and us, but warned that the night would bring out many Viet Cong who were positioned only a mile and a half away. They said we could plan on our position being mortared during the night. It would be dark in two hours and we agreed that if we had to spend the night, we would not sleep near the aircraft. We surveyed our surroundings and found some gravestones and ground depressions, and an old foundation that would provide some shelter.

While helping to survey the Chinook's damage, I found a wire bundle above and behind the pilot's seat that had been severed by the bullet that grazed Jesse's head. The wire bundle served the SAS (Stabilization Augmentation System), whose purpose was to sense changes in the attitude of the aircraft and make slight inputs into the flight controls to keep the aircraft stable. This would explain the wallowing that occurred when we were hit. Looking down at the floor, I was amazed to find the bullet. I decided that I would find Jesse when this ordeal was over, and give him the bullet and his helmet, which had a small entrance hole in the front and a two-inch exit hole in the rear.

In the aft section of the Chinook, two bullet holes were found in the aircraft's skin. They were probably from the same bullet that severed the hydraulic line. The crew chief

began matching up the color-coded SAS wires, while the other crewman removed a non-critical piece of drain tubing, with which he would try to repair the damaged hydraulic line.

About 45 minutes after we ditched, a second Huey arrived. Jake informed me that he and his two crewmen would remain behind in an effort to repair the Chinook and fly it out before dark. Spotting us, the Huey descended quickly. With the craft hovering about a foot off the ground, the door gunner braced himself and pulled the Army officer aboard first, and then he pulled me up. As soon as we were seated, the pilot took off at full-throttle. Within a minute the door gunner began firing bursts toward some high cliffs that bordered the South China Sea. I tried to ask him what was going on, but he couldn't hear me over the sound of the rotor blades and jet engine. Later it was explained that on the way in, and on other occasions, they had received ground fire from the cliffs.

I was dropped off at a small Army Intelligence unit located about five miles from Phan Rang Air Base. A Sergeant, who was awaiting my arrival, escorted me to an underground area that housed a Teletype and some radio equipment. It was here that I was "de-briefed" on what had occurred. I was then transported to the air base.

I arrived at Phan Rang Hospital only to be informed that Jesse had departed 30 minutes earlier. They told me they had patched up his head and medevac'd him to Cam Rahn Bay. I noticed a field ambulance backed up to the loading platform of a C-123 transport plane, so I walked across the field toward the plane. I found Jesse sitting in the rear of the plane, his head looked like he was wearing a large white turban. He thanked me for bringing his helmet, but when I retrieved the armor-piercing bullet from my pocket and handed it to him, he was flabbergasted. All he could say was, "Wait till my son sees this! Wow!"

Jesse told me that I had just missed Coalby, who left on a flight to Saigon a few minutes earlier. Jesse complained that he had lost some control in his right arm, and added that he was worried the graze may have caused some brain damage. The C-123's crew chief interrupted, "Sorry fellas. You'll have to cut it short – this bird is about to fly." Jesse thanked me again and asked me to get someone to forward his mail to him at the hospital in Cam Rahn Bay. I assured him that I would.

After several agonizing hours of waiting at Phan Rang, I caught a hop on a Saigon-bound C-123. Shortly after becoming airborne, we encountered a horrifying storm. Every time the aircraft banked, water poured in from somewhere overhead. It felt like it was 110 degrees and I was soaking wet. I thought we were hit by lightning several times, and it sounded like one of the engines was cutting out. I was beginning to think that I would have been better off staying with the Chinook in the Salt Flats of Phan Rang!

Finally it was over. The C-123 landed at Tan Son Nhut Airbase at about 9:00 pm. By this time it was too late to try to find Coalby, so I hitched a ride into Saigon and promptly checked into the Astor Hotel. At $25 per night, the Astor was second in quality and price only to the Caravelle Hotel located down the street. I rang for room service to

bring me a few highballs and a snack. After toning down, I conked out without a worry in the world. While I slept in the relative comfort of the Astor, Jesse spent the night in a hospital in Cam Ranh Bay, where the doctors and nurses kept shining flashlights into his eyes every time he fell asleep.

The next morning I met Coalby at the Bell Helicopter villa on the outskirts of Saigon. He was real happy that I brought his briefcase. He poured coffee and we swapped stories about our experiences from the time we parted company. His excitement didn't end in the Salt Flats either. The Huey that picked up Coalby and Jesse promptly took hits on the way to Phan Rang – another MAYDAY! The smell of JP-4 was very strong, indicating that the fuel cell had been hit. The Huey pilot wanted to land, but Jesse told him to keep going, because they probably wouldn't blow up if they hadn't already. They made it to Phan Rang.

That morning, probably while Coalby and I were catching up on the previous day, Jesse was transported by helicopter – one without doors as he recalled – to a hospital in Nha Trang, where they poured "cold as hell saline solution" onto his wound and sutured his scalp. Later that day, Jesse received a visit from his good friend, CWO-3 Donald Joyce from the 179th. Don, a Chinook pilot who was also fixed-wing rated, flew the 52nd Aviation Battalion's Beaver U-6A up to Nha Trang to see Jesse. As if being shot down in his own helicopter and then being shot at in his medevac chopper wasn't enough, Jesse's hospital stay at Nha Trang included a mortar attack along with its other services. Jesse would stay at Nha Trang for several days before being transported by C-118 to a hospital in Japan.

Coalby and I went into downtown Saigon and each went our separate ways for a few hours with the understanding that we would rendezvous at the USO Club. Coalby headed for the Air France office to purchase plane tickets and I headed for the barbershop. Getting a haircut and visiting with the 34th weren't my only reasons for wanting to fly the 219 air miles to Saigon. I also wanted to call my wife from the USO Club, and just get away from dirty-old Pleiku for a couple of days.

After making our phone calls at the USO Club, Coalby and I set out for Tu Doa Street – the main shopping district in Saigon. Tu Doa was also known for its many bars, and we celebrated surviving our ordeal by having a drink in at least twenty of them. That night I stayed at the Bell Helicopter villa as the guest of Coalby's boss – the chief Bell rep at Tan Son Nhut.

The following morning we overslept and missed our scheduled ride to the airfield. After much hustling we got out onto the main road and hitched rides to the airbase on the back of a couple of motorcycles – a sort of two-wheeled taxi service. Fifteen minutes later Coalby and I arrived at the gates of Tan Son Nhut Airbase. We paid our "Vietnamese Cowboys" 100 piastres each, and then caught a lambretta to the edge of the airfield.

It was easy to spot the giant Chinooks on the field. As we approached them, our crew recognized us and called out to us. They had been successful in flying 65-7967 out before it got mortared. We raised our arms in acknowledgement. I looked over at Coalby and said, "You know, it's not too late to back out. With any luck we can get out of here on a C-123!" He replied that if I was crazy enough, so was he. "Besides," he said, "this is what I call flying weather."

I saw CWO Gessel from the 179th near aircraft 66-19075. Forgetting that they were short a pilot, I asked him what he was doing in Saigon. He explained that the CO sent him down to co-pilot the new Chinook back to Pleiku. "Sure hope it's not a lemon," he said. He informed me that word had just been received from Nha Trang that Jesse was going to be evacuated to Japan for further treatment of his injury. I knew he was very close to Jesse and I expressed my sympathy.

Soon we were off and circling Tan Son Nhut. It felt good to be out of the sweltering heat below, made worse by the choking exhaust from thousands of motorcycles. A few minutes later we were flying over Bien Hoa. I glanced into the cockpit to look at the gauges – the altimeter read 4,000 feet above sea level and the air speed indicator read 110 knots. We were out of range of small arms fire, but I still had an uneasy feeling because of our recent ordeal.

Our first refueling stop was Nha Trang Air Base. Nha Trang's coastline looked like it was right out of the pages of National Geographic – lush green palm trees, white sandy beaches and hundreds of sampans. After Nha Trang was Quinhon Air Base. We refueled and took a little extra time to visit and shop at the Post Exchange. I stopped in to see a Hamilton Standard rep named Donald Ballard. I was reminded that I could never convince Don to fly over to Pleiku for meetings. He used to tell me, "There's a war going on over there!" I would no longer argue with him about where the war was or was not.

When we arrived back at Camp Holloway, quite a crowd had gathered to hear what had happened to us at Phan Rang. Within a week the crew chief wrote a full report of the Phan Rang incident and had each of us who were on board sign it. The report cited the heroic efforts of our co-pilot who not only saved our lives, but also saved an aircraft worth $1,000,000. Three weeks later, Coalby and I were invited to a commemorating ceremony on the airfield. The two-star commander of the 1st Aviation Brigade and others had flown in from Saigon for this special event. After the speeches were made and hands were shaken, Jake was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

In November 1967, Jesse was transferred from Japan to the Naval Hospital at Portsmouth, Virginia. He recovered from his injury and returned to duty in March 1968. He made Captain and returned to Vietnam in June 1970 for a second tour. He was assigned to the 34th General Support Group at Tan Son Nhut, and later commanded the 166th Maintenance Detachment there. Jesse retired from the Army in 1980, after 26 years of service, and then worked as a federal civil service employee. He retired in 2001 after 19 years of service. In 2001, Coalby Brown was still working for Bell Helicopter as their Customer Support Development Manager for Latin America and the Middle East. I

worked in the aircraft industry until 1970. With layoffs pending, I sat for and passed the Massachusetts Civil Service police exam and was appointed to the Springfield Police Department. I retired from the Department in 1998 after 28 years of service. My wife and I now enjoy traveling and spending quality time with our grandchildren. I don't know what ever became of Jake. I am distressed by the fact that I cannot remember his last name, no matter how hard I try. I am sure that I thanked him properly back in Vietnam, but it would have been nice to tell him again, all these years later, how very much I appreciated his flying skills on that fateful day in October 1967.

Chinook CH-47A serial number 65-7967 is still flying, according to sources at Fort Rucker, Alabama. The 139th CH-47 built by Boeing has been upgraded and modernized and is now CH-47D serial number 86-01667. In 2001, students at the U.S. Army Flight School at Fort Rucker were learning to fly in the same cockpit that figured so prominently in Jesse Hamilton's life. 86-01667 has flown in excess of 4,000 hours as a D-model, and will probably be upgraded to an F-model, enabling it to provide service beyond 2015.

CH-47A serial number 66-19075, the 333rd CH-47 built by Boeing, was flown by an unqualified individual and crashed in Vietnam on April 4, 1971. It had accumulated 2,149 hours at the time it was lost.

Notes:

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