

Shot Down In Vietnam.

By CW-2 [Bernardo S. Paez](#)

April 1st 1967, "April Fool's Day".

It didn't occur to me that it was April Fool's Day until the day was almost over. When the day started, it was just another day in Vietnam. Little did I know that it was to become an unforgettable day.

It started out innocently enough. We were assigned to resupply a unit that was combing a village about 8 miles West of the city of Pleiku. We resupplied them with food, water, ammo, mail, clean clothing, new replacement troops, etc.. Took out the soldiers going home, going to R&R, going to sick call, anyone having business back at base camp. What we called an "Ash & Trash" mission. What we considered soft duty.

Our crew consisted of Co-Pilot W.O. 1, Rawlinson, Crew Chief Martinez, Door Gunner Kephart, and myself. We had just gotten in new replacements into the company and Rawlinson was one of them. He was 19 years old. I don't even remember his first name. (Now, upon reviewing the write ups, his first name is Donald).

Earlier that morning, the unit we were resupplying had entered a village they were searching and had secured a landing zone just on the South outskirts. The landing zone they selected was in the middle of fairly tall trees that required a steep approach to enter and a confined area take off to depart. A confined area take off consists of backing up the Helicopter as far as possible and then executing a high power, high angle take off until clearing the trees. Upon clearing the trees, then it was possible to nose over the aircraft and build airspeed. We had been taught all this in Flight School and it was just a matter of reviewing the procedures and practice. We landed and took off three times. I demonstrated the first landing/takeoff, then let Rawlinson take over.

The ground forces had selected a landing zone that allowed only one direction of landing and take off. We had to approach and depart East to West due to the wind direction, the shape of the landing zone and the taller trees being to the South with the village to the North. We were forced to violate the rule of never duplicating your approach and takeoff. We landed and took off those three times without incident and then were released. We went back to the unit's fire base to await further missions.

We sat around to the side of the fire base helipad for about 1 hour. Presently a 1st Lt. and a Staff Sgt. E-6 came up to the aircraft. It turned out the Lt. was the Pay Officer and the Sgt. was the payroll guard. They had a canvas sack full of MPC, (Military Payment Certificate), and they asked us to fly them into the village we had resupplied. They wanted to pay the troops in the field since it was the first of the month.

We flew them into the landing zone we had used all morning and they got off and headed into the village. I let Rawlinson do all the flying, radio calls, etc.. We took our time setting up for the steep takeoff.

We had just barely cleared the trees and were nosing over to gain airspeed, when we got hit with about 15 rounds of small arms fire. The first three rounds tore into the aircraft about 3 inches from my right foot, between the seat and the center console. The Helicopter bounced up and down like a toy. I had a stack of maps and a Playboy magazine there and the bullets ripped the maps and magazine to shreds, filling the inside of the Helicopter with dust, sand, and confetti. I immediately got on the controls, "I've got it, I've got it!" yelling at Rawlinson. He released the controls and I nosed the aircraft over and pulled all the power I could. We kept on receiving fire for about two seconds. We flew on about 50 meters and were hit again with about 11 more rounds. I turned to the left and Martinez opened up with his M-60 Machine Gun spraying the area behind and to the left. Later on we counted the bullet holes. We were hit 26 times.

The instrument panel caution lights were lit. "Engine Oil Pressure Low", "Hydraulic Oil Pressure Low", "Engine RPM Low" along with audible warning warbles "Peeyo!, Peeyo!,.....Peeyo!" The FM radio was cycling between frequencies, also adding it's "Beyooooop!, Beyooooop!" to sounds of the caution lights and the Machine Gun Firing.

I was stunned and trying desperately to think. "Martinez!,...stop firing!, turn off the caution lights, pull the circuit breakers!, turn off the FM radio!". I was screaming! They did as I asked and it got deathly quiet.

I knew there was a fire base about 3 miles South of us and I turned the Helicopter in that direction.

I got on the intercom and asked if everyone was all right. The right Door Gunner, Kephart did not answer, I looked back and Kephart was hanging partly out of the aircraft by his harness. His machine gun was in pieces and hanging by the bungee cord. I kept yelling at Kephart asking if he was alright. Kephart looked in my direction and I could see that his forehead and flight helmet were full of blood. I also registered that the firewall behind him was also coated with blood. I then decided to head for the 95th, (?), Evacuation Hospital just outside of Pleiku. I turned back to the left hoping we could make it to the Hospital in time to save Kephart.

All this took less than 2 minutes, but it seemed like an eternity. As we headed for the Hospital, I happened to glance down at Rawlinsons' left boot. His boot was flowered open on top and blood was spilling over the sides. Rawlinson saw my expression and followed my look. His eyes bulged open and he started screaming when he realized he had been shot through his left foot. "Aaaah!", he yelled, he got on the cyclic control stick and started transmitting on the VHF radio. "I've been hit!, I've been hit!,...Mayday! Mayday!, 895's been hit!, 895's been hit!", he was screaming at the top of his lungs.

"Shut Up!, Shut Up!", I screamed back. He let go of the cyclic stick and fell back into his seat. He gave me a look that said "my life is in your hands". I tuned to the emergency frequency to do a Mayday call. The controls started jumping around and started getting real stiff. I knew we were running out of hydraulic fluid. I knew we had to land right away while I still had some control of the aircraft. I had no time for the Mayday on the emergency frequency.

I saw a big rice paddy to our right and as I turned toward it, the engine gave a loud "Ooouh!", that's what it sounded like. Like when you are punched in the stomach. The engine quit on us.

I reacted as I had been instructed countless times to do an emergency auto rotation. I bottomed the collective control to decrease the angle of attack of the main rotor blades. This is to keep the rotor blades turning and to prevent them from being slowed down by biting into the air. It also makes the Helicopter fall through the air rapidly and creates a pin wheel effect to keep the rotor blades turning as the wind passes through them. You also have to increase right pedal to keep the nose straight due to the loss of torque.

The object of the emergency autorotation is to keep the rotors turning and to use the stored energy at the last second to cushion the fall and make a safe landing. If done properly, you can come to a gentle landing as the rotor blades slow down almost to a stop. It is a lot easier to do if you have hydraulic pressure to easily move the controls. I didn't have that luxury. The controls were jumping up and down as the blades rotated.

I mentally reviewed the autorotation procedure..... Head into the wind, keep 60 knots airspeed about 10 feet off the ground, flare the aircraft by pulling back on the cyclic. This will make the rotors bite into the wind and slow the aircraft down drastically while making the rotors increase their rotation at the same time providing you with a small burst of lift. As the aircraft slows almost to a standstill, you straighten it parallel to the ground and pull up the collective so that the rotors bite into the air and cushion you to a safe landing.

I was aiming to make an autorotative landing in a clear area at the edge of the rice paddy. The rice paddy itself was not in use and was overgrown with weeds and plants about 4 feet high.

As soon as I flared the aircraft, I spotted a raised dike with an irrigation canal cut into it's middle. I pulled in a little collective to hop the Helicopter over the dike, but the controls were stiff and I was too late. The tail rotor hit the dike and I saw it break off and sail away out of the corner of my eye. With the loss of the tail rotor the Helicopter started turning to the left and the nose turned downward with the impact and the loss of weight at the tail.

I pulled up on the collective with all my strength to cushion the crash. We smashed into the ground with the left side of the nose of the aircraft. The main rotor blade dug itself into the ground about 2 feet and came to an abrupt halt.

I remember my upper body hurtling toward the instrument panel before the shoulder and lap harness locked into place and left me hanging in midair, inches away from the instrument panel.

I yelled at the crew to get their weapons and form a perimeter around the Helicopter. I was going to get on the radio to call for help. The crew did as I ordered. Poor Rawlinson, he grabbed his M-16 and hopped on one leg about 10 yards away and flopped on the ground.

Turned out Kephart was wounded through the left wrist and a bullet had taken off the tip of his nose. That is why there was so much blood on his head and on the firewall. He had also gotten a lot of shrapnel from the bullets that destroyed his machine gun.

Kephart and Martinez unloaded Martinez's machine gun and ammunition and joined Rawlinson to form a defensive perimeter.

I then called Martinez back to the Helicopter and asked him to check for fire and to grab some smoke grenades.

I made sure I was on the emergency VHS frequency.

I tried to radio for help and the radio wasn't working on my side. I plugged into Rawlinson's radio cord and was able to make contact with a helicopter from a unit based just south of Pleiku. I seem to remember it was the 127th Assault Helicopter Company based at Camp Holloway, only thing I know for sure is they were called the "Falcons".

They asked for my location and I had to tell them to "hold one", as I had to dig through the pieces of my maps to find the right one. I told them we were about 5 miles South of a high hill we called "Titty Mountain", I read the coordinates to them. At about the same time I saw a helicopter North of us. I asked them to make a left turn, identified them and asked them to head in the direction they had turned to. I then told them we were going to pop smoke and to identify the color. I yelled at Martinez to pop a smoke grenade. They identified the color purple and came right in.

We had not even been on the ground 8 minutes. They landed and told us another helicopter was coming in right after them. Their Aircraft Commander reminded me to remove all the radios, weapons, and ammunition, (anything the enemy could use), and take it with us. They loaded up Rawlinson and Kephart who were wounded and took them to the hospital.

By the time they were ready to take off another helicopter was circling to come in. The next Helicopter landed and their Crew Chief helped us strip our aircraft of usable items.

When Martinez and I climbed into the second aircraft, I was surprised to see that it was my Company Commander, (Major Merritt), waiting for us in the passenger section of their helicopter.

He had been directing a Combat Air Assault and was on the way back to base camp when he heard Rawlinson's radio transmissions on our company frequency. He knew what area we had been assigned and headed there right away.

I took a seat right across from him on their helicopter and he brought out his map and asked me to explain what had happened. I pointed to the village we had been resupplying and was running my finger down the path we took. He stopped me and pointed at the front of my flak jacket and asked, "what's that?". I looked down and saw a bullet hole across the front of my flak jacket. I hurriedly unzipped the flak jacket and saw two holes more closely spaced through my fatigue jacket. I unbuttoned my fatigue jacket and there were two closely spaced holes through my T-shirt!. I pulled up my T-shirt and had not a mark on my body! The bullet must have missed me by less than 1/4 of an inch!.

Later on we concluded that there must have been an enemy shooting at us from the top of a tree. I couldn't continue pointing out what happened as my hands were shaking too hard. He had to hold my hand steady in order for me to finish explaining.

They took Martinez and me back to base and dropped us off. They went to arrange to sling load the wrecked helicopter out of the rice paddy.

I went into my "hootch" and was so full of adrenaline that I chugged two beers one after another. I was chugging the beers, when our "hootch maid" walked in. She was an elderly Vietnamese woman who cleaned our place and washed, ironed, and shined our boots. In actuality, a very unattractive female. I was so charged up by the close call to death, that I wanted to take her right there. She saw the look in my eyes and hurried out the door she had just entered. I wound up masturbating right there.

That evening myself and Martinez were assigned to fly the Company Commander, The Executive Officer, and the Operations Officer to the hospital to visit Rawlinson and Kephart. I tried to beg off the flight, but they ordered me to do so. Get back on the "horse that threw you" type of thing. We visited and wished Rawlinson and Kephart well and returned to base camp.

That night I realized it was "April Fool's Day", I cringe when I think of it now, God or fate sure played a terror filled trick on me.



A
HEADQUARTERS
4TH INFANTRY DIVISION
APO San Francisco 96262

GENERAL ORDERS
NUMBER 2013

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17 July 1967

AWARD OF THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS

1. TC 320. The following AWARD is announced:

~~PAEZ, BERNARDO S. W3152624~~ CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER CWO-2 United States Army
Co A, 4th Avn Bn, 4th Inf Div, APO 96262

Awarded: Distinguished Flying Cross

Date action: 1 April 1967

Theater: Republic of Vietnam

Reason: For extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight evidenced by voluntary action above and beyond the call of duty in the Republic of Vietnam. On 1 April 1967 Chief Warrant Officer Paez distinguished himself while serving as Aircraft Commander of a UH-1D helicopter, when his aircraft became the target of intense automatic weapons fire. Checking for aircraft damage, he found the hydraulic system was inoperative, the engine oil system was losing pressure, the copilot was wounded and incapable of assisting in flying the aircraft, and the door gunner was wounded. Shortly thereafter, the engine failed, but Chief Warrant Officer Paez maintained his composure and landed the aircraft in hostile territory without further injuries to the crew. After establishing security for the helicopter, he immediately contacted rescue aircraft and directed them to his position. Upon arrival of the rescue helicopter, he supervised the loading of the wounded and equipment aboard the evacuation ship. His outstanding flying ability, calm and professional reactions and sound judgment under overwhelming stress saved his crew from injuries on landing and insured immediate evacuation of the crew. Chief Warrant Officer Paez's actions are in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit and the United States Army.

Authority: By direction of the President under the provisions of the Act of Congress, approved 2 July 1926.

FOR THE COMMANDER:

OFFICIAL:

H. A. Williams
H. A. WILLIAMS
Major, AGC
Asst AG

JUDSON F. MILLER
Colonel, GS
Chief of Staff

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