



CW2 Martin Beckman in the Operations area Delta Company, 227th 1st Cavalry Division, Lai Khe, Republic of Vietnam May, 1970.

Thoughts on My Tour of Duty in the Republic of Vietnam

By Martin P Beckman Jr.

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I was born in Anderson, South Carolina and finished High School there. I attended The Citadel and graduated in 1968. I was then drafted and tested to go to flight school with the U.S. Army. For primary helicopter training I was in WOC class 69-19 at Fort Walter's Texas and afterwards assigned to Fort Rucker, Alabama. There I was promoted to Warrant Officer One and received my Army Aviator "Silver Wings". I was selected for a Cobra transition at Fort Stewart, Georgia in route to Vietnam. In my first tour I flew Cobra's with the Delta Company, 227th Group, 1st Air Cavalry Division from August 1969 until August 1970. I later extended my time in Vietnam to fly the UH1 with the 2nd Signal Group.

When I arrived in the Republic of Vietnam, we first went to the assignment station where you waited to receive orders to your Unit. I remember all the second tour soldiers and aviators looking very anxiously at the list on the wall next to the orderly room that was posted several times a day. After a few days of waiting my name was on the list for the 1st Cavalry Division. From there the 1st "Cav" soldiers were bused to the 1st Team Academy at Bien Hoa. There we had a week of training. We were to learn customs of the Vietnamese, about booby traps, snakes, weapons training, repelling, and some relearning of basic military skills that were to be of use

in Vietnam. The day on the rifle range Warrant Officer Gary Lotts, who would later be a scout pilot at Quan Loi, and I went to train and qualify on the M-16 rifle and, the 45 or 38 pistol. We were going through the safety briefing when the range controller in the tower was shot in the head by a sniper. This was our first real experience with the war. The next day Gary and I skipped the class on snakes and went to the Special Forces Steam baths for our training.

When I first arrived in the country the 1st Cavalry Division had just been moved from the Saigon area to Northern III Corps. The Division was very active in combat. In Saigon though, the “Cav” had been very active and not in combat. We were told that the 1st “Cav” was kicked out of the city for the above obvious reasons. From Headquarters of the 1st Cavalry Division at Phuoc Vinh we were assigned to our company. Warrant Officer Jimmy A. Huggins, El Lobo 15, and I were both South Carolina boys and had become acquainted in Cobra school at Fort Stewart, Georgia. We were bold enough to ask for an assignment to the Unit with the best living conditions! The Colonel assigned both of us to D Company, “Guns 227th”. A Cobra Unit that had 12 (AH1-G) Cobras. The company was located at Lai Khe, a large rubber plantation down “Thunder Road” south of Quan Loi. “Thunder Road” was Highway 13 and was called “Thunder Road” because it

had four Fire Support Bases next to the road about every 5 to 10 miles.

They had artillery units that fired out to give support to troops in the field and I suppose to convoys that were ambushed. They were seldom quiet and thus Thunder Road got its name. Northeast of Lai Khe was the 1st “Cav” Headquarters at Phouc Vinh. When we arrived by the “courier bird” UH1 we found that we had trees and there were four pilots to a small open room called a “hootch”.

At the time, Lai Khe was Headquarters for 1st Infantry Division and the 11th Armored Calvary Regiment, so it was a fairly good place to be. We had rubber trees for shade. My roommates were Jimmy Huggins, Bob A. Childs, and Floyd W. Kosinsky. We were all WO1s. Bob and Floyd were, to Jim and I, old timers because they were two weeks ahead of us. Bob and Floyd were pulled to fly with the infant net team because of their two weeks of “experience”. The infant net team was the first true helicopter gunship that was tested to fly combat missions with the aid of night vision devices. The team was moved around to fly in different areas or Corps with civilian technicians or engineers so that they could monitor and fix the new system. They had three UH1-M models with infrared, a TV like screen, and a tube to “see in the dark”. The helicopters were very heavy. I remember that one could not hover unless it was cool or at night. This helicopter’s engine was

too weak to allow it to hover in the heat of the day. One crashed dreadfully one night when the pilots flew it into the ground on a target run. This was my first personnel encounter with true “target fixation”. The LTC for the net team, Kvernes, was in this helicopter. I recall talking to him when he was new in country. We were looking at the rubber trees and fungus that were growing on one of the trees. It was just one of those things you remember. Also on the aircraft was W01 Dennis Debner. Luckily Bob and Floyd were not involved in this accident but they too were exposed to many inimitable experiences.

Delta Company’s pilots were called “El Lobos”. My call sign was El Lobo 18. The primary mission of Delta Company was to fly gunship support for 227th Group’s A, B, and C Company’s UH1s. The UH1s provided lift capability to the ground infantry Brigades and Companies. We would normally be assigned two Cobras to cover a flight of the lift company’s UH1s. “First up” would have the most missions, Combat Assaults or lifts. The mission would be to move ground troops by air in one, two, and up to 6 and 12 ship formations. A Company, 227th call sign “Chickenman” was also at Lai Khe. The only other 1st “Cav” Unit there. We would fly out to one of the Brigade LZs, brief and meet with the ground unit and the lift commander called “Yellow One”. This would be the pilot in

charge of the ‘Slicks’, who was normally a CW0 or WO1, sometimes an RLO, but always someone who really new what was going on and was cool under fire. This Yellow One or White One, as the pilot was called, was in charge of the flight or Combat Assaults. He would be talking to the Guns, his flight, the ground commander, air artillery “Blue Max” and ground artillery. He was responsible that the ground artillery had “tubes clear”, all rounds out, and that they were marked by a “Willie Pete” a white phosphorous round in the LZ. He also had to make sure that “Blue Max” had done their gun run, we had done our gun run, and that the flight was together. Also if anyone was taking fire , the “Yellow One” had to encourage the flight to keep their cool and continue to keep the flight together. He was sometimes under a real lot of pressure to keep his cool too. Once in a while the unit commander would try to become a flight lead or “Yellow One”, but rarely.

Besides covering the lifts or insertions, we had a secondary mission to cover the Brigade scouts, aka little birds or low birds, which flew the “Loach” or the OH6 helicopter. I remember we mostly worked with the Silver and Snoopy Scouts. Here you would fly out as a team, the Cobra covering the scout. The teams were called “Pink” if it consisted of a Cobra (AH1) and a Loach (OH6). Sometimes two scouts would go out, and at

times we would add a second “Snake”. “Red” was the term used for a Cobra, “white” for the scout, and “blue” or “blues” for UH1 transporting troops. The team would fly to an area and the Cobra would vector the scout in this area or “box” to be searched. Normally this was a free fire area that was felt by military intelligence reports to be where the VC or NVA were operating. “Free Fire” meant you could shoot at anything in the box, it being clear of friendly troops and civilians. If the scout found something we would relay the information to the unit in charge of that area. If the scout took fire you would fire back and hope the little bird would get out of the area. The hardest thing was to keep the scout helicopter in sight and to keep an angle so that you could fire under him if he took fire. You did not want to lose sight of the Loach. If you did and he took fire or crashed, you had failed to protect him. It was a real fear if, for a moment, you lost sight of him.

Our third mission was to cover the sniffer bird, a UH1 with a sensor that detects the amount of ammonia in the air. Here again you vectored the low bird, a UH1, into a box on the map. He would fly back and fourth in the box and would call out “mark” when the sniffer box sensed ammonia. This was not a favorite mission for the Cobra pilots, but it was important to the chemical officer who liked to fly.

Our daily mission was scheduled by the number of mission to be flown and consisted of two Cobras for each operation. “First Up” had the most missions scheduled for the day, “second up” had fewer missions, and “third up” had the least amount of missions. After being third up, you would either be off the next day, but normally you would fly on the Night Hawk Mission. Again this was to cover a low bird, a UH1 with many guns on it. The UH1 would typically have a normal crew and “extra” people on it who just wanted to go up at night in the dark and shoot at something or anything because they were bored. These “extras” had jobs that saw little or no combat such as supply, clerical or support personnel. The low bird was armed with a 50 Caliber machine gun on one side and a star light scope mounted on the other. We always went to Song Be for our briefings. The UH1 Night Hawk crews wanted to go north into the dark from Song Be to places like the Dong Ni River, Bu Dop or Bu Gia Map. These were bad places where you would take fire.

I flew on at least four fatal combat accidents. The first one was before I became Aircraft Commander “AC” and happened either in October or November of 1969. It happened just after a Combat Assault involving a large 8 to 12 UH1 flight centered between Fort Compton, Song Be, and Quan Loi that we were covering. The flight was about 800 feet above

ground level. We started taking fire, when we saw red smoke being dropped by the Crew Chief and Door Gunners, and with the announcement of “taking fire.” This was always quite a surprise. The flight was heading southwest. We were over a jungle east of Quan Loi. One ship caught fire and you could see the Crew Chief and Gunner climbing forward to get out of the heat and fire. We radioed a heading for the closest clear area. The pilots responded and were heading for this field. The fire must have been too intense because both the Crew Chief and Gunner jumped from the UH1 at altitude and fell several hundred feet into the jungle. The helicopter in flames made it to the field but crashed upright into the clearing. As it crashed, several of the units aircraft landed beside it while we circled the accident. We watched as the AC and pilot were pulled out of the wreckage. The two had survived but the crew that had jumped did not. I think they were found a long time later.

The second combat accident took place on the 21st of May 1970 in Cambodia. I was AC at this time. The accident involved an OH6 supplying ammo to troops in heavy combat. An OH58 was asked to fly an emergency resupply. It had flown out over the jungle to kick out ammo supplies without a cover gunship and had received heavy ground fire. This aircraft was flown back to the firebase with a great deal of damage. The OH58 pilot

was uninjured and volunteered to fly back in an OH6 to show the Loach pilot where the ground troops were. The crew consisted of now two pilots and a gunner. Cover was requested and my Cobra was called. All of us were briefed on the current enemy situation and took off in the direction of the troops in contact. We circled over the area while the little bird was hovering over the troops dropping ammo. It called "taking fire" and smoke was seen coming out of the engine compartment. I vectored it over the jungle to the closest clear area. I believe the OH6 pilot had been hit and the OH58 pilot was now flying the aircraft. I told him to land but he wanted to continue to the Fire Support Base. The engine seemed to quit once but somehow came back on line very quickly. Smoke was still coming out of the engine compartment heavily at times. Then the OH6 burst into flames and went down in the jungle. By this time a C&C bird was overhead. I called a "MAYDAY" and the C&C went down into the jungle, almost disappearing, and got some people out on the ground to attempt a rescue. All of the OH6 crew was lost. WO1 Pat Cowley and WO1 Robert Gorske were the pilots. The pilots were not in the same unit or Division. They were just two brave WO1's trying to help the guys on the ground get emergency supplies.

The third experience was when I was a Cobra AC on a single ship sniffer mission. This was on the 22nd of May 1970. The “Sniffer”, a UH1, was flown by Captain Richard Larson and W01 John Rielly. I called their “Mayday”. All they had time to call out over the radio was “Engine Chip” as they descended from a low altitude and disappeared into the jungle. They were way north of Song Be and just south of Fire Support Base Brown located in Cambodia. I circled over the spot in the jungle where they went down and an OH6 from the 1st of the 9th “Cav” came in to help. He found a bomb crater that was just big enough to land by and went down into the jungle. He had to put the skids just on the edge of the crater. He then jumped out to get to the downed aircraft and left his “Loach” running. His gunner then got on the radio and stated that the OH6 was settling to the rear. It finally rolled back into the crate itself. Then he was asking for help on how to turn the engine off. We radioed back to pull the red knob which was an emergency shut off which he did and this stopped the engine. This pilot and his gunner were pulled out later. By then another UH1 from the 1st of the 9th had repelled some ground troops “Blues” in and found that the sniffer operator was injured and the rest of the crew had not survived. We flew gun cover for the whole operation. Then with the bodies recovered, we flew back to FSB Brown. We flew back with the Unit’s UH1s and the Guns, and

did a fly by with our fallen comrades. That was a very sad day for I had briefed with this crew and talked with one of the pilots about his return from R&R that he had with his family in Hawaii.

The Fourth was a Combat Assault north of LZ Buttons (Song Be) with a flight of 6 to 12 UH1's. It was on the 26th of June 1970. We had two "El Lobo's" and two "Blue Max's" covering the UH1 formation. The flight started from FSB Snuffy at an old French airstrip called Bu Gia Mag. It was to be a short flight to the west into a large field. We had a full artillery prep, the "Blue Max", and our Guns. We had departed Snuffy and circled around while artillery was firing on the LZ. The flight started to descend. Then just as the "Blue Max" started their dive, the flight started taking fire. "Blue Max" above me and to my right had taken a direct hit to the transmission area, for the main rotor system separated from the aircraft. I looked up and saw that the main rotor blades had come off the Cobra. I remember the main rotors continuing to turn as the helicopter fell and burst into flames. The crew was CW2 Douglas Vergamini and CW2 Dennis Brault. They had been shot down by an enemy .51 caliber machine gun. The CA was aborted and we all returned to Snuffy. The ground commander said they would complete the mission by ground.

Before I became AC, I flew with Captains Rob Lee and Pete Pellant mostly on our night hawk missions to Song Be, “LZ Buttons”. I recall one night flying with Captain Pellant in September 1969. We were in the underground “TOC” (Tactical Operations Center) getting our night briefing when we started taking incoming. We ran to the flight line and started the aircraft while explosions went off all around the compound and on the flight line. We were being hit hard with incoming, as we took lifted off and a large ground attack with all the fixings was taking place on the western perimeter. Each time we landed to refuel and rearmed at Song Be, we would be under a lot of incoming. Each time we landed we took more incoming. We covered the western part of the compound with weapons fire. Once we went in to re-arm and the ammo dump took a direct hit and exploded. So we ended up having to fly to Quan Loi for re-arming. We would still go into Song Be for fueling, but every time we landed the area would take incoming. I will never forget and never understand how, with all the outgoing artillery and incoming, we did not get hit. We never received any awards for this, yet in all my experiences this was one of the flights of flights. It deserved some recognition.

On one of the last flights in “Guns 227th”, Jimmy Huggins, El Lobo 15, and I, El Lobo 18, went out on our own for our last flight in the beloved

Cobra. We were doing some very proficient low leveling. We were old AC's and bold but not very old, age wise. We were just in our early 20s. We were flying just north of Lai Khe at a very low altitude, "low leveling", down Thunder Road and some smaller dirt roads. We for some reason started firing the 40MM grenade launcher, or "chunker" . The explosions of the grenades exploding below us at this low altitude say 10 to 20 feet above the roads made a very loud and interesting noise. We were really enjoying our last true combat Cobra flight, feeling good to have survived so much. This was all very much understandable to our maintenance officer later, when he had to replace the main rotor blades and do extensive repair work to the belly of his AH1G. It received so we say "major combat damage due to friendly fire." I will never forget the "tinkle, tinkle" sound that Jim and I had tried to recognize each time a 40MM round exploded. "What was that funny tinkle, tinkle sound Jim?"

I received a DFC for providing gunship support on the night of 13 May 1970 in an all night ground attack at FSB Brown in Cambodia. I enclosed the award and description. It says Vietnam but it really was Cambodia because that is where FSB Brown was! I do remember that we would rearm and refuel at Song Be. Also that the clouds were such that we would climb VFR on top, fly out to Brown and circle down, break out of the

clouds, and fire in support of the ground troops. At one point during the attack I had only “nails” in my rocket pods. This was an antipersonnel 2.75 inch rocket. Instead of the usual high explosive head this rocket contained about 2000 one-and-a-half-inch dart shaped steel projectiles which were ejected as the rocket decelerated at about 1500 feet from the helicopter. This was not normally used in the area of friends due to the lethal effect it had in a large vicinity with no precise point of impact. I recall making this clear to the observer on the ground at FSB Brown and he make it clear to me that he would have his troops take cover. Also that this was very much needed to stop the enemy. I fired the “nails” out over the northern perimeter and was very relieved to hear over that radio that no friends were hit and that it really stopped the attack. The Flare Ship would be above or VFR on top and drop flares down through the clouds. I remember this was this kind of neat. It also helped us determined the ceiling or base of the clouds. At first light the attack ceased. We landed and looked over the area which was contested and the damage that we had done. About 50 meters northwest of Brown was a road and an area that was used by the NVA for a .51 caliber gun that had been shooting at us. It had operated sporadically during the night. It was a long night but we survived and so did the troops at Brown.

I also enclose the Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Bronze Star and an interesting narrative of how I got it.

These are the events that I have recalled from my personnel experiences in Vietnam. They are as accurate as my memory allows.

Sincerely,

I do have a few more stories about R&R's, one elephant, and seven water buffalos. I also have not added the events of my extension with 2nd Signal at Long Thanh North. Jimmy and I extended for six months to go to a unit that had a good club and swimming pool. Well the club burned down and the pool was closed by the time we got to the unit. The pilot's had wired to many air conditioners into the club which caused a fire. Also this is the same unit of George Miller and the story of the U-21 pilot who fell out over Saigon trying to close the door.