

FLIGHT AND SURVIVAL TRAINING
by [Robert Anderson](#)

I AM SURE SOMEONE, SOMEWHERE, SOMETIME, HAS TOLD THIS STORY. IT IS ABOUT FLIGHT AND SURVIVAL TRAINING. NOT THE BASIC FLIGHT TRAINING WE ALL RECEIVED AT FT. WOLTERS OR RUCKER, OR HUNTER ARMY AIR FIELD THIS TRAINING WAS NOT TAUGHT UNTIL YOU WERE IN COUNTRY, AND THEN YOU LEARNED THAT YOU WERE NOT THE GREAT, BIG BAD HELICOPTER PILOT YOU THOUGHT YOU WERE.

THIS TRAINING WAS TAUGHT BY OLD MEN WHO HAD BEEN IN COUNTRY FOR AGES, SOMETIMES AS LONG AS 6 MONTHS. THEY WERE THE SENIOR AIR CRAFT COMMANDERS IN THE UNIT THAT YOU WERE ASSIGNED TO. TOUGH, QUIET OLD MEN, WHO WOULD TALK TO YOU AS IF YOU WERE REALLY THEIR EQUAL, BUT WHICH YOU WERE NOT, BECAUSE THEY HAD ALREADY PROVEN THAT THEY COULD SURVIVE, WHEREAS WE HAD NOT.

NOW, WHEN I SAY SURVIVAL TRAINING, YOU MIGHT ASK WHAT THAT ENTAILED AND WHEN DID IT START? WELL ANY PILOT WHO FLEW IN VIETNAM KNOWS WHEN IT STARTED, BUT FOR YOU NON-PILOTS, IT STARTED THE MINUTE YOU SAT DOWN IN THAT HELICOPTER FOR YOUR FIRST MISSION IN THE SKIES OVER VIETNAM, AND ENDED WHEN YOU WENT HOME -- ONE WAY OR THE OTHER.

NOW, I TOOK THOSE LESSONS LIKE EVERYONE ELSE AND DURING TRAINING I MADE MY NUMBER OF MISTAKES. BUT LEARN I DID, AND AS FAR AS I KNOW, NO ONE WAS KILLED OR INJURED BECAUSE OF ANY STUPIDITY ON MY PART -- JUST MAYBE SHAKEN UP A LITTLE. I DID BEND A COUPLE OF BIRDS, FOR WHICH I WAS CHEWED OUT.

NOW I KNOW THAT YOU ALL REMEMBER THESE LESSONS AND BECAUSE OF THEM A LOT OF US WENT HOME, TEACHER AND STUDENT ALIKE. SOME OF THESE LESSONS STICK WITH YOU TO THIS DAY -- MAYBE IT'S BECAUSE THEY SAVED YOUR LIFE.

THESE ARE TWO THAT SAVED MINE:

I WAS A SLICK PILOT AND PROUD OF IT. SLICK PILOTS WERE THE GUYS WHO FLEW ANY AND EVERY KIND OF MISSION THAT COULD BE THOUGHT UP: FROM NIGHT HAWK TO COMBAT ASSAULT TO RE-SUPPLY AND MEDIVAC, IF NEEDED.

ONE OF THE LESSONS I'D BEEN TAUGHT WAS THAT YOU NEVER GO INTO A LZ THE SAME WAY TWICE -- NOT IF YOU HAD ANY CHOICE IN THE MATTER. OF COURSE THIS WORKED 90% OF THE TIME, PARTLY WORKED 5% OF THE TIME, AND OF COURSE DID NOT WORK THE OTHER 5% OF THE TIME -- THOSE TIMES YOU BENT OVER AND KISSED YOUR ASS GOOD BY.

BACK SOMETIME IN '69, WE WERE HAULING SUPPLIES TO A COMPANY SIZE UNIT ABOUT 11 CLICKS NORTH OF QUAN LOI. THE LZ WAS A HOVER DOWN, ABOUT 50 TO 75 FEET STRAIGHT DOWN THROUGH THE TREES. BECAUSE OF THIS, THERE WAS ONE APPROACH THAT WAS BETTER THAN ALL THE REST. (YOU NOTICE I AM TRYING TO RATIONALIZE WHAT I DID NEXT.) I MADE FOUR TRIPS TO RE-SUPPLY THE COMPANY IN THIS LZ OVER A 6 TO 8 HOUR PERIOD. THE FIRST THREE TIMES, I WENT IN THE SAME WAY AND OUT THE SAME WAY, JUST LIKE WE'D BEEN TAUGHT NOT TO DO. ON THE FORTH TRIP MY BRAIN DECIDED TO WORK, AND I TOLD MY PARTNER TO GO IN THE OPPOSITE WAY. WE LANDED WITHOUT INCIDENT. WHEN WE WERE READY TO LEAVE, I TOLD MY PARTNER TO GO AHEAD AND TAKE OFF, AND WE WENT BACK OUT THE WAY WE HAD BEEN COMING IN THE FIRST THREE TIMES.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT PROVES THAT WHAT WE'D BEEN TAUGHT WAS TRUE -- YOU DO NOT RETRACE YOUR FLIGHT PATH. I HEARD GUN FIRE BELOW US, AND I SAW THE ENGINE RPMS START TO DROP. I TOOK CONTROL OF THE AIRCRAFT AND FOUND THE COLLECTIVE UP AROUND MY ARMPIT. I LOWERED IT AND THE RPMS CAME BACK UP, BUT I WAS ADVISED BY THE CREW CHIEF THAT WE WERE TRAILING A LARGE WHITE CLOUD OF SOMETHING, MAYBE SMOKE. I NOTIFIED THE UNIT THAT WE HAD JUST LIFTED OUT OF, AND TOLD THEM WE WERE GOING DOWN IN A SWAMPY AREA TO THE SOUTH OF THEM, AND THAT WE MIGHT BE ON FIRE. LUCK WAS WITH US, BECAUSE WE LANDED WITHOUT INCIDENT. WE LEARNED LATER THAT THE NVA HAD SET UP AN AMBUSH FOR US, FIGURING WE WOULD COME IN THE SAME WE HAD COME IN BEFORE. SO WHEN WE CAME OUT THE WAY THEY THOUGHT WE WERE GOING TO USE TO COME IN, WE MUST HAVE SURPRISED THEM BECAUSE THE B40 THEY FIRED AT US STRUCK A TREE LIMB AND EXPLODED UNDER US, RIPPING OPEN THE FUEL TANK AND CUTTING THE INLET AND OUTLET LINES TO THE TRANSMISSION FLUID COOLANT FAN. IT TURNED OUT THAT THE WHITE CLOUD WAS JP4 COMING OUT OF THE FUEL TANK. WE WERE ALSO HIT BY AK47 FIRE, OF WHICH MY PARTNER TOOK SEVEN HITS ON THE ARMORED SEAT.

SO THE LESSON WORKED, BUT WOULD HAVE WORKED BETTER IF SOMEONE (ME) HAD THOUGHT THINGS OUT A LITTLE MORE.

THE SECOND LESSON THAT STUCK WITH ME, ALSO SAVED MY LIFE. AN AIR CRAFT COMMANDER I HAD FLOWN WITH WHEN MY UNIT WAS UP IN I CORP IN '68, TOLD ME TO ALWAYS LISTEN TO A FM CHANNEL NO MATTER WHAT ELSE WAS GOING ON. HE SAID THAT THE RADAR USED ON RADAR CONTROLLED 37MM AND 50 CAL. GUNS WOULD BEEP WHEN YOU WERE BEING SCANNED, AND THAT A GOOD RADAR OPERATOR COULD GET A LOCK ON AFTER TWO SWEEPS SO IF YOU HEARD THEM SWEEP YOU, YOU'D BETTER BE DOING SOMETHING OTHER THAN CONTINUE FLYING IN THE DIRECTION YOU WERE HEADING AFTER THAT SECOND BEEP.

AFTER BEING TAUGHT THAT LESSON, WE MOVED SOUTH TO PHUOC VINH, WHERE I MADE AIR CRAFT COMMANDER, WHICH MEANT I SAT IN THE LEFT SEAT AND STILL RAN INTO TREES LIKE BEFORE, BUT THAT IS ANOTHER STORY.

THIS LESSON CAME IN HANDY WHEN I WAS FLYING LOG MISSIONS OFF AN LZ THAT WAS SET UP ON A RIDGE LINE BETWEEN TAY NINH AND QUON LOI. WE WERE OUT OVER THE RUBBER PLANTATIONS SOUTH OF THE LZ, WHEN I HEARD A BEEP. I ASKED MY PARTNER IF HE HAD HEARD THE BEEP, AND HE SAID NO. THEN CAME THE SECOND BEEP, AND WITH THAT I TOOK CONTROL OF THE HELICOPTER AND PUT THE COLLECTIVE DOWN AND MADE A HARD LEFT. JUST AS WE TURNED I HEARD A LOUD POPPING SOUND, AND THE CREW CHIEF SAID THAT WE HAD GREEN TRACERS COMING UP AT US THAT JUST WENT UNDER THE HELICOPTER. GREEN TRACERS INDICATED THAT A 51 CAL. MACHINE GUN HAD BEEN FIRED AT US. WELL, WE GOT OUT OF THERE AND CALLED IN ARTILLERY. I DON'T KNOW WHETHER THEY GOT THEM OR NOT, BUT THE LESSON HAD WORKED AND WE MADE IT OUT SAFELY.

THERE WERE HUNDREDS OF LESSONS TAUGHT EVERY DAY BY THE OLDER GUYS TO THE YOUNGER ONES, SO HOPEFULLY THEY WOULD COME HOME. I, FOR ONE, AM EXTREMELY GRATEFUL FOR THE EXPERTISE THEY SHARED WITH US. THANKS GUYS