

## Another Day of Trash Hauling, Wrong

By Charles S. Overstreet, Longhorn 16

Bearcat, Republic of South Vietnam, fall of '69'. Another day, 0400 wakeup by an overly happy CQ, drag ass into fatigues, boots on, a real nice cold water shave, teeth brushed. Wonder what missions the division has dreamed up for us today, in addition to the inevitable 6 to 10 hours of normal trash hauling, bullets, beans, beer, ice and soda. Paul "Jawbones" walking to the mess hall singing 'Don't take Your Guns to Town', and I thought this was a war zone. Strap on the 45, turn off the fan, look around my beautiful room, fuck-it time to go again.

I was a first tour Captain, Platoon Commander, assigned to B Company 228<sup>th</sup> ASHC(CH-47's), 1st Cavalry Division (AM). We were based at Bearcat, south of Long Binh in the southern part of III Corps. The Division's AO (Area of Operation) stretched from Tay Ninh in the east through Quan Loi and into the Song Be/ Bu Dop areas and then all the way to the II/III Corps border, basically we were the border patrol along the Cambodian/Vietnam Border. Since the Cav was airmobile, figure around 400+ helicopters, it was expected to cover larger AO's than the standard Army or Marine Division. The Division was committed to find them, fix them, finish them. At the time of this story I have been in Vietnam since April and have approximately 700 hours of flight time, and been an AC for about 3-4 months.

Stroll, sort of drag ass to the mess haul. Looked at what's for breakfast, greasy eggs and bacon, stomach can't handle this, screw it. Coffee, orange juice, actually orange colored water, one shot of colored water and a cup of very black coffee, about the only decent thing on the chow line. With a second cup of coffee, the Mess Sargent will be pissed about taking cups out of the mess hall, fuck him I also have the additional duty as the Mess Officer, continue meandering towards operations. Mumbles of good morning to the other crew members, every one is still in the world between sleep and fully awake, mostly sleep. Finally starting to feel like a human being. Jesus, I wish I hadn't drank that last beer or was it the last 2 or 3 too many, who cares.

Walk into operations and find out that I'm flying with one of the few Captains that never made AC, a staff type. Just fucking great he's short and I'm hung over, really not in the mood for the constant battle of who going to be in charge. Fuck it, I'll just lay back and let the day progress and hope nothing important comes up, right. As Platoon Commander I am also Air Mission Commander for the day, which puts me in charge of all the aircraft we will be committing, keeping everyone informed of our progress in knocking out the scheduled bull shit missions, plus keeping track of any add-ons and the status of any Division Hard Missions. I checked to see how many aircraft we would launch for the day and if any Division hard missions had been laid on. The mission sheet has no big surprises, just about seventy sorties for the six aircraft committed. We were committed to go to Tay Ninh and work for the 1st Brigade, best news of the morning. Gallant Fox 6, the logistical commander for the Brigade, has always got his shit together. We will haul beer ice and soda first, because later in the day he will probably cut a few sorties and we will get home at a decent hour. The other 2

brigades log people want their beer, ice and soda first and in order to entice you into getting the good stuff out they shorted the number of requested ammo, beans and water sorties at the beginning of the day, only to add them on the afternoon, and we have to haul ammo day or night. I digress. In the Cav we got mission sheets and hauled until we were finished or it got dark. If ammo was still to be hauled the Brigades would declare a Tactical Emergency, and we would do it in the dark. With the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade they never pulled that chicken shit stuff so we worked with them and usually everything worked out OK. I figured that if every thing went as planned we might get home in time for hot dinner and a shower before all the water is gone. Wrong!

Pick up helmet, bullet board, maps and survival kit, emergency radio and maps, we stored it behind the center console. If we ever got shot down would probably forget it, if it a'int on you it don't go. Take a look at the AO map for hotspots, most are probably out of date. The rest are scout reports and they go looking to get shot at. Notice that 51 reports are increasing, not good.

Walk out to the aircraft to do the pre flight and operational run-up. Co-pilot is in one of his moods, trying to pull rank, rank among Captains is like virginity among whores. Really not up to this. My FE (Flight Engineer) has everything open and ready to go. As usual I take the top, ever since I came home with a main drive shaft section almost cut in two I always pre flight the top. I can always walk around the bottom a look at most of the important stuff, the top keeps you in the air.

Great news! Door gunner says he can't get any ice for the 5 gallon water can, Bull Shit, tell him to find some or don't come back. The CC (Crew Chief) and FE crack up and wish me the best of mornings. Ice is already on board, just jerking my chain. The FE asks if I need another class on the important things to look for on a pre-flight, smart-ass. It does gets me into a better mood. We crank and check all systems, no problems.

Shut down to wait until predawn, shoot the shit about nothing, kind of quite talk, nothing serious, smoke, another cup of coffee, waiting for launch when we all start doing what we are trained to do, go to war. It's a sort of quite time every one is in his own small personal world, either thinking about the last letter from home, what happened yesterday, what's going to happen today. Just a peaceful moment before the storm, whether it will be a totally boring or a very exciting day. Maybe communicate with our greater power.

Time to go, looks like a beautiful day in the making. Make final radio checks, Chicken Man on Guard, as normal. Depending on the time may even hear the famous AFRVN 'Gooooooooooooo Morning Vietnam'. Taxi out, get clearance and depart. Climb out to 2,000 and head east toward Tay Ninh, beautiful day the greens are getting greener as the sun comes up, no haze. We follow the MSR (Main Supply Route) it's easier for artillery clearance. This route takes us south of Phu Loi, by the Iron Triangle, over Chu Chi, Trang Bang, Go Da Hau and into Tay Ninh City. Settle back light up what is probably the tenth smoke of the morning, but in the clear air, with a great sunrise it tastes great. Coffee would be good, ice water isn't too bad though. Nice thing about the Chinook we can carry some comforts with us.

As Air Mission Commander I divided the missions up for the other five Chinooks committed, and said lets take care of the beer, ice and soda first then start normal re-supply, ice doesn't last long sitting on a log pad. They would keep me informed of what they hauled and to whom. I kept track of who hauled what and where it went throughout the day so that I could either release ships or beg for help if things went from bad to worse, worse was usually the norm.

Our first sortie was ammo to LZ Grant and was uneventful, the morning was cool and very beautiful. It stilled awed me on how many shades of green existed, outside of the defoliated areas. The day would soon change to hot and dirty so we enjoyed it while it lasted.

Our next sortie was mixed, ammo and pax to LZ Jamie, which was located north east of Tay Ninh. We passed over LZ Grant and 10 klicks later approached LZ Jamie. My Co-pilot was flying and I ran the radios. After dropping the ammo we repositioned to unload the pax. Pax unloaded we pick up to a hover and prepared to depart. CAUTION the huge Master Caution light illuminated and the caution light panel was showing a transmission light. The Chinook has 5 transmissions, 1 for each engine 90-degree gearbox, the combining transmission and the forward and aft main transmissions. On the 'A' model there was no way to determine which transmission the light applied too. We would have to disconnect each one to figure it out. It is really not a big deal, but we would have to shut down. Again no problem, that is until the Red Hat on the LZ, troopers trained to run the log side of the war, radioed that they were taking mortar fire. I suddenly became aware of rounds impacting on the far side of the LZ. All the troopers that had been lying about were diving for cover and the 105's were getting cranked up, Things were definitely not getting any better.

I told the co-pilot, lets get the hell out of here and head for Grant, about 10 Klick's to the west. He was worried about the chip light, as I was, but the light seemed the lesser of two evils. Staying around Jamie didn't look like a realistic option to our problem.

Since Grant was only about 10 Klicks we low leveled, and within minutes Started an approach in the LZ. I took the controls and was going to pass over the LZ and make a left turn into the sling-out pad. Upon crossing the water point on the river the most horrendous noise and grinding sounds I had ever heard came from the rear of the aircraft. My first thought is get this thing on the ground, I started to make an approach to the sling-out pad, but then, what the hell, lets just get this thing on the ground. Fort Rucker didn't train me for whatever was happening to the aircraft. Shot a straight-in hot approach to an old road that ran south of Grant.

Ended up planking it down about a klick from the LZ. Jungle on the left, jungle to the right, Terra firma in the chin bubble. As soon as the aft gear hit the ground I pulled both condition levers to stop with a big inward sigh of relief. I still had no conception of what had happened, but for the time being we were safe. The co-pilot was upset in that I had shut down both engines before cranking the APU, he was concerned about an after fire in the engines. Fuck the engines was my response and at the same time the aircraft shuddered and the rotor blades

came to a sudden stop. Jesus Christ, we had just had a transmission failure. The adrilin kicked in, plus fear and cold sweat. We had just cheated death, by how many seconds only God knew and he wasn't telling.

Slowly got out of my seat and hit the ground, looking at the rotor blades. The FE and CC were already on top. They quickly informed me that the whole system was frozen. Started to light a cigarette, right, I was shaking and had told the lighter in both hands. My co-pilot walked up and asked if we had a serious problem. Shit, I just love idiots. Said the whole rotor system is fucked, the response was how long will it take to get it fixed. Not any time soon. Please give me a break, here we were on the ground after what in a matter of seconds we might have bought it and he wants to know when it can be fixed. At the time I didn't even want to do anything except to thank the Lord above, the one who protects fools, drunks and pilots like me.

Lo and behold a jeep comes up and an Infantry Major gets out and asks if we have a problem. I'm lighting my second smoke, only need one hand to hold the lighter this time. Do you laugh or cry? The Major asks if everyone was ok and said he had never heard anything like that in his life. I said what. His response was the racket the helicopter was making as we passed over the LZ. Me neither and I was inside. He looked at the shaking hand holding the cigarette and asked if I was ok. Yeah, just scared to death. I explained that we had just had a transmission failure.

About this time the FE yelled down and said the Combining box had totally eaten itself up. Threw down a piece of a gear as big as my thumb, said there were bigger pieces but they wouldn't fit thru the drain hole. I turned to the Major and said you are looking at five very lucky troops. His response was would you like a cold beer. Are you shitting me? hell yes. Staff type my co-pilot, you are going to drink, how can you fly. At this point in time I came to the conclusion that he had not one concept of what had transpired in the last 20 min or so, ignorance is bliss. My response was not only one beer but also if the major had another I would probably drink that. Lo and behold another cool one was offered.

I took it and got into the aircraft. It was time to let someone know we were down and OK. Forgot to put out May Day on landing, probably because we were so near to the LZ and thought we had a minor maintenance problem. Or maybe just too involved with planking the bitch on the ground. I finally got in contact with one of my company aircraft and asked them to relay our problem and that I thought we needed to start getting the Crane Co "Superhooks" on alert for a CH-47 sling out. The process would involve removing all the blades and draining all fuel tanks, oil, etc. This would get the weight down to what a Crane could handle.

Waited about 5 minutes and got a response that everyone was notified and the recovery steps were under way, it was now around 08:00. Lit another cigarette and sat there sipping a cool one, thinking things are really smoothing out. Forgot, about a new Mission Commander, got back on the radio and passed the job to one of the senior AC's. Now I could totally relax, maybe get a nap, wander up to Grant for lunch, get a ride to Tay Ninh, spend the night with Gallant Fox, con the Major into buying the beers, go back to Bearcat next AM. WRONG!

The infantry major wants to talk about the plans for recovering the AC. I told him what I thought was going to happen, however he wanted me to explain it to the Battalion Commander. Rode up to the gate, actually multiple gates, sort of a zig zag arrangement. Walked up to the battalion TOC (Tactical Operations Center) and got a lot of weird looks. It dawned on me that I was the only one with clean OD colored, not rubber plantation red or just Vietnam brown. Fatigues and god forbid spit shined boots, Thanks to our hooch maids. I was also in a minority in that I had a shirt on and was missing an OD towel around my neck. In short I was out of place. Looking around just reinforced my respect for these guys and I resolved to do whatever I could to make their lives better. Believe it or not I loved those guys. Maybe being enlisted and going through OCS to get Commissioned gives a different perspective toward grunts and especially GUNNERS, I went through Artillery OCS.

Walked up to the TOC, Tactical Operations Center, the LTC Infantry Battalion Commander was there, along with about a half dozen Cpts. and Lts. Instead of how are you or I'm Colonel so and so, I see you have a problem, its when are you going to get that "Shithook" away from MY FIRE BASE!?

Not anytime soon sir. I've got to coordinate with my people and they will have to get contact with the 1st Aviation Bde. for Crane support. At this point in the RF (Rat Fuck) I figured we would sling the "Hook" out. NOT!

What had started out to be a small maintenance problem, then escalated into a major maintenance problem, which was turned into a RF had now turned into a super cluster fuck. The decision had been made, by my company's Maintenance Officer to change the transmission in the field. No small task since in the rear we used a truck mounted cranes to remove and replace things like transmissions, engines, etc. Looking around I didn't see any trucks much less ones with a crane on the back.

After getting this great piece of news I decided to head back to the aircraft and chilling out. Wrong Again.

Battalion Commanders can be a great pain in the ass. This one wanted to know how long it was going to take to replace the transmission. I soon discovered that "fuck if I know" was not the school solution nor a very acceptable answer. I tried to explain that if we had a transmission in a shipping box and if they got every one to think priority and if they didn't wait around to eat lunch and if they didn't take the normal maintenance two hours of regrouping after lunch and if we had the forklift, that we shared with 'A' Company on location and running they might make it out here by 1500. I did explain that the forklift was broken the day before yesterday and I knew we didn't have a spare transmission and none of the above 'ifs' would come true so 1900 to 2000 looked good. Anticipating the next question I said I have no idea how long to change the bitch in the field.

Lieutenant Colonels can look at you in that certain way that just reinforces in your head that they are not happy with the situation at hand and especially the answers you are providing to their questions. They don't even say a word. Staff Officer's who were hanging around to get the latest information become very

involved in some bull shit paper work or sort of disappear, as in slink out of sight. You look around and say 'oh shit', just you and the Colonel and I've given another wrong answer. They need to write a correct answer book covering these situations and issue it to all young Captains

Actually the Colonel was starting to have a little sympathy for the position I was in. In fact he offered bunkers for myself and the crew, weapons if we wanted them. He then informed me that at dusk he would pull the Fire Team that had been sent out to provide cover for the Chinook, close the perimeter gate system and have one of the 105 Howitzers laid on the aircraft, and the first incoming round taken the 105 would take the Chinook out. In sort of disbelief I ask about the recovery team. "If they don't leave before dark tough shit. They can take the recovery aircraft and spend the night at Tay Ninh", was the response and looking at his face I became a believer.

At this point one might wonder were the rest of my crew was? The enlisted men were on the aircraft trying to second guess what the final recovery would be and what they could do to hurry the operation up, It was now into the early afternoon and a whole lot of things weren't being done as far as we were concerned. I just love living in the dark, especially when I am the main participant. Both the door gunner and crew chief were also committed with their 60's to helping secure the aircraft with their 60's just in case.

I got back on the horn and informed the Battalion of the decisions that were being made at Grant and kinda of thought someone should start informing higher ups on what I felt was becoming an total fucked-up mess. I really couldn't believe we would blow up a Chinook. Wrong Again!

The 105 Battery Commander came in and the colonel briefed him on the plan. At about the same time my co-pilot, who had been napping all morning and part of the afternoon showed up and wanted to be briefed on the situation. I got another strange look from the Colonel and was asked just who the hell was in charge. Captain no name informed the Colonial that he was the ranking Captain and plus he was a Battalion staff officer, fully in charge of the situation. Fuck it let him handle this BS and I walked out of the TOC.

My personal fair angel, the Battalion XO, shoved another cold beer into my hand and sat down and explained that the Col was fully aware of who was in charge, but just loved to get the goat of junior officers and see how they reacted. I asked was he really serious of blowing the AC if Grant got hit, "In a heartbeat" was the reply. In the last three months they had been hit hard five time and had take motors, rockets or small arms fire almost every other night. The colonel wasn't going to lose men to protect a broke down helicopter. It sounded like a good plan to me, as long as I was going to be in that promised bunker. On a Fire Base, right. Fort Rucker didn't cover this contingency.

Got back on the horn and let my people know what the Battalion Commander's plan was. They were not happy campers about the idea of blowing a Chinook up. Neither was I, but it was out of my hands, an Infantry company and two batteries's, 105 and 155, beat a aircrew of five in any poker game I've ever heard of.

Things got better, or worse, depending on where you stood about an hour later when a Huey with a Big Cav patch and 1st Bde painted on the battery cover landed. No one else than the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade Commander, a full bull colonel. I was directed back to the TOC, where the Brigade Commander was explaining that the Division Commander did not appreciate the plan that had been formulated. In fact the Chinook would be protected by an infantry platoon and that maintenance operations would be conducted after dark. I got some dirty looks and sort of tried to become invisible.

About 1800 hours the recovery Chinook, with the maintenance personnel, lights, generators, a replacement transmission arrived. It took a lot of work, sweat and maybe a little bit of apprehension of being outside of the FSB, but the transmission got changed out.

We took off around 0200, went to Tay Ninh to refuel and from there back to Bear Cat. Upon landing went to Operations to complete the Army's paperwork. The night Operations Clerk informed me that I was scheduled to fly that day. Right, I'll be in the club for a period of time and then to bed, sort of suggested he should find some else. Just another day in the Nam, some worse some better.

Found out the next day, from my Platoon Sgt. that Maintenance been had covering up a history of chip-lights on that transmission. They were trying to get the last five hours out of it before it would be changed out and sent back to the US. Kinda made me wonder whose side they were on. My reaction that night caused a new policy on wearing weapons into the officers club.

I guess that's about it. Not a great war story but something different. My only regret is that I can't remember the names of the enlisted crew members. They did a great job, as always.