



# BAN ME THUOT BARB

Remembering the 155 Assault Helicopter Company  
& all Ban Me Thuot Guys  
October, 2013

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## **Our Turn in the Barrel at Fire Base Kate by John Ahearn, 1st Lift Platoon Stagecoach 11**

Fire Base Kate was set up in September, 1969 along with two other bases, Susan and Ann(ie), in the Bu Prang area, all set to provide mutual fire support. Kate was set up east of the Special Forces camp at Bu Prang, with Susan and Ann being established south of Bu Prang. At least three other firebases were set up in the Duc Lap area. All of this was done in response to the increasing presence of a large NVA force in the Bu Prang – Duc Lap corridor of the border.

The effect of the NVA presence and the establishment of so many firebases was that the fall of 1969 became a very busy time for the 155. It seemed that flight crews were always maxed out. I recall that Operations had both its 120 hour and 140 hour cumulative flying time caps in any 30-day period and that I got to visit the flight surgeon (Dr. Blair) twice at 120 hours and was grounded briefly once at 140 hours.

At the end of October, Fire Base Kate was under regular attack, perhaps because it was closest to the border. On October 31, I was assigned to fly “routine” re-supply out of Gia Nghia. Flying with me, as my pilot was Marlin Johnson, subsequently killed in action on April 20, 1970 during a hot LRRP extraction northwest of Duc Lap.

During the day, I seemed to make endless trips in the Bu Prang – Gia Nghia - Duc Lap area, while Kate was under active attack. I recall that during one trip north to Duc Lap out of Gia Nghia, we could observe fighters providing air cover and, at the end of any gun run, NVA would stand and charge up toward Kate. The effect of possible foliage cutback and heavy airstrikes was that there was a large bare area encircling Kate.

Later in the day, we got an assignment from an IFFV 0-5 in Gia Nghia to fly a load of supplies and an Artillery first lieutenant into Kate. Both were loaded on board and we took off, well fueled, and headed north. It is worth noting here that, while I knew Bu Prang like the back yard, and had flown into Susan and Annie quite a few times, I don’t believe I had ever flown into Kate. That said, once airborne, I was in contact with a forward air controller (“FAC”) who positioned us north of Kate and advised that we should stay out of the way and await a pending B-52 bomb strike (“arc light”). The FAC also advised that we would have our turn going into Kate immediately after a Chinook re-supply. I climbed to what I thought was a comfortable altitude to avoid ground fire and we flew a rather quiet east-west racetrack, interspersed with a few figure eight tracks. I advised the lieutenant of the pending arc light and we just waited.

After perhaps 20-30 minutes, all hell broke loose along the ridgeline on the south side of Kate where the NVA appeared to be based. The arc light was totally breathtaking in its enormity. It was just pure Rolling Thunder as it erupted continuously from east to west and just tore up the ridgeline south of Kate where the

NVA were apparently positioned.

Immediately after the arc light, we watched as the Chinook tore out of Bu Prang with a sling load and two accompanying gunships. In short order, there was chatter on the radio that they were taking fire and, while they undoubtedly made a best effort to get the sling load into Kate, they were taking heavy ground fire and dropped the sling load short of the firebase.

This timeframe was an eye opener for me, as I knew it was our turn in the barrel. I'm pretty sure I was wishing and hoping for rapidly rising exhaust gas temperature or a tail rotor failure, but I also knew we had to go and try to get into Kate. These thoughts were interrupted with a request from our gun pilots that we meet in Bu Prang. A short flight later, I got out to have them tell me in person (as opposed to over the radio) that they were fully expended on mini-gun ammunition, but they could cover us with rockets. It was getting late and I knew it had to get done. So, we took off to the north, quickly turned eastbound toward Kate and stayed pretty low level at a high rate of speed, our best friend. I remember crossing the burned out area encircling Kate and doing a cyclic climb up into the firebase. It wasn't a beautiful approach, but it was good enough that we were there for just a few seconds while the supplies were pushed off and the Artillery lieutenant jumped off. I think I had my head locked in the full front position while I quickly identified my best exit route to the northeast. Off we went, staying low level for what seemed about ten minutes. It was eerily quiet in the aircraft as I think that all of us were just too damned scared to say a word. After that cooling off period, we climbed to a normal altitude and headed straight to Ban Me Thuot, re-fueled and post-flighted the aircraft in the dark, radioed Operations that mission was complete, and called it a day.

The next morning, I was enjoying a fine 155 breakfast in the Mess Hall when Bill Melvin, the 155's able assistant Maintenance Officer, found me and invited me outside, where he proceeded to chew me out for failing to find a number of holes in the tail boom. All I could do was explain the prior day's mission into Kate and that, in doing our post-flight in the dark, we just did not see or find the holes. There was speculation that they would have been the result of covering rocket fire as opposed to ground fire.

Later that non-flying day, I learned that five H-models from the 155, led by then C.O. Major Dean Owen, and with several Falcon guns had flown out in the middle of the night to re-supply Kate. It was on the second day after my flight that I learned that the Artillery lieutenant I had flown into Kate had been killed in action within a few hours of getting into Kate.

Subsequently, 43 years later, I learned that two separate books are currently being written about the events that took place at Kate. I was also put in contact with Bill Albracht, a former captain who was in command of the Green Beret security detachment placed on Kate at the time. Bill and I spoke for over an hour in late April 2013. He was able to clarify one thing for me. I had never known how many B-52 strikes had been made in the area surrounding Kate. One? Five? I never knew. He confirmed that through the entire engagement, there was only the single strike on October 31. Therefore, I knew that he and I were speaking about precisely the same timeframe.

Regarding the bomb strike, he told me they had never been advised of a specific B-52 strike, but they were advised to "take cover." He told me they did so but even in taking cover there were some injuries from incoming shrapnel. As to the Chinook sling load falling short of the firebase, he expressed that they really needed those supplies, but I think he recognized the difficulty of that approach while taking ground fire.

John Ahearn  
Stagecoach 11

**The Journey of Uncle Ho**  
by Ken Donovan  
2nd Lift Platoon Stagecoach 28

**The Journey of Uncle Ho**



After over forty years, the exact date that I came into possession of Uncle Ho has been lost to the fog of time. I do remember it was during the dry season, somewhere north of BMT, and I was flying C&C for the 4th Infantry Division.

The current owner at that time of Uncle Ho was a VC tax collector who made a mistake of taking a short cut across an open field with his AK-47, instead of sticking to the tree line, a mistake he would not get a chance to make again.

We recovered his back pack, the 4th ID guys were really excited about some tax records and maps, I saw Uncle Ho, and grabbed him; the 4th ID guys did not seem to care. You see Uncle Ho was a 5x7 silk cloth photograph of Ho Chi Minh. Uncle Ho was much revered by both the NVA and VC, and that is why I believe the tax collector was carrying Uncle Ho that day.

Uncle Ho turned out to be one of two war souvenirs I brought home from Viet Nam, the other was an NVA flag, my crew and I took out of a tree. (A few years ago I gave it to my crew chief, Mike Wilcox.) Uncle Ho would reside in my Viet Nam photo album for about the next 40 years.

About a year ago I was talking to Les Davison and he was talking about some of his several trips back to Viet Nam and how different it is today from what we experienced during the war. I shared my story about Uncle Ho. Sometime later we discussed the possibility of returning Uncle Ho to his home country.

Les indicated he had the contacts in Viet Nam to make that happen. On March 24 2012, Les contacted Mr. Hien Huynh of Ho Chi Minh about getting Uncle Ho back home, Mr. Huynh indicated he would be happy to assist in getting Uncle Ho placed in the War Museum in Ho Chi Minh City.

On May 24, 2012 Uncle Ho was returned to Viet Nam and currently resides at the War Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, a place I believe is more fitting than my photo album.

“Why did I return Uncle Ho?” a good question. Maybe it was several things. First, I am not sure Uncle Ho really belonged to me; I just took possession of him for a while. Second, in not too long of a time we will

pass into history like the WWII vets, and like them, many of our war souvenirs will be trashed because people will not realize or understand the significance of a simple cloth picture.

Lastly and more importantly, maybe it was time to let go of Uncle Ho and return him to his rightful home, before it was too late to do the right thing and to remember I am no longer at war.

Ken Donovan  
Stagecoach 28  
Oct 1968 - Dec 1968

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**Flying Formation with the Russians**  
**by Charlie Marvin, Falcon 8 Gun Platoon**

First, let me say that last year was my first reunion, which I enjoyed very much. It was great to meet old friends and to catch up with them and their lives. I was able to meet some new ones too. As a result of being there and listening to some good stories, it brought back some long forgotten memories.

While at the table one of the guys asked if anyone had an unusual story. I indicated that I did. However, I couldn't remember who I was flying with on my aircraft. I was acting as AC and flying trail. Again I'm not sure but I believe it might have been Jeff Schrader flying lead. It was during the summer of '69 and we had been sent out on a night mission toward the border to support some Special Forces team. We had a C&C who was directing us out to the location but as we were approaching the area we were called off and advised to head back home.

It was one of those pitch black nights where you couldn't see anything. On the way back my crew chief asked if we had any other aircraft flying in the area. I told him "none that I knew of other than the C&C aircraft". He indicated that we had an aircraft flying formation off our right side; as you can guess that really got my attention. I looked over my shoulder and saw an aircraft but was unable to verify what type helicopter it was. The aircraft only had its position lights on. I quickly contacted both lead and C&C and they both confirmed that no aircraft were in the area. So I decided to try and slow down so we could get a better look at the helicopter. However, as I started to slow down it maintained position with us. Finally it slid over and moved up some so we could see it better. I knew it was not one of ours and it looked like a Russian aircraft. As it moved up beside us the pilot on the left side waved and then abruptly broke hard right and left the area with all his lights out.

But remember I said I could not remember any of my crew that night or the aircraft number I was flying. As it happened Tom Mullen was sitting at the table and said "I was the crew Chief on the aircraft that night". I went "no way, are you sure?" and he said, "Yes". Well to my surprise Les was there and asked me to write this up. After we discussed this some more we are pretty sure it was a Mi4 doing resupply missions at night. The Russian pilot was just having some fun with us (thank goodness) to break up his boring night like many of us used to do if the truth be known, but tell you what it sure did get my attention. And Tom, I'm glad you were there so no one would think this was just some old fish story that got away.

Well, thanks for letting me bore you.  
Charlie Marvin, Falcon 8, 68-69

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**Agent Orange Information**

I was requested by Elizabeth Coward to include some information concerning Agent Orange which I know has impacted several members of the 155 AHC to include myself. I would refer anyone seeking information concerning Agent Orange to the following US Government website:  
**[www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/](http://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/)**

First let me say based on my own research anyone who was in Vietnam was exposed to Agent Orange, which has proven to show its effects on individuals many years after exposure, so I believe all of us are at risk.

In April of 2011 I was diagnosed with CLL which is a form of Leukemia; that was the bad news, the good news is I still have not required any type of treatment. It was my doctor who suggested I check to see if my cancer was covered under the Agent Orange Law. I checked it that afternoon and found that CLL had been added to the list of Agent Orange diseases, only 6 months before. (The Government maintains a list of recognized Agent Orange related diseases which changes all the time)

Based on my personal experience I would recommend the following:

If for some reason you believe you may have a claim, check the above website and see if your condition is on the list. If it is, file a claim as soon as possible, the VA will now take claims over the phone, and then you can send in your supporting documentation. You can use your civilian doctor's paperwork to support your claim.

Always keep a copy with the date you send in anything to the VA, always keep a copy of everything the VA sends you. I keep a binder with all of my VA documents.

Understand that VA claims take a long time; it was about a year before my Agent Orange claim was approved.

Also, there are a number of Veterans' organizations to include the VFW, DAV, and the American Legion who have service officers who can help walk you through the process.

Hope this helps, it is my personal wish that none of you reading this will ever have to use the above information.

Ken Donovan

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**Another Stagecoach Gone**

We received word from Sharon Gorman (Gerald Gorman's wife) that Gerald passed away June 13, 2013. Gerald was an enlisted man from the 1967 timeframe. A biopsy indicated he had lung cancer.

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**Notes from Our Webmaster Elizabeth Coward**

My apologies for the disappearance of the pictures on the website; the plug-in I was using has stopped working. According to their instructions, I could backup to an older version. That sounded good until I read the rest of their instructions, could have lost all the pictures on the site. I am reworking the pictures and looking for another plugin to use. It has to be very flexible since we have more than 2,500 pictures on the site. I will get them back up as soon as possible.

**Next Reunion Location Vote**

The next reunion is scheduled for November, 2014. You need to get your vote to me by November 3, 2013. This will give the host time to finalize the arrangements. I am keeping a tally of all the votes. You may vote once for any of the following locations:

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| Fairbanks AK  | Veterans Day weekend                        |
| Ft Rucker AL  | Veterans Day weekend                        |
| Charlotte NC  | Veterans Day weekend                        |
| Las Vegas     | Veterans Weekend                            |
| Washington DC | Note: this would be on Columbus Day Weekend |

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