



BAN ME THUOT BARB

*Remembering the 155TH Assault Helicopter Company
& all Ban Me Thuot Guys*

December, 2013

SHOT DOWN AT DUC LAP

by Gilbert Terry, Falcon 2

The battle began the night of 22 August 1968. Duc Lap had two compounds, one was Special Forces and the other was MACV. They weren't far apart, and both were within a couple miles of the Cambodian border. A large force of experienced NVA troops had assaulted both compounds during the night. The Special Forces guys were holding the bad guys off pretty well, but the MACV compound was in serious danger of being overrun. Our light fire team of Charlie model gunships had launched from Ban Me Thuot City Field early the next morning. We headed to the MACV compound, to see what we could do to help stem the tide. We were the first gun team on station after dawn broke, and we were in for a surprise. As part of the attack, the North Vietnamese had brought anti-aircraft weapons in during the night. But they didn't crank them up during the darkness, because the muzzle flashes would have given their positions away – and made them prime targets for Air Force fighter-bombers and Puff gunships. There were quad 50's; four barrel gun systems on a little trailer with wheels that would fold flat, to form a stable platform.

Bruce Chido was Falcon Lead, I was Trail A/C. Fred Pratt was my Peter Pilot, Bill Goodness was the CE, and Carey Arney was the DG. On the way to Duc Lap, it quickly became apparent that Bruce was having radio problems. His UHF and FM radios didn't work at all, which meant he could not communicate with anyone on the ground or the FAC. Luckily, he could still communicate with us on VHF. So we agreed to swap places; I became Falcon Lead, and Bruce would be the Trail ship. When we were close, I made contact with the Air Force FAC to get the latest information. He directed us to a row of hootches near the MACV compound, where a lot of fire was coming from. When I was sure of the target, we got set up and started making our gun runs.

On the first run, we took a bunch of small arms fire, and rounds came through the windshield. Fred and I both had bits of plexiglass pepper our faces. We always flew with visors down, to protect our eyes, so it wasn't a big deal. Another round hit the FM radio tuner. We'd been hit - but we were still flying. We broke off and turned outbound, and I asked on the intercom, "Everybody OK?" We were, and Bruce said they were OK, too. All the instruments were in the green, so we rolled in again. Inbound on the second gun run, my rocket sight disappeared. A .50 round went through it, and it just exploded – gone. WOW! "There's big stuff out here," I thought to myself. Something, probably a piece of shrapnel or part of the rocket sight, cut my helmet strap nearly in two. There was a lot of small arms fire, kind of like a hailstorm. A round shattered on the door hinge, and a chunk of it stuck in my leg. I knew it was there, but I was kind of busy with other things right then. We finished the gun run and broke off, and again I asked, "Everybody OK?" All affirmative; everyone OK, the engine was still running, we still had ammo, and Falcon Trail was OK. There's no doubt we were being effective, we were tearing up hootches left and right, taking out those positions. We were flying over a small lake, turning inbound for another gun run, when we started taking hits from the .50. It was like being in a

Volkswagon with someone beating on you with a sledge hammer. The helicopter was yawing from the hits. Not good. As I rolled out inbound for a third gun run, I glanced down at the engine instruments – and the engine oil and torque were unwinding. UH-OH! I knew right away that engine wasn't going to run long without oil. (The crew chief told me later that there was oil shooting through the firewall; the transmission had been hit.) Forget the gun run, I was looking for the best place to put it down. The MACV compound was off to my right, so I started turning toward it, at the same time going into a steep descent. I figured that the closer we could get to the compound, the better off we would be when we landed – or crashed. Who knows why, but I did notice our heading as we descended toward the MACV compound. But we didn't fly long. When the engine quit, it got very quiet. Fred said very calmly, "There went the engine." My response to him was not as calm – nor was it PG-rated.

I immediately bottomed the pitch to enter autorotation - but the rotor speed was bleeding off, big time. (We figured out later that the transmission had been hit with armor-piercing rounds, and was seizing.) Fred and I both realized right away that we couldn't make it to the compound. In fact, we didn't even have much time to prepare for the crash. I was still flying the helo, even as the rotor RPM unwound and we continued to lose altitude. Fred folded his mini-gun sight up, to get it out of the way. And the rotor went slower and slower – and then it just quit turning. It stopped out the left front, and I kind of stared at it, not wanting to believe it had stopped. Then I looked out the window to see how much further we had to go; about 100 feet, or maybe even 150. I had a big flare in, hoping I could get back some rotor speed, but it didn't help at all. The Huey nose kept coming up and back – and then we crashed. The tail boom hit first, and we went in almost upside-down on the side of a hill. The helicopter started rolling end over end, up the hill. The tail boom broke off, and there was lots of dirt and noise. I remember thinking, "This is it. There's no way to survive this."

When everything quit moving, it was deathly quiet. I remember sitting in my seat, looking at my hands. I turned them over a couple of times, and I thought, "Man, I'm still alive." I was really surprised. I looked over at Fred, and he was OK, too. But the radios from the nose of the Huey were over on top of his feet, pinning him in. I noticed his door had been torn off. Just then a mortar round exploded outside my door, or maybe it was a grenade. In any case, that brought me back to reality.

Automatically, I reached to unlatch my seat belt – and immediately fell hard on the ceiling and then into Fred. I hadn't realized that we were upside down! I crawled over Fred and fell out on the ground. And my good southern upbringing just came to bear, because I picked myself up and I said "Excuse me" to Fred. I'll never forget the look on his face. But his reply was immediate; "Get me out of here!" So I started pushing on the radios, and he was, too; we were trying to get his feet loose. It wasn't working, so I looked around for something to pry with. I happened to glance around, and saw a guy maybe fifty meters away, aiming his weapon at us. He got one shot off, it hit on the helicopter, head high, but didn't hurt anybody. Before he could fire again, Chido's door gunner took him out. Well done, Falcons.

At almost the same instant the round hit, Fred freed himself and BOOM, he tumbled down and out onto the ground. He picked himself up, and we immediately started looking for the crew. The crew chief's seat belt had been ripped out of the firewall, but he was nowhere to be seen. Then I noticed a foot sticking out from under the helicopter, and I thought, "This can't be good." I grabbed his foot, expecting another struggle to pull him free – but he slid out quite easily. Luckily, the helo had come to rest leaning on the armament pylon, leaving enough space so that the crew chief was not pinned underneath. When we had freed him, we found he had been hit with small arms in the left hip, just under the ribs, and he was in a lot of pain. So now there were three of us. While I had been pulling on the radios trying to get Fred out, I noticed the door gunner dangling in his seat, unconscious. But by the time we had gotten Goodness out from under the helo, Door Gunner Carey Arney was awake and had gotten himself out, too. We kind of huddled next to the wreckage, catching our breath and wondering "What next?"

We four sat there for a minute or two, not saying much. I'm not sure about the others, but I was definitely in denial mode, expecting to awaken soon to find it was all a bad dream. Twenty years old and bullet-proof, I didn't think it was going to happen to me – but it did. A few minutes ago we'd been airborne warriors,

taking the fight to the enemy. Now we were down in enemy territory, without much going for us. OK, enough of that, let's get back to reality. So we took stock. Fred and I still had our helmets and chicken plates on, and we had our .45's. But the M-60's and M-16's were gone, thrown out somewhere in the crash. Survival radio; yep, I've got one of those. I pulled it out and tried several times to make contact – but the darn thing didn't work! Shot down was Strike One, no survival radio was Strike Two - but we weren't out yet. I always wore a compass on my wrist, just in case. Good thing I did. I remembered the compass heading to the MACV compound, so I said, "We need to go that way." And we started off, crawling up the hill through the tall grass.

Fred and I were carrying – and sometimes just dragging – the wounded crew chief. There was lots of popping and snapping, as bullets were whizzing by everywhere. The fire seemed mostly random, rather than aimed at us. We knew bad guys were nearby, and they were looking for us. The vision burned in my memory from those moments has blades of grass fluttering to the ground – after being cut off by enemy bullets. It's funny what you remember.

But then, the Air Force came to our rescue. Two F-100's arrived on station, made a couple of orbits to identify their targets, and started making their runs. The NVA had to take cover, and the fire lessened. Best of all for us, the noise from the two jet engines drowned out the sounds of our movement. And their 20 mm cannon were helpful, too. Things were looking up. I felt like we had a chance to make it. But that all changed when the lead F-100 was hit. We watched in disbelief as he climbed away from the battlefield, trailing smoke - and then he punched out. Nobody said a word as his chute drifted down some distance away. His wingman departed, and we were on our own again. And it had again gotten very quiet.

With the noise from the jets and their munitions covering our movement, we had made good progress going up the hill. But when the jets went away, we couldn't move – because we figured the noise of our movement would point the bad guys right to us. Fred and I were trying our best to keep the crew chief quiet, but he was in a lot of pain. It's a wonder we didn't smother him. We were lying on our backs in the grass with our .45's at the ready, looking straight up so we could see all the way around.

Again, it was the Air Force that came to our rescue. Before anyone spotted us or stumbled over us in the grass, two F-4 Phantoms came on station. Fearing attack from the air, the NVA again had to take cover. But from our standpoint, we most appreciated the noise of the two fighter jets. And they were VERY noisy; two F-4's are twice as many engines as two F-100's, and we used that noise to our advantage. We started crawling up the hill again, and we made a lot of distance. It wasn't too long before we got to the fence that was the outer perimeter of the MACV compound. We laid down along the wire and thought we had it made. Not so fast, GI! We were taking fire – from the compound!

When the MACV guys saw us disappear over the hill, going in upside-down, they figured we were goners. And it had been about two hours since we'd gone down. Needless to say, they were not expecting crash survivors. When we got to their perimeter fence, they thought we were NVA, and they were shooting at us. Fred and I used some rather colorful English words - LOUDLY - to get their attention and to let them know we were Americans. And it worked. A lieutenant and a sergeant came out and got us, and led us in through the mine fields.

When we got inside the compound, there was a wall about three feet high. We laid the crew chief down inside the wall. Fred knew first aid from his SF first tour, so he worked on Goodness to treat his injuries as much as possible, and to make him comfortable. I didn't know anything about wounds and medical stuff, so I just plopped down against the wall. I thought to myself, "We're safe" - even though I could hear bullets whizzing overhead. Well, maybe not quite "safe," but better off than we were an hour ago.

I looked up to see a Major wearing OD underwear and a steel helmet coming toward us. He was the CO, and when the compound had been hit in the middle of the night, he hadn't had time to get dressed. No matter, he was in the battle! We talked quickly. I told him about our wounded crew chief, and he gave me a brief sit-rep. He told me the whole area was littered with AK's, M-16's, and carbines of guys who had fallen, and that there were plenty of rifles. He also said they had an M60, but no ammo for that weapon. I told him there was lots of 7.62 ammo in the mini-gun trays on our downed gunship. He asked if I would lead one of his guys back to the

ship, to bring in some of that ammo, and I said OK. One of his sergeants overheard, and he said, "I'll go, sir." And off we went.

I had my .45, but the sergeant didn't even carry a rifle. We went out through the mine field and kind of ran bent over back to the ship. It took less than 10 minutes; a lot less time than it had taken the four of us to go the other way. The ship was full of ammo, because we hadn't fired the mini-guns very much. I immediately started pulling the belted 7.62 rounds out of the mini-gun trays, and that's when I realized, "I'm really hurting here." I had had so much adrenaline running through me, I hadn't noticed any ill effects from the crash. But now, when I grabbed the ammo, my back hurt, my neck hurt, and I couldn't carry anything with my arms extended. So I wasn't the best ammo transporter, but I managed to carry a good amount by wrapping the ammo belt around my chest and my neck. The sergeant grabbed as much as he could carry, and we headed back to the compound. Going uphill carrying the ammunition was slower, but we made it without incident.

After we got back, it wasn't long before a Dustoff Huey flew in. I knew the pilot, CPT Iley. He was a good ol' boy from Texas. When he landed in the middle of the compound, Vietnamese soldiers rushed the Huey and immediately filled the ship. Most of them weren't even wounded, they just wanted out of there. The terror on their faces was apparent. It was clear that getting any of them off the Dustoff ship would take considerable time and effort. Fred and I managed to make space for Goodness and Arney, but it was VERY tight. Fred and I looked at each other, and we both knew the helicopter was overloaded. I stepped up on the skid toe and leaned in the window. (CPT Iley reminded me of a pit bull; kind of snarly, and he had chewing tobacco running down from the corner of his mouth). I told him, "You are grossly overloaded. Pratt and I will come out on the next ship." And he looked at me, out that window, and he said, "Get your bony little ass in here, because I am NOT coming back!"

There wasn't time to argue, so we muscled ourselves in. I sat on the console between the pilots, and Fred wedged himself in back. I was watching the gauges as CPT Iley pulled pitch to depart. When the N1 gauge went past 100%, I quit looking at it. I was afraid we weren't going to make it. But his H model had a lot more power than our gunships did, and we made it out fine.

There was no hospital at Ban Me Thuot, just a big tent. They laid us down on some cots. It wasn't long before they started bringing in wounded people who were really messed up. Fred and I looked at each other, and I said to him, "I feel guilty in this cot." Both of us had back trouble, we had compression problems. We both had to walk stooped over, and we couldn't twist our necks or backs. So we rolled ourselves off the cots, went to our knees, and gingerly stood up – still stooped over. As we headed out the door, somebody asked where we were going, and we told him we were going to our hootch. And that's what we did. At some point later that day, we did go see the Flight Surgeon. We really needed to be X-rayed, to find out the extent of our injuries, but there was no X-ray machine. Doc told us, "Aw, it's just muscles, you'll be fine." But he didn't want us flying, so he grounded us. "Just until your muscles are better," he said.

We spent the next few days just hanging around and goofing off. I might even have done a little drinking. Why not; after all, I was grounded. Fred had been restless from the start, and by the third day he was chomping at the bit to get back out there. His SF brothers were fighting for their lives, and he didn't like sitting on the sidelines when he thought he could help out. Besides that, our guys had been flying day and night – and they were wearing down. Fred and I still weren't 100%, but we'd had enough of sitting on our butts while our friends were flying and fighting. So we went to see the Flight Surgeon.

Doc's initial reaction was, "Hell no, I'm not clearing you to fly. You can't even stand up straight, and you can barely walk." We argued that the other Falcon pilots were very tired, maybe approaching exhaustion – while we were alert and rested. Finally he relented, but he did set some ground rules. He pointed to me and said, "You can't be an Aircraft Commander, you have to be a co-pilot." And he pointed to Fred and said, "You can't be in the same helicopter as Gilbert. I don't want you two flying together." Sounded good to us. We thanked the Doc and quickly departed – before he could change his mind. We walked directly to Operations, to let them know we were cleared to fly.

The very next day, Fred was Peter Pilot with CPT David Rutledge, our platoon leader – and one heck of

a pilot. I was flying as Peter Pilot with Brad Jones in the Trail ship, and we went back to the exact same spot. We made some runs and then, just about the time we were running out of ammo, we heard the radio call. It was, "Pratt's been hit." CPT Rutledge also told us he had plexiglass in his eyes, he couldn't see very well, and he was going to put it down near the MACV compound. There's nothing democratic about an aircraft, you're going to go where the Aircraft Commander decides to go. I folded up the mini-gun sight and looked back at the crew chief and door gunner. They were already at work, because they knew what was next - we were going to get Fred. So they were throwing stuff out of the helicopter, to make room and get rid of excess weight. Spare M60 barrels, C rations, a lot of loose stuff went overboard. We were already out of ammo and low on fuel. So we both thought we would have enough power to fly in and pick up Fred.

Brad Jones was a happy-go-lucky California surfer kid. He was senior to me, he'd been around, and was toward the end of his tour; a very good pilot. We followed CPT Rutledge down, and landed right next to his ship. The door gunner was standing outside shooting with his M-60 while the crew chief helped get Fred out of his helicopter and into ours. As soon as Fred was in, Brad pulled pitch. We bounced some on the uneven surfaces, and then we were airborne. We made it! We flew down the hillside, right past where our first helicopter had crashed. By now it was just a hole in the ground, because the Air Force had blown it up so the North Vietnamese couldn't get the radios or mini-guns or any of that stuff. As we came out, another gun team had come on station to cover our exit. Their call sign was "Buccaneer", the leader was Buc 8. Buc 8 swung in behind us, shooting up the place. We were gaining airspeed and slowly beginning to climb out; so far, so good.

But then, when we were about 15 or 20 feet off the ground, we flew right over a guy who emptied an AK into our helicopter. He stitched our gunship all the way down the right side. OK for me, I was sitting in the left seat – but not good for Brad. One round came through the chin bubble, through his left pedal, through his left boot, creased his toe, between his legs, behind his hand, and hit him on his chest protector. It was like someone hit him with a sledge hammer. It lifted him up in his seat and turned him around to the rear, so he was looking at the crew chief. When the bullet hit his chicken plate, the ceramic material shattered and peppered his neck and face. Blood splattered all over the cockpit, it was like someone slung a red paintbrush at me. Brad thought he'd been hit in the throat, because of all the blood. He told me, "You've got the controls." And I already had them, believe me. So I was just trying to nurse the ship along, to continue our climb-out. The crew pulled the red handles on the pilot's seat and slid Brad back, to see what they could do for him. Lloyd Wusso was the crew chief, I said, "Wusso, get up here." (Sidebar: I was the platoon Armament Officer. When I went to test fire the weapons systems, I usually tried to let the crew chief fly on the way back. It was just something I did, and they loved it. It was kind of a reward to them. I taught them how to line it up on the runway and fly it to the ground. I didn't try to teach them to hover, not enough time.) As he was scrambling to get into the pilot's seat, we were climbing out. Buc 8 was still shooting under us, doing his best to cover our getaway. When the crew chief was strapped in, I told him, "If anything happens to me, just grab the controls and keep it going. Don't pull too much power or you will bleed off RPM." I turned his radio switch to #3, and I said, "The guy you'll need to talk to is Buc 8, he will steer you home and line you up on the runway. Don't make any turns, don't try to hover, just crash it into the runway, if anything happens to me." He never said a word. I was busy, but I looked over at him, and his eyes were BIG! Obviously, he was thinking, "Uh-oh, I might actually have to do this." But he didn't. Nothing happened to me, and we made it out without further damage – thanks to Buccaneer 8 and his wingman.

We flew back to Ban Me Thuot as fast as we could, and went straight to the Red Cross landing area. Fred was still alive when they took him off our ship. He'd been hit bad, but he was a tough guy, so we were hopeful. We hovered to the revetment and shut down – and that's when we realized our helicopter was really messed up. We'd taken a lot of hits. In fact, two of the control tubes to the tail rotor had been cut nearly in half. They wouldn't have lasted much longer. We'd been lucky to get back. And then a little later we learned Fred had been flown to the hospital in Pleiku, but had died en route. We'd made it back, but we'd lost a good man. A very sad day.

After Action Stuff: Incredibly, the F-100 pilot who was shot down that day was rescued. Four of the SF guys, already in the fight of their lives, defending their compound against overwhelming odds, saw his chute drifting down after he'd punched out. They raced out of the compound in two jeeps, fought through an NVA company guarding the road, picked up the pilot, and then fought their way back into the compound. Those SF guys were amazing. I'm glad they were on my side.

Some weeks after the action, the Battalion Chaplain sent me a map of the battlefield. The map had numbers all over it. The map legend showed #14 as the site of our downed helicopter, and #15 was the North Vietnamese Command and Control bunker – **and they were right next to each other!** We'd gone down in a very bad place – and lived to tell about it.

Back at Camp Coryell, after the NVA had pulled back into Cambodia and things had quieted down, I put in for R&R. I'd been checking most every day to see if my orders had come in. After being told for the third time that they must have been lost, I went to the CO. He said, "You're not going on R&R – yet. I'm not supposed to tell you, but General Abrams is coming here to decorate you." I very distinctly remember my first thought on hearing that VERY unexpected news. "Couldn't he just mail it?" I didn't want a formation and ceremony, I wanted to go on R&R. In fact, I didn't even know I'd been put in for a medal.

Now that I'm older and wiser, it's pretty neat that a General pinned on my medals. (*Editor's Note: Gil Terry received a DSC and Purple Heart for his actions on 23 August 1969 and, a DFC for actions of 26 August 1969.*) Having said that, I really don't consider myself a hero. I just did what had to be done. We had such a great bunch of guys in the 155th, we were there for each other. Any one of the other guys would have done the same things I did. It just so happened that I was the one who drew the short stick that day.

Pratt Hall, a flight simulator facility at Fort Rucker, is named to honor Fred. It's a fitting tribute. A good man, a fearless warrior, he died taking the fight to the enemy. I'm very proud to say I served with Fred Pratt.

This history was narrated by Gilbert Terry and placed in words by Les Davison. BIG Thanks to both! And Gil, I always looked at you as a hero, and still do. I was proud to fly with you! Jeff Schrader

Next Reunion Location Vote

The next reunion is scheduled for November, 2014. Las Vegas is the site that had the majority of votes. We are planning for the Veterans Day weekend. The days, place, and time are still being decided, and you will be notified in further newsletters. Make plans! Be there! We are getting older you know.

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Treasurer's Year End Report:

I am happy to report to the association that we are well in the green. Our bank balance at this present time is \$6,183.21. I believe that the next meeting of the newly elected officers for 2014 may want to possibly discuss some sort of scholarship program for members' families. (Just throwing the idea out there.)

Fortune Cookie: (*Wish I had known this back in the day! Editor.*)

I ordered Chinese the other day and got this in my fortune cookie: **"Flying is simple. Not hitting the ground is hard."**

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