



BAN ME THUOT BARB

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



SORTIE 61

September 2016

Combat Air Assault: The Most Exciting Two Minutes of your Life

Ken Donovan, Stagecoach 28

I am flying Lead today, flying an air assault, our unit's primary mission. Most of our assaults are eight ship formations with two gunship escorts. Many of our assaults are in support of the Special Forces, carrying Montagnard tribesmen.

LZ minus 20 minutes. We are loaded and the gunships have jumped out ahead of us to identify the LZ. The SF Captain briefed a good LZ meaning we should be able to get in and out fast. It's funny, back in the world, they have a saying "speed kills;" but here, "speed is life". I am hoping we can burn off some fuel, which will give more power going into the LZ. We're enroute, I brief my crew on actions in the event we go down in the LZ. I remind them the most important item is the survival radio in my vest.

LZ minus 2 minutes. I can see the gunships about 2 miles ahead, they have identified the LZ and thrown a smoke grenade out to ID the Landing Zone. They call "Smoke is out." "Roger I see yellow smoke." The guns confirm yellow smoke; this is to ensure I have the correct LZ.

"Ok guys, visors down" (this is to protect our eyes from shrapnel). I ask my co-pilot to lock our shoulder harnesses. That way if one of us is hit, we will not slump over the controls. I can see the guns coming around behind us to escort us into the LZ.

LZ minus one minute. "Flight this is Lead, LZ in sight, turning final, weapons free, cleared hot. This is where things get really exciting. The twenty M60 machine guns open fire and the world around the formation is filled with outgoing red tracers. The guns have opened fire, must be shooting 17 lb. warhead rockets today, I see the bright flash, and the dirty gray cloud of the explosion. If they are impacting really close, I can feel the shock wave. Today the lead gunship is a 40MM grenade aircraft, I can hear the steady thump, thump, thump, as he fires in 5-10 round bursts, followed by as many explosions, looking like large flash bulbs going off on the ground.

While most of our assaults are unopposed, this one is not. The radio has been very quiet, but now the calls are starting. "Chalk 2 taking fire, smoke's out" (this is to ID the target for the guns). "Chalk 4 taking fire, smoke's out." I am always amazed by how calm the guys sound over the radio. There they are, I can see some greenish-white tracers coming at us. What I always thought was funny was how at first they seemed to slowly float up toward us, then whoosh, they've zipped past us.

LZ minus 20 seconds. Now the hard part, getting this overloaded pig on the ground. You see due to the extreme environmental conditions, we are always overloaded and underpowered. The low RPM audio warning comes on, indicating we are losing power. I can hear the tension in the new Peter Pilot's voice as he counts is down, "6400, 6300, 6200." At about 6200 rpm, the controls become less effective and they start to feel mushy.

On the LZ. My door gunner (Dave Clements) calls, "Clear down right," followed by my

crew chief (Mike Wilcox), “Clear down left,” and we touch down. The troops are quickly off the aircraft, because they know what a target we are in the middle of the LZ.

LZ plus 10 seconds. Trail calls “Flight down.” “Roger Lead is coming out,” followed by each aircraft, until Trail calls “Flight is up.” I am pulling the guts out of the aircraft to gain as much airspeed as possible to get out of the LZ.

LZ plus two minutes. We are now clear of the LZ, only one aircraft hit, good news is no injuries. You can almost feel the relief inside the aircraft. I look down and the leather palms of my flight gloves are damp and dark with sweat, wonder when that happened? “This is Flight Lead, thanks Falcons, let’s go Home Plate.”

One day closer to going back to the world.

ANOTHER BORING XO STORY

Chuck Markham, Stagecoach 5, 1970

THE 155TH HAD BEEN designated the lead unit on a big Combat Assault to take the 4th Division into Cambodia. That made us responsible for the on the ground logistics for the entire operation and that made me the lead on getting the planning and requisitioning done. The ops section and Battalion S-3 (BTN OPERATIONS) were great helps in providing the capabilities of various delivery systems and the projected expenditures for an operation of a specified duration. The S-4 (BTN LOGISTICS) however, was a totally different story. The S-4 himself, I need to try and avoid a lawsuit, was a junior Quartermaster Corps Captain without brains or balls. I kept the landline to DBT burning with my objections to his second guessing my calculations and requirements. Hot meals were not a requirement for the op, so my primary responsibility was the establishment and operation of the (Forward Ammunition and Refuel point) F.A.R.P.

The Battalion Pathfinder Platoon was attached to the 155th for the duration and they were a great help. The young LT. was from Paris, Texas and as sharp as a whip. He knew everything there was about establishing forward airfields and FARPs. We selected DUC LAP as I recall, and began the planning. I had filed all the requisitions for fuel and ammo and the correct number of sorties of Chinook aircraft to transport said requirements. Everything was supposedly approved. Two nights before the op was to begin I was “visiting” with the S-4 out behind ops. He had informed me that in his estimation I had requisitioned more fuel than we would need and he had arbitrarily cut the requisition and reduced the requested Chinook sorties. Some of you guys know me. The voice level when I addressed him was not muted and the tone was not civil. There may have even been some profanity scattered through the conversation. Captain REMF was on his heels and not sure whether he wanted to try and play his, ”I’m a member of the Battalion Staff “ card. He didn’t have to make that decision. Out of the night strode the Battalion Commander and the 155 Commander. As they walked by Colonel Walker asked “Captain Markham is there a problem?”. I replied as they entered ops “Nothing I can’t handle sir”. Later one of the guys in ops said the Colonel told Major Steel. “I’ll bet that’s right.” We got the fuel and the sorties reinstated and the LT ran the F.A.R.P. while I went out and flew the C.A.s. The S-4 moved up to Brigade about two weeks later and when the 155 shut down the Colonel asked me to take Command of the Battalion Headquarters Company. I did.

Officers Become Gentlemen

BAN ME THUOT, Vietnam (IO)- A special rehabilitation program has been established officers of the U.S. Army's 155th Assault Helicopter Co. who have neared the end of their tours in Vietnam.

When an officer becomes a "short-timer," he is moved to a special rehabilitation table in the copter outfit's mess hall.

No longer does he have to walk through the self-service chow-line and eat off metal trays.

The short-timers are served their meals on china plates, cups and saucers and receive napkin-wrapped silverware at the "couth tables."

The program is designed to polish up the veneer of civilization that often becomes a bit rough after eight or 10 months of Vietnam combat duty.

A table commander presides over each "couth" table, levying fines on any officer committing an uncouth act.

The standard fine- a round of drinks for the table-usually teaches the veterans how to ask for a slice of bread or the salt and pepper without the usual qualifying adjectives normally used by the less couth majority who still have months to go in Vietnam.

Maj. Thomas A. Ingram of Wetumpka, Ala., company executive officer, who initiated the program, has pronounced it an unqualified success.

No doubt the wives of returning 155th officers appreciate his efforts.

This article was published in the "Stars and Stipes" August 1966

REUNION WASHINGTON, DC

13 – 15 October 2016

(Well, technically it's in Arlington, VA.)

Below is the administrative part of our upcoming reunion, but there is a much more important part that we normally don't see in these blurbs. It is sometimes our last chance to see brothers that have a shared experience only known by very few people. I have never felt so welcomed and embraced as I do when I join with this bunch of people at any venue. I've done pig roasts, multi state motorcycle rides, main lobster boils and reunions in some of the most luxurious settings in the United States. Every occasion gave me the opportunity to extend my family and adopt another brother. The food's good and the beer's free too.
chuck

Hyatt Regency Crystal City
2799 Jeff Davis Highway
Arlington, VA 22202

Thursday, Friday, and Saturday
Single & double rooms are \$99 plus tax

Toll free phone reservations: **888-591-1234**

On-line reservations: <https://resweb.passkey.com/go/155AHCreunion>

Free shuttle to/from Reagan National Airport and Metro. (Hotel is 1/4 mile from Reagan National.)

Hotel has Valet Parking only: \$32 for all day. (Nearby private lots are less expensive.)

Banquet Saturday evening will be \$60 per person. Coachmen will perform.

We'll likely set up a time to visit The Wall as a group, to honor our fallen brothers.

Some guys are already talking about coming early and/or staying after: great idea. October in DC area is generally nice weather, and there's **much** to see and do (and many are free): Smithsonian museums, monuments galore (new/recent ones include WWII Memorial, FDR Memorial, Martin Luther King Memorial), and history everywhere. If you're a Civil War buff, Gettysburg, Antietam, and several other battle sites are within easy driving distance. Same for the Marine Corps Museum (newly

tions officer and numerous other extra duties required in a unit. Some were successful and a few ended much as the confrontation described above. Chuck

Purple Gang: In the Beginning

Bob Beaudreault, Stagecoach 16Z

Accurate recollections of events long ago are virtually impossible to attain by individual remembrance. The best for which we can hope is somewhere between actual events and total bullshit, preferably closer to actual fact. With that preamble I offer this remembrance of the inaugural flight of the famed "Purple Gang".

The time would have been late 1969 or early 1970 as the exact date escapes me. Admittedly, not a very good start to a recollection. However, I can vividly remember being involved in the discussion with several of my First Platoon mates as we were at a staging area waiting for the word to fly on to a CA with a mass troop insertion. My memory is we were at Gia Nghia in support of the local ARVN units making a multiple ship insertion. Many of the 155th Slicks were participating with gunship cover supplied reliably by our awesome Falcons. During the downtime, I do recall some sort of card game broke out as did discussion about how we, collectively as helicopter pilots, were throwbacks to the days of "seat of your pants" flying. Basically it was the low-level, hands on, move the controls in synchronization type of piloting skills that brought to mind the open cockpit bravado of WW1 bi-wing fliers. I am not certain it was an altogether valid analogy, but it seemed to work for us at the moment. Thus emboldened with our visions of aviation grandeur, a conclusion was reached that we were much akin to the famed "Lafayette Escadrille", those volunteer Americans who freelanced as aviators for the French before the US decided to join the effort against the Germans in 1917. As I remember it, I was among those present for this historic reflection, then at the rank of 1LT, but more proud to be an AC. Among others who took occasional interest amid the flurry of card playing were Lew Sain, Larry Ingram, John Houston, Mike Butcher, Gene Breslin, Frank Uhring, Phil Watson, and I also believe, Frank Alotta, John Ahearn, Terry Kirkpatrick, and Marlin Johnson were lurking in the area, as most of our First Platoon ships were assigned to this mission. I also believe because of the size of the operation we had Lt. John Vagnini, an old flight school comrade from Second Platoon, and Les Davison from the Falcons, who for reasons unknown seemed to like us, sharing occasional conversations as well. I have probably overlooked some or added some names due to the ravages of time, alcohol, and several divorces which have combined to dim my once acute sense of memory.

As now recalled, I believe liftoff was pushed back due to the inability of the ARVN ground troops to get their act together in sufficient number to make the attack a useful exercise. However, at this moment of insight for our platoon came inspiration, a double inspiration as things turned out. Having decided that we, in fact, were the reincarnation of "Lafayette Escadrille", in spirit if not in actuality, it was suggested that we must, as did the flamboyant fliers of that famed unit, wear flowing scarves as we danced upon the skies. Enthusiasm grew to the point where the card game was abandoned, at least by some, and with available time we launched a march on the local market place in search of our decorative and purposeful neck wear. Reality set in quickly as we realized the local population had little or no knowledge of the "Lafayette Escadrille" and even less caring about it. In truth I think most were quite perplexed to find a gaggle of US Army pilots plodding through the market in search of scarves in 100 degree weather. Little did they know what small part the market would play in the now legendary evolution of the Purple Gang. With time running out for this holy quest, we decided it would be most efficient for us to go to a fabric store and get enough material to make our own scarves for wearing that day with enough to supply future generations of "Purple Gang" fliers, although at this juncture in the genesis, I don't think purple was in our thoughts. Again I remind you of my age, marital distresses, and affection for Jack Daniels. I recall in the fabric shop, where many local ladies would buy basic material to make their own outfits, was a vivid array of colors ranging from fushia pink to rainbow orange to godawful green and sunflower yellow. All agreed that none of those would come close to evoking the bravado spirit we sought to bring to our cockpits - and strike cold fear into the hearts of our enemies, bring admiration from the ladies, and respect from jealous comrades secretly wishing to be us, or to emulate us. And then we spotted it. There was a bolt of PURPLE, perfect purple, as if the spirit gods of seat of the pants piloting had been watching over us. We exchanged knowing glances and inward smiles, knowing fate had taken us to the right spot - or some such poetic shit.

I believe we purchased most of that bolt of fabric, much to the joy and confusion of the shop owner, who we encouraged to cut the cloth in strips of appropriate length and width for immediate wearing into battle, which was looming immediate. I recall being as a giggling schoolboy returning to my helicopter, with each of us in the fabulous First Platoon, now wrapped about the necks with our soon to be trademark scarves. The issue of what we would call ourselves before launching the seemingly always reluctant ARVN Army into conflict was as I remember it, yet undecided. But as we gathered for the go ahead, I believe Frank Uhring was struck with recollection of gangster days, probably, I surmise, because of some family history. He offered the suggestion we call ourselves "The Purple Gang", in homage to either his ancestry or as some sort of fear inducing reference to a cold blooded gang of cutthroat bootleggers made infamous by headlines of their days and a 1950's movie of the same title. Either way, it seemed to work.

Actually it was brilliant, not only for the obviously color reference, but for the dramatic intonations sure to resonate among the ranks of enemies and comrades alike. And thus emboldened, off we flew to fulfill the day's work, done with the usual professional efficiency and enhanced by our purplish "esprit de corps", which probably scared the already skittish ARVN soldiers more than it did the VC they sought to destroy. Further days saw our scarves perfected by Pham Thi the older hootch maid who also specialized in sewing. And thus, with well-tailored and brilliant, flowing badges of who we were, we flew into our own version of aviation folklore. I am most proud to have played my part and served with such truly brave and honorable men.

That's my story and I am sticking to it.

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FNG PETER PILOT

Les Davison, Falcon 2 ('69-'70)

Supply Room, Camp Coryell, March, 1969. Newest of the newbies, I was drawing my flight gear.

Shirt, Nomex, Flying, Medium, two (2) each – check;

Pants, Nomex, Flying, Medium, two (2) each – check;

Gloves, Nomex, Flying, Medium, one (1) pair – check;

Helmet, Flying, APH-5, one (1) each – check.

The Supply Clerk said, "You're kind of in between. Do you want a medium or large chicken plate?"

Huh? What did he say? "What's a chicken plate?"

"Bulletproof vest," came the reply. "Heavy and uncomfortable, but most of the guys wear them."

No hesitation at all. "Extra large," I said firmly. And that's the one I wore during my entire tour.

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At 155th the Price Was Right*

*I wrote this article for inclusion in a book I am writing about my Vietnam memories; hence the introductory paragraph. Since I cannot remember the dates that any of the above happened nor the names of the most of the officers involved, with the exception of Jack Doyle the XO for part of the period. I asked Les Davison, 155th historian, but there seemed to be a rather rapid turnover of COs, XOs and Air Ops officers (there were three different COs in 1967); therefore I didn't use any specific names in the article.

155th Assault Helicopter Company was a US unit comprising one company of helicopters and crew, and one maintenance company based at Camp Coryell on the northern side of the small airport on the western edge Ban Me Thuot. Although designated assault, it conducted many other functions such as med-evac, search and rescue, troop transport, resupply. Occasionally, I went out to the 155th, usually to hitch a ride somewhere or do a ride-along to looksee at something or an activity that they weren't sure if it might be VC related. They were well aware of the Province Chief's no free fire zones.

My position in the province was the senior civilian representative in the Combined Operations for Rural Development Support program (CORDS) and advisor to the Vietnamese Province Chief for Darlac Province headquartered in Ban Me Thuot; however, I wore two hats, the other one of my parent agency the United States Agency for International Development (USOM/USAID) in charge of the economic aid program in the province. CORDS was a multi-layered paramilitary organization of civilian and military personnel involved in the pacification program, ultimately under the command of Gen. Westmorland, with two Ambassadors as his depu-

ties and similar layering down the chain of command. The goal of CORDS was to improve coordination and cooperation between civilians and the military involved in the Vietnamese Pacification Program. Although I was neither military nor sheep-dipped (military in civilian attire), I had been in the Marine Corps prior to going to Vietnam and understood the culture of the military. I was known to be an excellent operator and scrounge my skills honed by midnight requisitioning, a necessity for a Marine's survival; i.e., if you needed something and you couldn't get it through normal channels you acquired it through a five-finger discount from the Navy, the Marine Corps' parent agency, although any Marine worth their salt would never admit to it. If I had been born 50 years earlier, I would have been a good horse trader.

One afternoon the 155th XO came to my office at Province Headquarters and invited me to eat/dine with him at the officers' mess, and afterwards he and the CO invited me for a drink at the officer's watering hole at one end of a Quonset Hut. A half-assed apology was made for the "shabby digs", but when they bought me a second drink, I got a strange feeling that they were up to something; and they were. Although it wasn't in the assigned support duties of the 155th, they had at times, on a space available or should I say aircraft availability basis, done favors for me such as flying personnel or commodities when security prevented ground transportation. Examples included: 1) transporting candidates for local elections back to their districts in order to meet election deadlines for presence in their respective villages after the VC had cut the roads to disrupt the elections (regulations stipulated non-US involvement in elections); and 2) transporting cement and aluminum roofing out to a Special Forces A-Camp to construct a school house for CIDG dependents. I had a suspicion that it was payback time for the latter.

They were straight forward in their approach and mention that it seemed to be apparent that I, that is USAID, had a large quantity of cement and aluminum roofing available for disposal and it sure would be nice if they could get some to build a new officers club. Although I knew I was hooked, I first explained that it was against USAID regs to provide commodities to the military since they had their own supply channels. Nevertheless, I told them that since they had helped me in the past and CORDS was created to facilitate military/civilian cooperation in pacification, I had an idea to how to cover my ass and build you a club. There a bunch of Montagnard refugees that I provide food assistance to, and believing the old axiom that "Idle hands are the devil's workshop", I created a "food for work program." You've probably seen Montagnards wearing surplus blue nurses shirts involved in public works projects down by Buon Ale – they're called Y-Ben's blue shirt army (Y-Ben being my Montagnard name). Why not expand the program and create a manual skills training program and we can split the costs. I've got several manually operated Cinva-ram brick presses in the warehouse with which you create bricks from mixing slightly moist red clay with cement, stuff it in the press, force down handle, and presto you have a brick. As you know, Camp Coryell is built on this damn red clay. I'll provide the Montagnards rations of food and you can pay them a small stipend; however, you'll need to hire a Vietnamese carpenter and mason to train the refugees in manual skills. You can buy lumber for framing and rafters on the local market, and I'll furnish the cement and aluminum roofing. They agreed; thus the Montagnard Refugee Manual Skills Training program was launched and a new officers club was built; and a fine one at that.

When the club was completed, I was the guest of honor for its dedication, which was initiated by a ritual of myself, the CO, XO and Air Ops officer downing shots of flaming Courvoisier Cognac without first dowsing the flames, and if so, one had to drink another. (As I recall, cognac was \$3.00 a bottle in the PX in Saigon.) I can't remember what the flaming shots were called, but Molotov cocktails seems appropriate. I was then presented a Stagecoach patch and was deemed an honorary member of 155th. A number of other officers joined us in the ritual, and we were all well-oiled by closing time.

This article is extensive and can not be presented in one issue. It will be continued in future issues. Mr Bengel attended a recent reunion in Atlanta and was the star of the show. There were always people gathered around him to hear his story.



155 AHC Association

Durham, NC