



BAN ME THUOT BARB

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



Sortie 62

November 2016

TAC-E AT LAC THIEN

Bruce L. Mc Innes, Stage Coach 27

June 7th, 1969 was indeed a dark and stormy night south of Ban Me Thuot. I had been in the 155 for only a week or so when WO Dick Rains burst into Richmond Stephens' room and asked, "Does anyone want to fly tonight?" Eager for experience, I volunteered. Dick and I met outside of Operations and hurried to the Corral, where crew chief Mike Wilcox and door gunner Bill Lumas were readying the ship. It was a 'TAC-E' mission at Lac Thien, and the Falcons and the Stagecoach flare ship had already cranked. We were to be 'C & C' (Command and Control). We would pick up the American Advisor at his compound near the village that was under attack, and then he would direct the action.

We flew to Lac Thien, met the flare and gunships, and then landed at the little PSP airstrip to pick up the American Advisor – a major – and two Vietnamese interpreters. Since we took automatic weapons fire on departure (one new experience after another for me, this night) Rains decided that when we dropped them off, we wouldn't show any aircraft lights.

We went about the mission. Man, it was exciting for me, even at the distance and altitude that C & C maintains so as to not interfere with the work of the flare ship and guns. The weather was heavily overcast, with intermittent rain and lightning which was sometimes visible and sometimes hidden by clouds. The surface of the lake reflected light from lightning and flares, the impact of the gunships punching rockets into the darkness surrounding the village at the edge of the lake, the flares themselves dangling below their parachutes, each waving from side to side like a phosphoric pendulum. Wow! Finally!



When the flare and gunships are expended on a mission like this, it's time for everybody to go home. No bullets, no point. While versions of what followed differ, my memory – accurate or not – has always been clear. Since we had to drop off our PAX, and were going to do this 'blacked out', Rains advised the flare ship and Falcons to return to BMT. We would be right behind them. Since the Advisor's 'airstrip' was on the edge of the lake, we flew a straight-in descent across the lake. The flares were gone, the lighting was gone, and it was really, really dark and gloomy. Dick was flying, and I was looking outside from time to time and monitoring the instruments, feeling pretty good about having made it through my first 'combat' mission. As we were

somewhere over the middle, we flew into the lake, right side (my side) slightly low. It was a

fierce impact as we immediately flipped over to the right, and then upside down. I remember having time to say ‘Oh shucks! We’re in the water!’ before I took as big a gulp of air as I could.

It was suddenly absolutely dark. I couldn’t see any instrument lights; had I been blinded by the impact? My left knee was injured, and I didn’t know how badly. We’re upside down! We won’t float. We’re on the bottom. Mile wide? Middle? Thirty feet deep? Don’t know. I needed to get out. My door wouldn’t open. I tried the other door. No good. Release pins didn’t do the job. Because we were upside down, I couldn’t seem to get a bracing position to push the windshield out. Couldn’t stand up through the ‘greenhouse’ because we were upside down. Back to my door, or Rains’. I wondered why I had not run into him. Making sure to hold onto something for orientation (floating around would make this even more hopeless than it was), I kept trying the doors. No joy. I was running out of air. I knew I needed enough air to get thirty feet to the surface after I got out, and I wasn’t out. When I couldn’t hold my breath longer – there was that point, and I was sure that in a few seconds I would be dead – I got another lung full of air. Didn’t know where, didn’t care. Air!

I went to work on the doors again, holding on to this spring or that panel part, without success. Same deal. Thirty feet to the surface. That would take air which I no longer had, even if I was out. And I couldn’t get out. By this time, I didn’t really mind dying. I always knew that could happen in Vietnam. But I was a pilot. I wasn’t a sailor. I needed to get out of the aircraft. I started hearing voices, and remember wondering why people were talking on the bottom of this lake. Angels? Atlantis? Absurd thoughts come to you when you’ve got nothing left. I was within seconds of losing forever my ability to hold my breath – really only seconds – when the door opened. From the outside! There were hands on my shoulders. They pulled me out and stood me up. I was standing in the mud, holding onto the aircraft, with my chin out of the water! The floor of the aircraft (my ceiling) was indeed under water, but the belly was above the surface. Someone had taken a head count, realized they needed seven alive but only had six. Thank you, Mike Wilcox, for coming to get me.

Ken Donovan and Major Moore flew out to rescue us. It was as dark for them as it had been for us, and they did a masterful job of hovering at night over still water.

After Action Report:

- I had only hurt my knee slightly on the ash tray.
- I wasn’t blind. It was just that dark.
- As I recall, Dick Rains later said he knew the surface elevation but somehow had just flown through it.
- As I recall, either Mike Wilcox or Bill Lumas testified later that they were looking at the water *when* we hit, and thought we were a couple of hundred feet above the surface at the time.
- Even if I had known the lake was only 5 1/2 feet deep, it wouldn’t have saved me. It took Mike Wilcox to do that.
- Ken Donovan and I flew a LRRP insertion the next day. ‘Back in the saddle...’

AT THE 15th, THE PRICE WAS RIGHT (continued)

Mike Benge, USAID, POW

Ed: In the last Barb, Mike told about being “innovative.” That’s how USAID cement and tin roofing materials were used to train local Montagnard workers – whose OJT project just happened to be to build an Officers’ Club at Camp Coryell. Mike’s story of “horse trading” at BMT continues.

The CO and XO were very impressed with the Montagnards because they thought they worked harder and were much more trust worthy than some of the camp's Vietnamese workers, who were then replaced by the Montagnards. I can't remember if they built any more Cinva-ram brick buildings or not; however, I know that an EM club was built.

On another occasion, the XO approached me, and asked if there was any way I could get them invitations to an upcoming party/barbecue being thrown by Colonel An, the Vietnamese 23rd Division commander; always a great *sware*. COL An frequently threw these parties especially when VIPs came to the province or upon arrivals of new senior US advisors; e.g. division and province level. Although senior MACV division and provincial officers were invited, those from 155th were overlooked (perhaps a bit of jealousy or rivalry was involved). The XO knew that I was friends with COL An and his wife, for I had asked for air support from 155 to fly supplies to remote areas for her as head of the provincial "Grey Ladies" (similar to the Red Cross). I told the XO "no problem," but it would cost him, for I'd like the use of the "reserve chopper" in an emergency if neither a non-reserve chopper nor an Air America chopper were available. The latter were seemingly exclusively available only for USAID VIPs (or those thinking they were) at USAID HQ in Nha Trang. He asked me, "How and the hell do you know about our reserve chopper?" I replied, "Hey it's my job to know" – and the deal was cut. I mentioned it to COL An's wife the next time I saw her, and she assured me that they would be invited; and they were.

Sometime later, I walked into the waiting shed on the other side of the runway from 155, and there sat COL An and his US Army advisor COL Cannon, who were anxiously/hopefully waiting/looking for a chopper. Cannon's chopper was down for maintenance, so

he had queried Camp Holloway in Pleiku and was told that all were committed; and he got the same answer from 155. A number of outlying outposts in COL An's 23 Division AO had been hit the night before, and he wanted to check up on the damage. I was supposed to have an Air America chopper coming in, so I thought I would make a few brownie points with COL An - and needle/embarrass COL Cannon (who as I recall was a bit pompous) - by offering COL An my chopper. COL An expressed his gratitude (and Cannon's face expressed embarrassment); but soon after, I got a call on my radio that my Air America chopper was cancelled. I excused myself and drove over to 155's Air Ops and mentioned it was payback time and I needed the reserve chopper. When they asked me what for, I explained the situation and I was between a rock and a hard place regarding COL An. He got hold of the CO and we talked it over and I was able to convince them that there wouldn't be any problem with COL Cannon, so they relinquished. I drove back to the shed, and soon after the chopper landed and I told them that here's my/their chopper and of course the 155 painted on the side created a look of surprise from both. However, the look on Cannon's face quickly changed to dismay. Even so, off they went. No mention was ever made to 155 by Cannon on why he couldn't get a chopper while I could.



Mission: BMT Stand-by, November '67

(Al Fitzgerald photo)

One day, I was asked if I could provide cement for some sidewalks at 155 which I did, for when it rained, the red clay became a sea of mud that stuck to your trousers and boots like glue. The payback was allowing the Province Chief and his wife to shop at the small PX on Sunday afternoons. The wife bought things like tooth paste and brushes, soap and a few other items, and the Province Chief a razor, aftershave and secretly a Playboy magazine (that I would give to him when his wife wasn't around).

One time a C-123 loaded with B-rations (canned goods) landed at the short runway next to 155 that was cosigned to a Special Forces Mike Force unit out near the commercial airport a few miles west of town. Unfortunately when the pilots found out they had landed at the wrong airstrip, they found the runway too short to take off with the load, so they taxied up to 155 and dumped it. I got a call from 155 asking if I could use some canned goods; of course I said yes, figuring I'd probably get a dozen or so cases. It wasn't long before a ¾ ton truck with racks showed up at my house piled high with cases of can goods. I thought, "What the hell will I do with all of them?" The Montagnards had given me a beautiful Belgian Malinois (similar to a German Shepherd, but a bit smaller and more compact) for a guard dog that I named "Asao", Dog in Rhade (Hey, he came when I called him). Among the canned goods were several cases of hash, Spam and canned ham. Some I would eat, some I gave away to my staff or to visiting Montagnards as gifts, and some I fed to "Asao." My cook/maid usually fed Asao in the kitchen; however, I finally convinced her to feed him out on the back porch, for the hash gave him gas and he was intolerable in the house. Since most of my food came from the nearby market, I had little use for the canned goods, so I gave them to a nearby orphanage run by some nuns.

Another time I broke a molar on a guava fruit seed, so I went to the Army dentist (can't remember his name) who frequented 155. He put in a temporary filling and told me to come back in a month and he would replace it with a permanent one. Unfortunately, I missed the appointment due to being captured by the North Vietnamese during their attack on Ban Me Thuot during their TET offensive on January 30, 1968. After our release and subsequent arrival at Clark Airbase in the Philippines, as part of our physical checkup, an Air Force dentist examined my teeth and asked, "Who and the hell filled your molar?", thinking it may have been a North Vietnamese "so called" dentist. When I told him, he was amazed that it had lasted the five years of my captivity. He then drilled it out and replaced it with a permanent filling. Then, after arriving at Bethesda Naval Hospital in Washington, DC, a Navy dentist asked me, "Who and the hell filled your molar?" When I told him, he drilled it out again, and put in a Navy filling; proving that you can't top Army dentists.

ASSOCIATION WILL SUPPORT MONTAGNARD ORPHANS

At the Reunion, Association officers voted to make an annual contribution of \$500 to Friends of Vinh Son Montagnard Orphanage. The orphanage, located in Kontum, Vietnam, provides for more than 800 Montagnard children at several locations in/around Kontum and Pleiku. For more info on the organization and its work, go to www.FriendsofVSO.org.

SHARING COMMO

John Teaford - Seeing and catching-up with all those in attendance after all these years was truly a great experience.

Larry Pluhar – Thanks for putting on a swell reunion.

Dave Bennett – Great reunion, thanks for letting this 283rd Dustoff guy join in. Always fun to get together; grandson Braden has not stopped talking about it.

TREASURER’S REPORT

Jeff Schrader, Treasurer

I am very happy to report that we’re in good shape. Overall the reunion was a financial success, largely due to members’ generosity. Special thanks to those attendees who paid their Association dues and/or made unsolicited contributions to the Association. We’ll do our best to spend your money wisely. Our treasury now stands at \$7,632.39. Are your dues current?

If anyone wants a more detailed report, I will be happy to provide that. Just contact me at the address/phone number below. Thank you.

REUNION RECAP

Rod Waddel, Stagecoach, 1970

Perfect weather, good food, great transportation, wonderful sights of DC, super hotel, and the best of the best company. These are but a few words that one would use to describe our 2016 reunion. The hospitality room was filled with BMT guys, friends, and family members. People were talking about what was going on in their lives, such as: travel, kids, grand-kids, vehicles, new or different residences to include within the US and some living outside the US. Several thought living outside the US might be an option to review. Friendships were strengthened and new ones developed, the women were at home and socializing with ease.

Thursday about 15 went on a tour of the Pentagon. This proved to be very enjoyable as our tour leader was never short on humor. We saw where the plane crashed into the Pentagon on 9/11, and today you would never know it happened. The memorial outside was designed after much thought with reference to those within the building and those in the plane. On Friday we went to Arlington Cemetery and, as always, it touches the inner soul or heart. Today there are over 400,000 buried there and doing about 35 funerals a day. Those standing guard exhibit a devotion that is beyond reproach.

Saturday morning we met at The Wall to honor our fallen brothers. It was not crowded and the weather was perfect. During our time in Vietnam, we were so young and that time in our lives has been embedded forever. That was the past but time only marches forward. Saturday evening, for the banquet, there were about 90 in attendance for a good meal with good friends. Bob Beaudreault was an excellent MC, and Bruce McInnes’ “BMT Fashion Show” drew lots of laughs. All in all, it was rewarding to renew friendships and build new, experience our nation's capitol, and have time for our friends - past and present. A big thank you to all that put forth the effort to make the 155th AHC Association Reunion better. I hope to see LOTS of you – and some new faces, too – at Reno.

BMT GUYS AT THE REUNION WERE . . .

Ken Acker, John Ahearn, Frank Alotta, Bob Beaudreault, Mike Benge, Dave Bennett, GR Butler, Bing Cherry, Wayne Coward, Jim Cunningham, Les Davison, Jeff Dilley, Ken Donovan, Jack Drewiega, Paul Fadz, Denny Fenlon, Jim Ferris, Bob Gardner, Tony Giordano, Joe Harrelson, Tom Hunt, Rueben Hunter, Roland “Bud” Jarvis, Geoff Jones, Russ Kogut, Jim Kohler, Ed Koroshetz, Dave MacGregor, Bob Maddox, Chuck Markham, Charlie Marvin, Larry Matthews, Vince McDonough, Bruce McInnes, Dean Owen, Brad Peterson, Larry Pluhar, Ron Polly, Jeff Schrader, Lonnie Schrader, Dave Skoog, Jim Stallard, Norm Swafford, John Teaford, Gil Terry, Wes Timmons, Fran Tiner, Frank Uhring, Rod Waddell, Terry Westbrook, and Fred Yamagata.

Ed: Sincere apologies if I’ve left anyone out.



BMT, 1968: GEN Creighton Abrams Pins DSC on WO1 Gilbert Terry

In case you didn't know, there's TWO warriors in this photo. Of course, Gilbert is one; that's why he's receiving the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions "above and beyond" at Duc Lap. The guy presenting the medal is no slouch, either. He was one of George Patton's top tank commanders in Europe during WWII, and he was awarded **two** DSC's.

While visiting Arlington National Cemetery during the recent reunion, Gilbert took time to find GEN Abrams' grave. This time, he paid his respects to the warrior general who had honored him so many years ago.

ASSOCIATION DUES Dues are \$30 per year, to cover costs associated with copying and mailing (snail mail) the newsletter. They're not mandatory, but if you can chip in something, we'd appreciate that. Send cheques to Treasurer Jeff Schrader. Thanks, guys.

NEW 155 AHC MERCHANDISE

Lapel/hat pins are \$8 each. Coffee mugs (Stagecoach patch on one side, Falcon patch on the other) are \$15 each. Prices include shipping costs.



And of course, we've still got t-shirts, hats, and Challenge Coins, too. Check out all the 155 AHC merchandise on our Home Page. Contact Quartermaster Chuck Markham to order.

MORNING FORMATION AT THE WALL

Anonymous

It's a picture-perfect fall morning, dew is heavy on the grass as we take our positions. Our Morning Formation (BMT guys, family, and friends) this day is on a grassy knoll overlooking The Wall; we've come to honor our fallen brothers. "High Flight" is perfect; the words lift us. But the Roll Call is difficult, as always; good men, taken too early. The lump in my throat comes right away - but hearing the names of guys I flew with is always the worst. There are tears, I'm not ashamed. Some (many?) of us thinking, "Could have been me." Or, maybe, "Should have been me." Survivor's guilt; not as bad as it used to be - but still there. Is that the same as PTSD? Maybe . . . We were so close, a band of brothers. We were there for each other - and some didn't make it. That still hurts. Always will. Lucky to have served with such a fine group of men. Honored to be included in the group. Humbled by the thought that these brave men find me worthy of inclusion. Truly, brothers.

Life goes on, but we will never forget those who flew and fought with us. Proud to have served with each and every one of you.

ASH & TRASH

We Need BMT Stories - They don't have to be "white-knuckle flying" stories or "taking heavy fire" stories. I know you guys have LOTS of memories of your time in Vietnam, so make the effort to put 'em to paper or computer and send 'em in - so others of us can share them, too. (Or, if you want, call me and tell me your story - and I'll type it out.) PLEASE???

Original Document 155 AHC Unit Histories are available on-line at "vhpa.org".

Reunion 2018 - The next reunion of BMT guys will be during fall (likely October) of 2018 in Reno, Nevada. **Jim Cunningham** is the point man on this mission; contact him with ideas, suggestions, phone numbers of dancing girls, and/or offers to help.

Historian Has History for You - Copies of original document annual unit histories, all "Ban Me Thuot Barb" newsletters, and an Index of Barbs are available. Contact Les Davison, 155 AHC Historian.

Les Davison, *Editor-This-Time*

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Training with Special Forces near Nha Trang, 1967

(Al Fitzgerald photo)

155 AHC Association

Durham, NC 27712-1325