



# BAN ME THUOT BARB

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



Sortie 63

March 2017

## ACTION AT LAC THIEN

*Jim Askren, Falcon 4*

I was Falcon 4 and on a support mission to help repel the VC at the Special Forces/Montagnard camp at Lac Thien. I was flying left seat and we had the rear doors open as well as the windows down (UH-1B). I had my left arm resting on the window. At the end of a pass over what was a very hot area, we banked hard left and I felt an unusual blast of air on the upper part of my left arm as well as smelling smoke. I asked Hohman (crew chief) if we were on fire. His reply was "No, keep going". I still remember wondering what the smoke was (now gone) - but who had time to question much in a hot area. The instruments all looked good. Did Hohman lean/fire forward at an extreme angle and fire close to me? Was I smelling his weapon exhaust? Move on, got to stay with the fight.



*Jim Askren showing where the bullet hit.*

When we landed at the PSP to refuel and rearm, we shut down, I climbed out, turned around to hang my helmet up and found out what happened. As we banked hard, a shot through my open window paralleled my elbow to shoulder so close I felt it. Then it went through the side of my seat, out the back and out the open rear door on the other side just missing our gunny. The smoke was from the powder disintegrating from the hole in the magnesium seat. That was close enough for me.

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## **THANKSGIVING DINNER FOD**

*Mike Lach, Maintenance*

I was sitting in the Mess Hall for one of the holidays, most likely Thanksgiving 1968. Sitting there eating turkey and the fixings. I had arrived only in late October to be the Maintenance Officer, so when I saw something unusual I just didn't know to heed the warning. The Falcons were dining, too - but they were also collecting nuts from the trays on the tables. I must have thought maybe they had figured a way to ferment those hard shelled fruits. A few days later while walking out to the wash rack, a Falcon ship was being washed and the engine was being flushed. On start of the engine, it belched a thirty foot cone of red sparks. My immediate thought was what has just happened? Foreign Object Damage (FOD) in the inlet?

It was dramatic to see something tear itself apart, something had broken. As I looked down the tail pipe, everything was cooked and had disintegrated. Bits and pieces of burned debris could be seen laying in the tail cone. The smell of Thanksgiving was everywhere, it was those nuts I had seen them collect at dinner. The Falcons had collected walnuts . . . to crush and be used as an abrasive to clean the engine. Some Falcons suggested it could be fixed. I remarked, "Maybe at the factory!"

Add another engine change to schedule. I was NOT pleased. I told them to write "FOD damage" in the log book and move the ship to the Maintenance revetment. Sometime later, I found the correct abrasive, it was finer than dust - and it did have a walnut smell.

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## **AIRCRAFT DOWN AT LAC THIEN**

*Ken Donovan, Stagecoach 28*

*(Bruce McInnes told about crashing into the water at Lac Thien in the last Barb. Here's the story of their rescue that night.)*

As Duty Officer that night, I remember an American Advisory Team was coming under fire and 805 with a Falcon team were launched. (Charlie Marvin has indicated he was on the mission, but could not remember who the other crew members were.) I believe it was about 0100 hours when they launched, with the weather a factor during the mission. For those not familiar with Lac Thien—it was a small village surrounded on three sides by high ground, with a small lake on the open side, which was the normal approach route.

I was listening to the Falcons on the FM radio as they covered Dick Rains and his crew on their approach. (The crew of 805 was AC Dick Rains, P Bruce McInnes, CE Mike Wilcox, and DG Bill Lumas.) All of a sudden Falcon lead called that he had lost sight of the slick and as they tried to contact Dick Rains, they received no answer on any frequency. It appeared the A/C had gone down for some reason. It was at this time I decided to report to the Command Hootch and report we had an A/C down.

I awoke Major Moore and indicated it appeared we had an A/C down at Lac Thien, cause unknown. Major Moore asked if my aircraft was ready to go, and I indicated it was ready. He told me to get a crew together and get the aircraft cranked while he got dressed; we were going to Lac Thien.

My assigned A/C was #540, a new H-model with a really good engine. Major Moore reported to the A/C and climbed into the right seat, as I brought the A/C to full RPM. Just as I pulled the A/C to a hover inside the revetment, the airfield came under mortar attack, with a round going off about 30-40 yards in front of the aircraft. With an empty A/C at night I grabbed an arm load of collective and pulled the A/C to a 100 foot hover, nosed over, and got out of Dodge.

As we approached Lac Thien, I remember it being very dark due to heavy rain showers in the area. I did not have a good feeling about what we might find at Lac Thien—if we were able to find anything. As we arrived over Lac Thien I was shocked when we heard, “this is Stagecoach 25, can anybody hear me?” A/C 805 had crashed into the lake on its approach, and was upside down, with the bottom of the A/C sticking out of the water. Somehow Dick and his crew had been able to get out of an upside down A/C under water in the dark, and were now setting on the belly of the A/C waiting to be picked up. I guess it was not their day to die.

The problem was how to find them. Dick kept saying, “You are flying right over me,” but we couldn’t see the downed ship. I do not remember how we came to the decision, but Major Moore took the controls to make the approach, while I turned on the searchlight to locate the slick in the middle of the lake. Needless to say, turning on your search light at night with bad guys in the area is really insane; I remember thinking, “I hope this doesn’t hurt.”

In short order we were able to spot 805 in the middle of the lake. Major Moore made an approach with our searchlight on, as the Falcons covered us. Major Moore hovered up to the downed helo and everyone jumped on board. Then we turned the search light out and we got out of Dodge for the second time that night.

Back at BMT, we parked the aircraft and I finished my night as Duty Officer. And then I would fly with Bruce McInnes the next day. Just another somewhat insane night during my tour with the 155<sup>th</sup>. But as insane as my night had been, I am sure it was **really** crazy for the crew of Stagecoach 805.

*(Backstory: At the Savannah reunion hosted by Gil Terry, I was telling some guys about the night I was Duty Officer in June 1969 when one of our slicks went down at Lac Thien. Bruce McInnes chimed in, saying he had been the Peter Pilot on that slick. Bruce then told his side of the story, to include the fact that after he got signed off by the Flight Surgeon that night, got some sleep, and then flew as my co-pilot the **very next day.** )*

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**Camp Coryell 1966**

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**TAC-E AT LAC THIEN, THE DAY AFTER** **Mike Butcher**

Enjoyed Bruce McInnes' account of his crash into Lac Thien in the last Barb. Here's a follow-up.

The next day, John Ruhly and I hovered closely over the belly-up slick, allowing an EOD E7 to slide off and rig up detonation charges on various key points of the fuselage. We pulled off while he prepared the hulk for destruction and orbited the crash site while keeping him in sight. After he waved us back over and we picked him up, we again reentered an orbit wherein he remotely detonated the charges. The ensuing water plume was quite a spectacle to observe.

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**REUNION 2018** The next reunion of the BMT Bunch will be in Reno, NV. Date is not yet set, probably sometime in October, 2018. **Jim Cunningham** is the Pathfinder for this one.

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**SHARING COMMO**

**Burriss McRee** - Reading Mike Benges's story about our BMT dentist, I too had a "temporary" filling in early January 68 with similar instructions of "return in 30 days" for a permanent filling. I DEROS'ed back to the states two weeks later, just before Mike was captured. My temporary filling lasted until 1977. I don't know

what the dentist used but he should have patented it; good stuff. Thanks for your efforts keeping the memories coming

**Bob Maddox** – Thanks for a great time at the DC reunion – and we’re looking forward to Reno.

**Jack Drewiega** – Thanks for a great reunion. I’ve got a story, give me a call.

**Dave Talbot** - Sorry, I haven't made a 155 Reunion yet, hope to before my last bugle call. Miss all you guys. Assigned to 155 in June 65 and sent to augment the 170th in late Nov 65. The 155 was the best! Many fond memories and lifelong brothers. I was part of the group that started the Falcon Guns, led by Capt Talley Pledger. Wish all my brothers and their wives a Blessed Merry Christmas and a prosperous and joyful New Year!

**Johnny Gann** - Appreciate you sending the Barb, here's my dues check.

**Dean Owen** – Thank you for sending the 1969 unit history. I am continually surprised at how many details of the events I have forgotten. However it remains very clear what a truly outstanding group of young warriors the members of the 155<sup>th</sup> were.

**Roger Fehlhaber** – Please send me one of the new coffee mugs. I was the Supply Sergeant in '68.

**Sheldon Reyher** - Thank you for sending me Many Beaucoup Magics, The wife and I both read it. Glad I was able to help out on that one.

**TAPS**

**Mike Wilcox** died in November, 2016. Mike was a 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon crew chief in '69.

**William Eckert** passed away in September, 2016. Bill was a pilot in '65-'66.

**Bobby L. Moore** died on 30 December 2016. Bobby was Stagecoach 6 during late '68 and early '69.

**Emery Fisher** died last July. He was a pilot in '66.

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**AN EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCE . . . WITH  
EXCEPTIONAL MEN**

*Ken Donovan, Stagecoach 28*

We now gather in the twilight of our years, to recall events that happened nearly 50 years ago, but more importantly to share our lives since we came home. I guess I always knew this but it has taken this long to come to the full

realization that I survived an extraordinary experience and that I shared it with truly exceptional men. I am alive today because of them, and they are the best of their generation.

While we came from all corners of America, we answered the call of our country when it was not the smart or popular thing to do. We shared a desire to fly, and willingly subjected ourselves to the Army's program that would make us into the finest combat helicopter pilots in the world. While we would fly the symbol of America's most unpopular war, I believe we fought more to keep the faith with each other than for America. I am reminded of a quote from a poem, *An Irish Airman Foresees His Death*; "I fight against those I do not hate, for those I do not love." This shared commitment to each other was unlimited, and while it was not something we openly talked about, we were willing to turn landing zones into aircraft junkyards to get our guys out. During my interview with my first platoon leader, Cpt. Joe Harrelson, he set a simple standard, "Remember Donovan, we go into an assault together, and no matter what happens we all come out together." This standard was again demonstrated when the "Old Man," Maj. Dean Owen, led us into LZ Kate on a night resupply mission. Actions of truly exceptional men.

The 155<sup>th</sup> was one of the first assault units in Vietnam, and has a long and proud history based on the actions of the men assigned to it. Jim, one of the "boat people," launched off a Navy aircraft carrier in 1965 into the unknown of Vietnam. We fought during the Tet Offensive, Gil fought during the first battle of Duc Lap in 1968. Russ assaulted into Ben Het the morning after tanks hit the SF base. We fought with the 20<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Squadron, whose pilots were old enough to be our fathers, in hundreds of nameless places on the Ho Chi Minh Trail across the fence. In late 1969 we would fight a major battle at LZ Kate, Bu Prang, and Duc Lap . . . even knowing the war was winding down. Charlie was shot down at Bu Prang only three days before his DEROS. John almost lost his leg going into the Volcano.

Other exceptional men would continue to fight while their fellow Americans openly demonstrated against them and the war. Against all odds we continued to serve, kept the faith with our fellow soldiers, and were courageous when we had to be. While some of us stayed in and would fly and fight in other wars, most got out, the last time they would fly was their last mission. Following the example of America's greatest generation, they took off their uniforms, and got on with their lives. We got our educations, started our careers, got married and raised our families. We became what our fathers were after WWII, solid citizens and loving fathers who lived quiet but still exceptional lives.

At the church I attend they have a small memorial to the men and women who have served. I always stop and say a short prayer; "Hi guys, you are still remembered, I will see you in the next life, where the sky is always blue, we never worry about fuel, and nobody shoots at us, be at peace."

For some reason thanks does not seem enough, but thanks for helping me survive an extraordinary experience and sharing your lives with me.

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*Editorial comment: The above narrative is one of the most powerful statements about our shared experience I have ever read. As a former Stagecoach 6, it lets me know that I do not stand alone in my admiration for all of you.*

**Chuck Markham, Stagecoach 5 & 6 1970**

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## **Book Reviews**

### **MANY BEAUCOUP MAGICS**

by **Tom Garvey**

Garvey was a Special Forces guy at Tieu Atar in 1968, and everything in this short novel says, “I was there.” Case in point is the description of the main character’s visit to HQ at the Bungalow in downtown BMT. This isn’t your typical shoot-‘em-up war story, but it definitely takes place in a combat zone. The final mission has action that includes 155 AHC slicks riding to the rescue – and that part really happened. Stagecoach pilot Al Owen and crew chief Mike “Monk” Andrews play a starring role, and Jim Ulakovic and Sheldon Reyher were there, too. A good story, worth a read.

### **RED FLAGS**

by **Juris Jurjevic**

Another short novel, this one takes place at Cheo Reo. Not a lot of shooting in this one, either; rather, an in-depth look at the Vietnam War in a small far-from-Saigon village. Vietnamese Army corruption, ARVN-Montagnard distrust (or maybe enmity), local villagers wanting only to be left alone, possible ARVN-VC collusion; all of these and more are in this story. And while US personnel are focused on prosecuting the war, none of the other parties seem much interested in that. Again, this author was there; the FAC callsign is “Pterodactyl.” Another good story.

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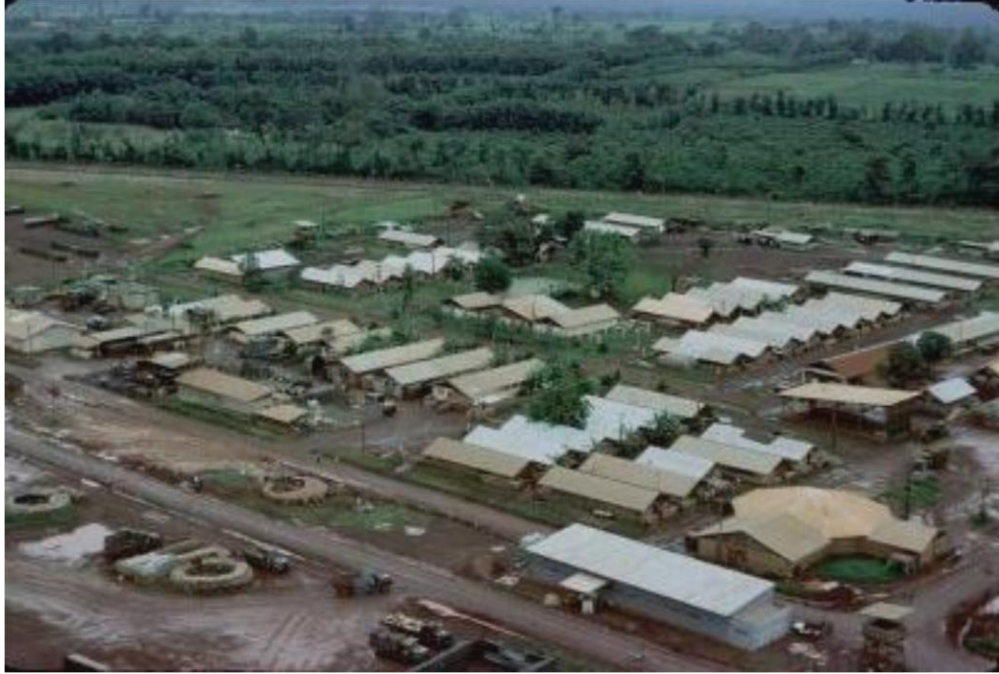
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Sortie 63 compiled and edited by Chuck Markham. Thanks to those who have shared their stories here. All mistakes, errors, and omissions are mine - and that’s an order!

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Camp Coryell, probably 1970.

155 AHC ASSOCIATION

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