



BAN ME THUOT BARB

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



Sortie 70

NOVEMBER 2018

OUR FIRST TRAGIC LOSS

Norm Gustitis, Stagecoach 3

The company had arrived in Vietnam as A/1/1 in May, '65; I got there in September. They had many missions all over the country. The young warrants were doing a great job, they were the backbone of the unit. When I reported in, the CO assigned me to CWO Glen Mantooh. He was one of the best, he helped me learn the ropes.

One of my early assignments was to drop a damaged ship at Maintenance – but there was no one working, since it was a weekend. I left them a note, “Need by Monday!” Another assignment was to arrange food and billeting for 100 men. Oh, and their ETA was 2 hours! I’m not sure how, but it all worked out. Another morning, at another base, Glen and I were to fly to BMT. Glen said it would be a good time for formation OJT, so I flew.

Actions were slow and easy until October '65, when the NVA attacked the Plei Me Special Forces camp. Two USAF planes were shot down there. This was the first time the NVA were noticed in the field. The 155th was ordered to Pleiku, with CPT Leonard Boswell heading up this mission. We were met on the ramp by COL Mcene and MAJ Charlie Beckwith. It was all “hurry and go;” 300 troops were waiting near the strip. After a very short briefing, we departed to recon the area. The COL and MAJ were in our ship, and two Falcon gunships led the way.

About 20 miles out, one of the men in back pulled on my strap and pointed at the gunships. I looked over to see that the main rotor had departed 1LT Preisendefer’s gunship. The rotor was spinning like a top. The chopper was upright, and seemed to be gliding – and then it crashed and exploded. All of us were in shock. It was clear that there could be no survivors. We were ordered to continue the recon mission. On the way back to Pleiku we flew over the crash site; it was still burning.

When we went out to recover the bodies, we took along infantry troops on extra ships for security, since we did not know what to expect. Doc Curry and a couple of his Medics were assigned the difficult task of gathering the remains. That was the most difficult mission I ever flew – and it was nothing compared to what Doc and the Medics had to do! Later, we had a memorial service for the crew at BMT.

As the Ops Officer, I fully expected some sort of inquiry or accident investigation as to why the rotor came off. Back state-side, even a hard landing would be enough to convene a Flight Evaluation Board for the pilots – but not here. What a contrast! Our Maintenance shop checked all of our helos, but found no problems. The big sign at Battalion, “ZERO DEFECTS,” did not matter; it was just the cost of the war.

The crew of Falcon 647 were:

Harold Preisendefer
Josef Huwyler
William Johnson
Michael Davis



Brave young men, serving their country,
they made the ultimate sacrifice.

REMEMBERING NACH (continued)

Roger Elliot

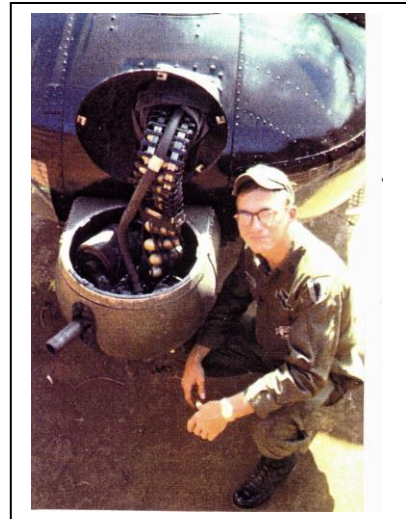
I just wanted to let you know that **Dan Reeves'** article, "Remembering Nach," really hit home for me. Dave was like a Big Brother to me when I arrived at the 165th Maintenance. He took me under his wing because I too was from Iowa - about 80 miles from his hometown in Nebraska. Unfortunately, like a Little Brother, I didn't follow all of his advice as much as I should have. I think of him every day. Thank you, Dave.

Jodi Petersen

I am married to **Dave Nachtigall's** nephew, Chris Petersen. My mother-in-law is Dave's twin sister, **Mary Nachtigall**. She received the recent newsletter and was very excited to see the article about Dave written by Dan Reeves!!! She is wondering if there was a way to get a copy of the pictures on the back of the flyover? And any pictures that anyone may have of Dave would be welcome. Thank you.

Chris and Jodi Petersen
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Mary Nachtigall
1404 S. 10th St #6
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Dave Nachtigall

RENO RECAP

If you missed it – your loss. Several said it might have been the best one yet! 55 BMT guys (give or take) came to Reno, bringing about that many family and friends. A few were first-timers, attending their first 155 AHC reunion – and they all said they'd be back. Good times were had by all.

Muchos kudos to **Jim Cunningham** for hosting the party. Jim did a LOT of work – and his efforts paid off handsomely. Thanks, too, to **Bud Martin**, for arranging the Nevada National Guard facility tour; the Chinooks and Black Hawks were definitely a highlight. And VERY special thanks go out to **Joyce** and **Fred Yamagata**, who again made a significant contribution to the reunion kitty. Well done to all!

Another highlight was the banquet speaker, **Pat Leary**. Pat was a gun pilot in Pleiku back in the day, so he fit right in – and now he's the president of Friends of Vinh Son Montagnard Orphanage. The Friends organization raises money to support Kontum orphans; the 155 AHC sends an annual donation, as do several members. We made it worth Pat's while to visit, handing over \$335 raised from a raffle for the beautiful quilt stitched by **Marlynn Simpson** (wife of **Norm Simpson**). It goes without saying that our very own Coachmen provided the musical entertainment – and it might have been their very best performance – EVER!

Attendees were (apologies in advance to those I've left out) Jim Abbott, Ken Acker, Bo Adolph (CCS guy), John Ahearn, Frank Alotta, Bob Beaudreault, Dave Bennett, Wayne Coward, Jim Cunningham, Les Davison, Ken Donovan, Jack Drewiega, Wally Foster, Jack Frost, Bob Gardner, Bob Goolsby, John Grow, Joe Harrelson, Dennis Harris, Bud Henry, Steve Herbruck, Rein Hofgesang, Ron Holt, Rueben Hunter, Larry Ingram, Bud Jarvis, Terry Kirkpatrick, Russ Kogut, Tom Love, Bob Maddox, Chuck Markham, Brad Marsh, Bud Martin, Charlie Marvin, Matt Matthews, Lee McGriff, Bruce McInnes, Bob Nickle, Dean Owen, Dave Pollock, Dan Reeves, Billy Richardson, Howard Ryder, Lew Sain, Royal Sander, Dave Skoog, Jim Stallard, Gil Terry, Frank Uhring, Rod Waddell, Phil Watson, HC Waters, Jim Winters, and Fred Yamagata.

SEEKING INFO on TERRY WEBB

My dad was **Terry Webb**, who served with the 155th at BMT in 1970. He was from Sacramento, he worked in Maintenance in the Sheet Metal shop. He just never talked about his time in Vietnam. After he passed two years ago, I found the 155th in his orders, and then I found your Home Page. I would dearly love to hear from guys who knew my dad in BMT – and photos would be over the top! **Please?** I'm in California, my e-mail address is "shopdog79@gmail.com."

Thank you all for your service to our country!

Shelly Webb

SEEKING INFO for GENE SIMMONS

I served in the 155th 1967-1968, I'm looking for anyone serving during this time. Does anyone have any Agent Orange compensation for service during this time? Please contact me at "genewash2@verizon.net". Thank you.

Gene A. Simmons

4001 Highgate Dr.

Valrico, Fl. 33594

"SWEET MOTHER OF JESUS, HELP US!"

Pete Agur, Stagecoach 17

"Gary, you're up on Guard." Gary squeezed the Transmit button and made the most important radio call of our young lives . . .

This was my first flight as a pilot in Viet Nam. How did I get there? And, how did we get out?

During the summer of '67 my dad, a highly decorated WWII Naval Aviator, sat me down for a Father-Son chat. His tuition money and my grades were not doing well together. What was my next choice? I knew I did not want play hide and seek in the jungles of Vietnam. So, I tested into the Army as a Warrant Officer candidate. Hah! The joke would be on me!

I became a newly minted Army Rotary Wing Aviator in November of '68. I had maximized my odds of survival by studying hard in flight school and graduated in the top 10% of my class. Additional survival motivation was provided by my mid-year marriage to my high school sweetheart. I was as ready as I could be. I had every reason to live. I was ready to take my training into the real world. As I prepared to board my flight to RVN my father hugged me and whispered, "Do your job, don't volunteer for anything, and come home safe." Great advice I should have heeded.

We arrived in Cam Rahn on Thanksgiving Day. I processed through 10th Battalion headquarters in Dong Ba Thin with three classmates. The personnel officer described each of the aviation companies that needed pilots. I asked about their operational histories. The 155th in Ban Me Thuot (BMT) was in the Central Highlands, only 45 miles east of the Cambodian border and the Ho Chi Minh Trail. During the past year the 155th had been involved in the most action and had lost the most ships and people. Using FNG logic, I figured they had been through their tough times. I asked to go there.

I arrived in BMT the next day, eager to fly. Let me at it! But the 155th's senior Instructor Pilot, Russ Kogut, was on R&R. I had to cool my heels until he got back to give me my in-country check ride, to confirm I knew how to keep the spinning side up. I was assigned to the First Platoon. After I got settled into my hootch there wasn't much to do. So, I went to the O Club and listened to the pilots swap stories. Over the next few days I picked up numerous tidbits about operations and equipment. On my third day in BMT there was a change of command celebration. The hail and farewell party lasted well into the night. Not being much of a drinker, I called it

quits early. At about 0130 the first of a half dozen mortar rounds came in. When the dust settled there was no real battle damage to people or equipment - but the party was over. The next morning one of the Peter Pilots was unable to fly due to a severe case of alcohol poisoning. Our platoon leader came to my room. They were out of pilots. They had decided to allow me to fly with WO1 Gary Burns on an Ash and Trash mission (local area resupply). The cover story was it would be a "local area orientation" flight.

I met Gary at the aircraft. This was his first flight since he had been involved in a recent accident. He had nearly been killed when his aircraft had struck a building and the rotor system had penetrated the cockpit and narrowly missed him. He had escaped with minor injuries. However, his confidence had been seriously shaken. He was getting back in the saddle on a CAVU day (Ceiling And Visibility Unlimited) while flying a quiet resupply mission.

Our mission coordinator was a sharp SP4 (name forgotten) who would direct us from the back of the aircraft on where to go and what we'd carry (people and cargo). Our crew chief and gunner worked well together (again, names have been lost in time) as we prepared for departure.

It was a beautiful day in the heart of the Central Highlands dry season. Towards the end of the afternoon the mission coordinator told us he would stay at a remote outpost while we made a circuit of remote outposts before scooping him up to head home.

Our first stop was a small Special Forces outpost called "The Tree". There was a single tall

hardwood next to their helipad that had survived the clearing process for setting up their camp. The Tree was adjacent to Highway 14, a dirt road that ran North-South along the Cambodian border. From here we were headed north with two Special Forces medics we'd picked up. One was getting ready to go home. He was showing his Area of Operations to his replacement.

As we departed The Tree, Gary told me he was cutting the corner a bit to save time and fuel. I thought nothing of it. We were about a mile or so west of Highway 14. Although I did not realize it, we were flying over Cambodia.

We leveled off 1,500 feet above the jungle. I was enjoying the view out the right side of the aircraft. Gary mentioned the mountain to our east was called Nam Lyr. He said it was a known enemy stronghold. All I saw was a tree-covered peak. I was about to ask Gary a question when there was a loud bang as the aircraft shuddered and yawed violently. My eyes immediately went to the instruments. Rotor RPM was decaying and engine RPM was winding up, off the gauge. Whatever had happened had sheared the short shaft (the drive shaft between the engine and the transmission). Gary slammed the collective down into autorotation and was descending straight ahead. I looked out to find a place to land. There was nothing but jungle. Lots and lots of tall, thick jungle.

My first reaction was to argue with God. "This is not fair! I worked so hard to be ready. This is my first flight. I just got married. What can I do that will allow You to get me out of this?" Then I realized I wasn't doing Gary any good, so I went to work. I secured the fuel system and



Sunrise at the Wall, Veterans Day 2018

Les Davison photo

yelled to the back-seat passengers to tighten their seatbelts. I locked Gary's and my armored seats' harness systems. As Gary began our autorotative deceleration at the tops of the trees, I spun the UHF radio frequency to 243. nothing, keyed the intercom and said, "Gary, you're up on Guard." Gary clenched the Transmit button and made the most important radio call of our young lives. He would tell the world we needed help and where to find us. What he said was, "Sweet Mother of Jesus, help us!"

I thought, "Gary, that is NOT a position report!" I looked out the front of the aircraft as we settled into the jungle. Gary had done a perfect autorotation to a touchdown in the tops of the trees. As he pulled the last of the pitch to minimize the descent into the limbs below, I told myself, "You only die once. Watch closely."

The rotor blades struck the upper branches. The aircraft shuddered violently as the blades were torn off and we rolled to the right as we free fell to the jungle floor. The impact was stunning. I opened my eyes. The silence was awesome. I didn't know if I'd been unconscious or if I had simply been dazed by the sudden stop. I didn't hurt. Was that good or bad? I looked out of the front of the aircraft. We were on our right side (my side down). Dust was settling through the sun's rays backed by a host of deep green jungle foliage. I heard fuel spilling. I wanted out of there NOW! I was trying to unbuckle my shoulder harness when there was a huge pressure on my left shoulder and helmet as Gary stood on me to climb out the high side of the aircraft.

It took a few seconds of fumbling with my chicken plate to get to the seatbelt unlatched. Free at last! I rolled out of my seat and scrambled into the back to help the passengers and crew go up and out through the left side cargo door. We shut off the aircraft switches, grabbed our weapons, and hustled a few yards away to assess our situation.

We did a quick check of ourselves and each other. One of the passengers had minor cuts on the bridge of his nose from the impact of his sunglasses. The gunner was hurt the worst; a shoulder injury. Apparently, he'd been struck by a Mermite can of ice cream when we hit the ground. No Purple Heart for that!

We looked back at the aircraft. She was on her right side, bent and broken. She had given herself up well to protect us. Gary had done a great job of setting her down in the jungle's top. The rest had been answered prayers. We discussed our situation.

TO BE CONTINUED

POOLSIDE PARABLE

29 Sep 69

The reason for the existence of the 155th is to provide aviation support to various units located in the Central Highlands. It is common knowledge to all that without helicopter support nearly all of the friendly operations conducted would be greatly hindered, if not altogether impossible.

It therefore becomes the responsibility of every Officer, Warrant Officer, Non-Commissioned Officer, and Enlisted Man in this unit to ensure that our best effort is put forth in providing this support. The 155 enjoys a good reputation among the units it supports, and we certainly want to maintain it. Each individual must all have a positive attitude toward doing everything he can to improve our support. Remember – support is all we have to sell. Let's make sure our customers get first-class service.

MAJ Dean Owen
Commander, 155

ED: "Poolside Parable" was a company newsletter published by the 155th Public Information Office a few times during 1969. Our History files include five issues (Volume 1, Number 1 through Volume 1, Number 5, from Aug '69 through Oct '69). If you have copies of other issues, please share them with Historian Les Davison.

TREASURER'S REPORT: Oct 2016 – Oct 2018

10/24/2016 Beginning Balance:	\$	11,702.70	
Receipts from 10/24/2016 thru 10/29/2018:			
2018 Reunion Receipts		11,709.00	
Dues and Merchandise		3,596.37	
Total Receipts			\$ 27,008.07
Costs 10/24/2016 thru 10/29/2018:			
2018 Reunion Costs	\$	7,723.85	
Merchandise Costs & Mailing		5,332.10	
Newsletter Mailings		1,691.54	
Orphanage Donations		1,050.00	
2016 Reunion Liquor Cost		882.00	
Roster Mailings		503.51	
Total Costs			17,183.00
10/29/2018 Ending Balance:	\$		9,825.07

Jeff Schrader, Treasurer

COMMO CHECK

Jim Abbott – Reno was my first 155 reunion, it was great to see old friends again.

Rein Hofgesang - Sharon and I had a great time at the reunion; we're looking forward to Indy.

Dan Reeves – If I had known I was going to enjoy the reunion this much, I wouldn't have waited all this time to come to one.

Jim Cunningham – I hope everyone enjoyed themselves at the Reno gathering. I wish I'd had more time to talk to folks.

Wally Foster – Many thanks to **Jim Cunningham** and everyone else who helped make Reno a memorable reunion.

Karen & Tom Love – We sure enjoyed our time with all of you at Reno.

Rueben Hunter – I look forward to seeing LOTS of you in Indianapolis in two years. I can't promise, but I'm going to try to arrange Huey rides.

Bob Beaudreault – It's always a pleasure and an honor to gather with 155 guys. I love you!



Falcon Armorers in 1969: L to R, Dan Reeves, Herb Hess, & John Hendley.

The aviation units were the sole combat element of the U.S. Army that did not come apart under the stress of the war in Viet Nam. Nearly 6,000 helicopter pilots and crewmembers perished, but the Army airmen never cracked.

Neil Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie

GENTLEMEN START YOUR ENGINES! The next reunion will be sometime in the fall of 2020 in Indianapolis, IN. **Rueben Hunter** has graciously volunteered to serve as our host.

THANK YOU, 155TH

From: **Friends of Vinh Son Montagnard Orphanage**
To: **155th AHC Association**

On behalf of the children, the sisters, and the Board of FVSO, we want to thank you for your most thoughtful donation. Your contribution of \$500 on November 9, 2018 will support our mission of providing nutrition, clean water, medical care, and education to the 850 children as well as their caregivers at Vinh Son and Sao Mai.

Thanks so much for your trust and your most generous support.

THE BARB NEEDS YOUR STORIES

Norm Gustitis' letter started like this: "I should tell about this tragedy before too many of us are lost." Well said, Norm; very well said. There are so many stories that haven't been told – and none of us is getting younger.

At the reunion, a few arms were twisted – and stories for future Barbs were promised. **Royal Sander** will tell about when he and **Billy Richardson** arrived at Camp Coryell during a mortar attack. **Howard Ryder** will tell about being shot down at Duc Lap. And **Tom Love**, **Russ Kogut**, **Bud Henry**, **Ken Acker**, and **John Grow** all signed up to share memories, too. Thank you in advance, gentlemen. We look forward to reading your stories.

And others of you out there, PLEASE consider sharing your memories of your time at BMT.

155TH AHC Association Officers

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Les Davison – Historian	bmt.uh1c.69@gmail.com	571-389-8765
Elizabeth Coward – Webmaster		

Officers' contact info is shown above. PLEASE contact Matt if your address, phone number, or e-mail address change. If you have any questions or matters of concern relating to the Association or BMT, calls and/or messages are welcomed by all the officers.

And if you just want to call to say "hi," we'll take those calls, too – gladly!

Overleaf Photo

Another of Rueben Hunter's excellent BMT photos from '65, when he was a Shotgunner with the Falcons. This one shows our base at BMT City Field. You can see the perimeter, several company buildings, several tents, and a few concrete pads for helos. What you don't see are revetments, hootches, Pterodactyls – or a swimming pool.



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