



BAN ME THUOT BARB

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



Sortie 71

JUNE 2019

“SWEET MOTHER OF JESUS, HELP US!”

((continued))

Pete Agur, stagecoach 17

In the last Sortie, Gary Burns (A/C) and Pete Agur (Peter Pilot, very 1st mission in-country) had crashed their Stagecoach slick into trees somewhere between Duc Lap and Bu Prang. On the ground, the four crew members and two pax found themselves relatively unhurt. The story continues . . .

We discussed our situation:

We were 10 minutes flying time, or about 15 miles, north of The Tree.

We were about one mile west of the road we would have normally followed and not likely to be easily found.

We had not transmitted a position report.

We had no survival radio.

We did not want to stay with the aircraft. It was going to attract bad guys.

We were ambulatory.

It was 1630. We would not be missed for at least a half hour. It would take an hour, or more, for a Search and Rescue effort to be launched. The odds of being found before dark were slim.

The mutual decision: we would self-rescue.

We set out southbound for The Tree. I grabbed the gunner's M60 and a couple of belts of ammunition and strapped them on. I also had my 45 plus a couple of clips of 45 and 7.62mm ammo on my belt. It is amazing how much an in-condition and highly motivated 21-year-old can tote!

Gary took the lead, with the crew and two passengers following. I was in trail as we worked our way through the thick underbrush. Damn! I learned to fly so I wouldn't have to do this!!! After about 15 minutes we came to a stream flowing across our intended route. It was only a couple of yards wide and a few feet deep. When the first few guys had crossed they did a quick check: yep, leeches! I had a better idea. I tossed the M60 and ammo belts across to the crew chief and worked my way downstream a few yards where there was a narrow spot. The far bank was covered by thick bushes. No big deal, I'd jump over. At least I wouldn't have to deal with leeches ... I hoped. I took a three-step running start and made the leap. As I landed I glimpsed and heard a large dark animal snarl and make a sudden sprint for parts unknown. One of the guys saw it come out the far side of the bushes. He said it looked like a big cat. Whatever it was, we had scared the heck out of each other.

Gary continued to lead us southbound. After another half an hour we took a short break to discuss our next moves. The sun was getting low. We didn't expect to be found this evening. But, we wanted to be in position to be seen if a search aircraft approached. We needed to go uphill to the highest point, so we could maximize our odds of being seen. Worst case: high ground was the most defensible.

It took us about 15 minutes to clamber to the top of the heavily wooded ridge. The trees were thick and tall. We could only see a small piece of sky above us. We set up a perimeter defense. I faced back the way we had come, with the M60 locked and loaded, resting on a fallen log.

We listened attentively for two things: search aircraft and the enemy trailing us. For the first half hour, we heard neither. Then we heard a C-130 fly high overhead. He wasn't looking for us. We all sat quietly, each watching our part of the perimeter. Small animals and birds stirred as the jungle began to settle into its normal routine after our rude and crude struggle up the hill. I looked over the sights of the M60. I wondered if I could really pull the trigger on another human being.

My debate was interrupted by the distant sound of a Bird Dog making S-turns to our southeast. He was working his way along our expected route. Gary pulled a pen flare out of his vest and waited for the plane to get a bit closer. As the engine noise reached its peak Gary fired the flare to catch the SAR pilot's attention. The flare made a loud pop and shot upwards. It ricocheted a couple of times off of branches and dropped back, well short of the jungle canopy tops. Gary quickly screwed another flare cartridge onto the firing mechanism and tried it again. Crap! Same result!

I suddenly remembered I had another way to catch the Bird Dog driver's attention. While I had been sitting in the O Club, I had heard a couple of pilots complaining about how poorly the pen flares performed. One of them said he always carried a clip full of tracers. One of the 7.62 clips in my vest was tracers-only. I tossed the clip to Gary and explained what it was. He slapped the clip into his rifle and anxiously waited for the Bird Dog to swing back our way. As the engine noise grew Gary fired off three rounds straight up through the branches above us. Our collective hearts sank as the O-1 reversed direction, continuing his search pattern. We impatiently waited for him to turn back towards us. As he did, Gary repeated the three-shot volley and we waited. The engine noise changed. He was headed our way! As he approached, Gary pulled his strobe light off his vest and turned it on. The Bird Dog was only a few hundred feet above the trees when we first saw him. He immediately entered a sharp bank and circled us a few times. He had seen us! But, we were not yet out of the woods.

We watched with concern as he drifted his orbit to the south. Then we realized he did not want to stay directly overhead, lest he draw unwanted attention our way. We also knew it would take a while for the rescue team to reach us. We hunkered down and waited impatiently. As the minutes agonizingly ticked by the sun set. The jungle darkened and came alive with new sounds. Our imaginations had a hard time separating nature's noises from what

we feared; the enemy finding us before we could make our escape.

Finally, after more than an hour, we heard the welcome thump of multiple rotor blades coming our way. The Falcons laid down suppressive fire on either side of the ridge as a Dust-Off Huey from the coast came to a hover high above Gary's strobe. The noise and downwash were disorienting as we watched a jungle penetrator descend to us. We sent the two passengers up first. We all watched as the Dust-Off pilot skillfully kept the aircraft steady as the penetrator rose among the branches above us. A few, long minutes later it was time for the crew chief and gunner to go. Gary and I watched and waited anxiously. When the penetrator finally hit the jungle floor for the third time, we climbed on with our gear for our ride to rescue. About half way up we were dragged laterally through the branches. And as suddenly as this abuse started, it stopped. Later we found out our crew chief had moved over to help the winch crew ... throwing the aircraft out of lateral CG. One of the Dust-Off crew unceremoniously shoved him back across the deck to reestablish aircraft controllability.

As Gary and I emerged from the tops of the jungle I watched the tracers and rockets lacing the sky. The spectacle was eerily beautiful. The night was black. There was not a light on the ground to be seen. There was a gorgeous full moon rising adjacent to Nam Lyr. As we were being brought onboard the rescue bird I thought, "A whole year. A whole year to go! Oh, my!"

We greeted the Dust-Off crew with elated hugs and pats on the back as we were pulled aboard the aircraft. They dropped us at BMT, refueled, and headed back to the coast before we could properly thank them. To them, it was all in a day's work. Those guys were amazing. True heroes!

Epilogue

Gary and I bought the Pterodactyl pilot a case of his favorite Kentucky bourbon.

The passengers and crewmembers recovered from our adventure.

Me? The next day, I had the glow from freshly cheating death rudely interrupted. A Maintenance Officer came to my hootch and told me to saddle up. I had to show them where the aircraft was. They wanted to salvage what they could and destroy what they couldn't. They didn't want the enemy to have it. I thought, "Hey, I just escaped from that place. There are bad people down there." That argument wouldn't work, so I climbed in and sat down in the back for the uncomfortable ride to hell and back.

It is amazing how detailed your memory is after a catastrophic event. Using the relative position of Nam Lyr and the road to the east, I was able to direct the crew to within a hundred yards of the crash site. With the Falcons providing cover, we set down a short distance away to let a ground team do their job. I was relieved when they reemerged from the jungle, mission accomplished.

That was the end of the beginning of my year, a whole year. Thinking back, I guess Gary's distress call worked... the Sweet Mother of Jesus helped us.

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SHARING COMMO

Bud Jarvis – Hope you had a wonderful Christmas and are looking forward to a great new year.

Greg Bundros – It sounds like the reunion was great fun, sorry I couldn't make it.

Terry Kirkpatrick – I enjoyed the reunion more than I can say.

Joe Kinder – Happy New Year to all!

Steve McCartney – Just called to say hello, it's been a while. Wish we could have joined the gathering at Reno.

Rick Farlow – Met up with two other Falcons for breakfast the other day; **Buzz Arney** and **Les Davison**. We mostly talked about when we were young and crazy.

2020 Reunion – Indianapolis The next reunion of the BMT boys will be in Indy. Nothing is set in stone yet, but very likely the latter half of September. Reuben Hunter ('65 Shotgunner) is making the arrangements. Look for more details in the next newsletter.

FALCONS FOREVER

John Grow, Falcon

Paul Fadz had been keeping in touch with Larry (Bing) Cherry from time to time. In early July 2018 Judy Cherry called Paul and told him that Bing had received surgery for lung cancer. Paul was going to go and see Bing, and they talked about a possible get together of several of the Falcons that had flown together in 1966 and 1967. Paul called several of us and we thought that this was a great idea, and July 25th to the 28th was chosen. Fran Tiner and his wife Laurie, John Gann, Paul Fadz, Al Fitzgerald, Vince McDonough, myself and wife Gretchen, and of course Bing and his wife Judy got together in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Judy arranged to pick us up in Phoenix and drive us to their beautiful home. This was the first time that Al Fitzgerald, John Gann and Vince McDonough had seen each other since the day Johnny had been wounded. And the first time Bing had seen Johnny since that day. As you can imagine the meeting was very emotional.

We all told wonderful stories - mostly of our relationships with each other. It was as if time stood still. The jokes and the laughter with each other was wonderful. It was almost as if we were back in Vietnam together. I can't tell you how much fun we all had. It meant so much to Bing to see all the guys. It was wonderful and I recommend that if any of you can arrange a mini-reunion like this to please do so. We are all getting older and may not have many more chances to get together with our brothers from Ban Me Thuot.

The only problem was that if you were going to tell a war story, you had best get it right - because they were all there together.

JUST ANOTHER ROUTINE FLIGHT

Larry Pluhar, Stagecoach

Phil Watson's night flying story reminded me that I considered night time the most demanding and perilous flying we did. Pucker factor was never higher than Flare ship, when the only lights you had to reference were the tracers of the fire fight you were going to.

I have a very clear memory of one such night. On the evening of September 6, 1969, Jim Abbott and I were called in to Operations, no doubt from our normal location in the Club. We were told we had left the B50 commander at Duc Lap, and someone had to go get him. We both decided that if someone had to go out there at night, we may as well go together. Two senior Aircraft Commanders are better than one was our logic.

I decided I would fly the right seat since I had quite a bit of instrument time and was the unit IP. We gathered a crew and weapons and departed for Duc Lap. There was a high overcast that made it impossible to determine horizon at any time in the flight. However, thanks to a lack of light security at the SF camp at Duc Lap, we were confident that we could easily accomplish the mission. I remember choosing an altitude something above what we would normally fly at during the day; probably 3,000 msl or higher.

We contacted the SF on FM and landed on the usual pad. Within minutes the voice on the other end of the radio said our pax had long ago decided to RON there - and he had not requested pick up. Great, ruined our night in the club for this? I was still on the controls and lifted off on the return flight to BMT. I remember Jim lighting a cigarette and saying something about what a good time we were having - and about 300 feet AGL all I could see was the rotating beacon flashing in the windshield in front of me - and then the next flash was lightning. Jim's bitching changed to something like, "You better have brought all your pilot *stuff* with you tonight, Chickenman."

I turned the aircraft to our reciprocal heading to get back towards BMT, and accelerated our climb. I can remember trading jokes about our situation the entire way home. I'll bet the crew just thought we were lunatics, especially when Jim said something like "We'll just keep on this heading until we break out," and I replied "Or until the fuel runs out."

I began to feel a bit uneasy when our ETA was getting within single digits, but we punched out just near the 14K Bridge. Whew! We landed uneventfully, and, of course, returned to the club. When the other guys there asked how it went, Jim and I looked at each other, smiled, and said, "Just another routine flight."

Teamwork Pays Off in Chopper Rescue

Reprinted from "Stars and Stripes": 17June70, page 7

BAN ME THUOT, Vietnam (Special)- The crew of a 17th Combat Aviation Group Command and Control ship braved intense enemy fire to pick up the crew members of their sister ship after the second ship was shot down and crashed inside Cambodia 16 miles northwest of Duc Lap.

Maj. Gerard Luisi, commander of the 155th Assault Helicopter Co., 10th Aviation Bn., and his aircraft commander, Capt. Curt Seiler, were in radio contact with the other ship which was supporting the 23rd Vietnamese Div. Suddenly the pilot of the other Huey reported he had taken fire and was going down. Seiler spotted the burning helicopter two miles away as it plummeted 160 feet into the jungle.

6. Luisi called in air support and then spotted smoke popped by the downed crew. The command ship touched down about a kilometer from the crash site, but Seiler realized the crew would not be able to reach them and lifted off again, setting down about 500 meters closer.

Meanwhile, the crash victims were under heavy fire from the enemy on the ground. The gunners of the downed helicopter had removed their M-60 machine guns and were able to keep the enemy down until they reached the clearing where the command ship was waiting. A hail of gunfire was directed at the rescue ship as it lifted off but door gunners Spec. 4 James Gibbs and Spec. 4 Mark Griffin were able to suppress the enemy. The rescued crew was immediately flown to a hospital at Ban Me Thuot.

TAPS

Jim Smrcka passed away last August. Jim was a Falcon pilot in the early days.

Joe Pagan died last November in California. Joe was a pilot during '67 and '68.

G.R. "Gary" Butler passed away in Florida this past January. Gary was the 155 Maintenance Officer during late '68 and into '69.

Dick Lattimer passed away in May. Dick was a pilot at BMT in '67.

Disabled Super-Spooky Lands at Ban Me Thuot

(reprinted from Vagabond Voice, 1 May 1969)

As the C-119 "Flying Boxcar" was performing a typical night mission, the right engine failed and could not be re-started. Ban Me Thuot City Field was the only place to set down, and the smudge pot lights were not lit. But under the light from mortar and hand flares, the pilot and co-pilot landed the aircraft which contained 5,000 pounds of fuel, flares and minigun equipment, and the eight crewmembers. Because of the lighting or lack of it, the pilot and co-pilot, both from Phan Rang, touched down with only 25% of the runway left in which to stop the aircraft. The aircraft, "Shadow 61," skidded to a stop at the extreme end of the runway. The crew got the aircraft down safely at 2120 hours with two blown tires, but otherwise without incident. Congratulations to LTC Robert L. Conley and MAJ Robert Allen for a job well done.

Ed: "Vagabond Voice" was the newsletter of the 10th Combat Aviation Battalion, based at Dong Ba Thin.

ROCKET ACE

Les Davison, Falcon 2

BMT, spring or summer of '70. All of our Falcon gunships carried 2.75" Folding Fin Aerial Rockets as part of the armament system. I fired a lot of rockets, and got to be pretty accurate - but nobody ever called me "Ace." By comparison, some guys could hit the bullseye with a rocket; Terry Westbrook was one of those guys.

It was a B-50 mission. I was Falcon Lead and Terry flew the Trail ship, we were supporting the SOG guys working on the wrong side of the border. We'd covered our Stagecoach slicks as they extracted a team west of Duc Co. While scouting the area, we had glimpsed a one-man rope bridge across a small stream. After the slicks departed, the FAC asked us to go back and take out the bridge. It was well hidden under the trees, we had to be almost on top of it to see it. So there was no way to line up, it had to be a very quick snap shot. I went first and was able to get off two rockets before I had to pull up. Close - but no cigar. As I was turning inbound for a second run, Terry was pulling off the target. His radio call was brief. "The target is down," is all he said. Like I said, Terry was a Rocket Ace.

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