



BAN ME THUOT BARB

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



Sortie 73

December 2019

I DIDN'T FLY – BUT A YEAR IS STILL A YEAR

Willie Jennart

I am one of the many other guys – the ones who didn't fly, except as passengers. After all, a year is still a year! After being at Camp Holloway (Pleiku) for a while, I was with the 155th at BMT from July '66 to June '67. My job was Crash Rescue. Sometimes I would go with POL and set up fuel bladders in a clearing. I got the job a couple times after **Jack Drewiega** went back to the world. Most of the time I'd haul fuel out to BMT East Field, or just to the Corral for refueling at night.

One time we took our Crash Rescue truck out and hit the siren by mistake (FNG, of course). **MAJ Joe Parlas** hopped on our truck and ordered, "Siren off – RIGHT NOW!" (I saw he passed away; so many gone, that's why I'm telling this now.) I remember convoy duty in a 5 ton. One time on a PX beer run (Black Label) for the NCO Club, four of us rode to Nha Trang and back; **SP4 Ace Elliot** (our dog handler), **SGT Thomas**, **SGT Anderson**, and myself.

On my way home in June '67, I got held up at Cam Ranh for a week because of the Arab-Israeli Seven Day War. Back in the World, I was a driver at Fort Knox for five months, then got a 15 day "drop" thanks to Operation Santa Claus.

"To those that have gone before us"

"TWO-SIX IS GOING DOWN, ON FIRE"

Howard Ryder, 2nd Flight CE, '68-'69

23 Sep '68: We were Stagecoach 26 that day, **CPT Floyd Edwards** was the AC. **WO1 Bill Richardson** was the Peter Pilot, I was the Crew Chief, and **Ron St. Pierre** was my Door Gunner. It was a "milk run" mission, an easy day for the three of us who'd been there awhile – but not for Mr. Richardson. He was the newest FNG; it was his very first mission in Vietnam. For a while it was just another day in the 'Nam - and then we got the call.

"Attention, all aircraft in the area report to grid coordinates XXYY0000 for a TAC E." We landed somewhere around Duc Lap, and the AC's reported to the briefing. One company of the 4th ID on a Search and Destroy mission had run headlong into a hornets' nest. We were to insert the remainder of the battalion to join the battle; CPT Edwards would be Flight Lead. We cranked up with about thirteen birds in the lift, and picked up our troops nearby. At the PZ we met up with a LOH carrying the battalion CO. The plan was for him to show us the LZ (like we can't read a map?).

As we neared the LZ, the LOH dropped down into a clearing – and then we heard and saw BOOM! BOOM! At the same time, the LOH shot to the clouds, straight up. Over the radio, we heard, "OOPS, I forgot to call off our Arty." (And he's in charge?) We scattered and regrouped to go back in. Just as we cleared the trees all hell broke loose. My AC said "Go hot!" I stepped onto the skids and looked under the ship – to see a VC soldier in the middle of changing banana clips on his AK-47. By this time the console was popping circuit breakers, and I heard "26 going down, on fire." Uh-oh! I'm with 26! They say the most dreaded sound in aviation is silence. But I would argue that it's all that crap that goes off just before. I was just along for the ride as CPT Edwards skillfully brought us to the ground. (May I add, sir, your Instructors at flight school would be proud of that landing).

I unstrapped my seatbelt and reached for the armor slide on CPT Edward's seat, but the guy next to me shoved me out the door. I picked myself up and turned to find an empty ship – and the LZ deserted except for one other aircraft. I looked around to make sure nobody else was nearby, and headed for the other aircraft. On the way, my foot got caught in the elephant grass, and down I went

(again). At this point the other bird lifted off (just like the opening part in the Chuck Norris movie). I heard rounds going past me, and I crawled for the trees. Once there, I met an officer who told me to crawl back out there and get the weapon and helmet from the dead guy. After what seemed an eternity, we finally met back with the rest of the unit and the others of my crew.

We spent the rest of the afternoon clearing a hover hole and helping with the wounded. By late afternoon, it was safe enough to bring in birds to extract the casualties. I'll never forget, one of the grunts on that first ship out had an unexploded M-79 round lodged near his collar bone! A couple more birds took out more wounded, and then the radio came to life and told us the next bird in would extract the flight crew. It was dark as we heard the approach. "Holy crap!" We were still taking sporadic rifle fire, and the pilot turned on his landing and search lights! Fortunately, it all worked. We watched the most beautiful sight in the world - another Stagecoach slick had come to take us out of this little slice of Heaven.

As we all piled into the aircraft and anticipated a quick pitch pull - nothing happened! I counted heads in the bird and realized we were short one. I stuck my head out from my hiding spot behind the pilot's seat, and my AC was standing on the skid talking to our rescue crew like "No Big Deal." After a sprinkling of a few choice words, CPT Edwards joined us in the back and we were off. God bless all you 155 guys, I knew you'd come for us - because that's what we did for each other.

Postscript: At the Reno reunion, I was telling this story to several '68 guys. When I mentioned the guy with the embedded 40mm grenade, **Russ Kogut** jumped up. He said, "Hey, I remember that guy! I was the AC of the slick that took him out." THANK YOU, Russ! Well done, sir!

The Bunny Hop



Mike Temple, 348th Aviation Support Detachment

Once on a hot and humid day, an overloaded gunship did the bunny hop. We controllers labeled it so because you would build up RPM in the revetment area and briefly lift off. The RPM would bleed off and you would land. Short little "bunny hops" got you to the active. This day the crew chief finally got out to pull a few rockets, and the gunner unloaded some ammo cans. Finally the hops got long enough and, after using more runway than a Pterodactyl, the gunship went off to war.

Vernon Jennings, 348th "Tower guy", walking to work at City Tower, sometime in 1969 (**Mike Temple** photo)

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“HEY CHARLIE” (No, not that Charlie.)

Jim Kohler

It was just before Christmas 1965. I'd finished dinner in the Mess Hall, and as the sun set I retired to my hootch for letter writing and catch up time. As I was getting settled in, one of my hootch mates popped in and told us, "Come outside, you've got to see this, it's Charlton Heston at the NCO club." We went outside and sure enough, here came a large group of guys walking from the club, with the famous actor in the middle. Even though he was dressed in fatigues, he was easy to spot as he stood a good head above everyone else. Just about the time I got close to the group, one of the Mess Sergeants (who was well into his "cups") yelled out, "Hey Charlie, what was it like kissing Sophia Loren in *El Cid*?" To this day I can't remember his answer, but it got a lot of laughs. And then I chuckled again when the officers in the group scooted him forthwith off to the O Club, and the excitement was over.

HIDDEN FIGURES AT CAMP CORYELL:

the 165th Transportation Detachment

Gregory L. Ferris: SP/5, '66-'67

The recent *Ban Me Thuot Barb* newsletter deliberately opened the door by inviting members of the Air Force, MACV, Recon Airplane and "all other former residents" of the Camp to share stories, events and memories for the newsletter. Allow me to take the initiative in telling the story of the "hidden figures" of Camp Coryell.

Something tells me that very little is known of the 165th Transportation Detachment team at Camp Coryell. Indeed the camp had a diverse membership; however little has been said about the Detachment's role and responsibility of keeping the 155th AHC in the air.

Where we were located: The 165th was housed in four hootchs containing 64 enlisted members (88% were draftees), along with seven NCOs located in another hootch. The hootchs were close to the outdoor theater, the "Recreation Hall," and the road leading to the main gate.

What we did: The purpose of the Detachment was to support the 155th daily maintenance needs and, to be sure, periodic inspections/replacement of parts time worn (rotor, engine, etc.) Located across from the airfield was the Maintenance Line, where 6 vans dedicated to sheet metal repair, machine shop, rotor repair, electrical & avionics repair, engine/transmission repair, and tool crib were located. A short distance away -in front of the vans - were three quonset structures where three maintenance teams worked - each individual having a specialist level of knowledge. The commitment, along with long hours (going the extra mile) and dedication to work was the focus.

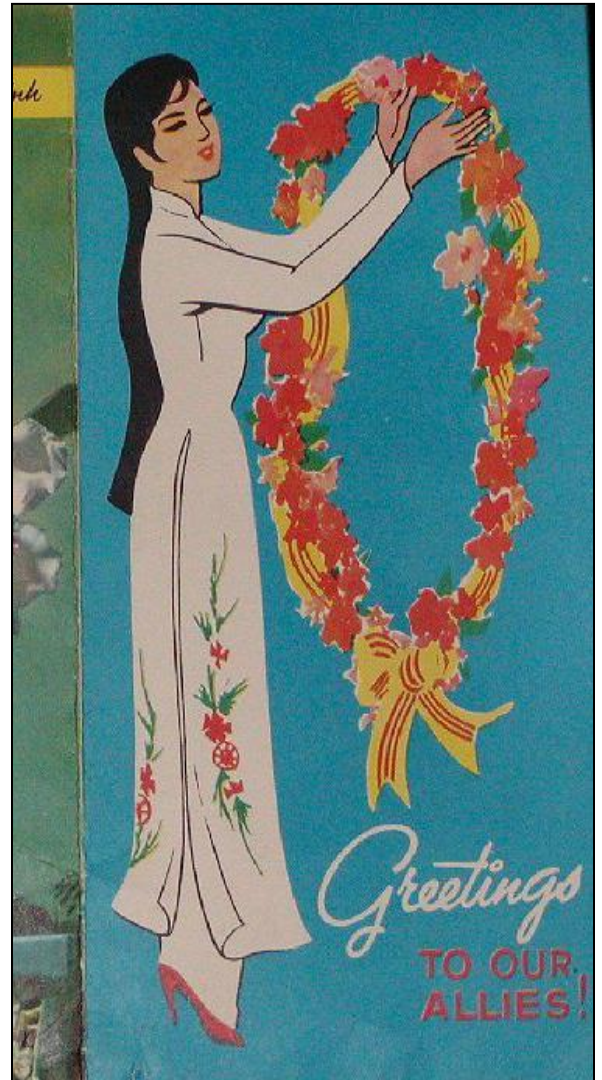
Working with each team was a Tech Specialist who thoroughly inspected the completed work as well as diagnosing reported problems. The Detachment had a full-time WO4 test pilot flying completed maintenance work as well as diagnosing problems along with the Tech Specialist.

The Detachment's relationship with 155th crew chiefs was exceptional. We provided them with answers to their questions and with resources when needed. And there were even times when some Detachment members filled in **briefly** as a 155th crew member.

Yes, the 165th Transportation Detachment were the hidden figures at Camp Coryell. However, our impact was greatly felt in the performance and safety of our choppers. To be sure, a comment made often and frequently used by us was – *Torqueing Down the Jesus Nut*. It meant *work was finished, on time and ready for the 155th AHC mission*.

CHRISTMAS CARD, 1966

Presented to MAJ Bo Atkinson, CO, 155 Assault Helicopter Company, by the Camp Coryell hootchmaids.



EMBERS OF WAR: the Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam

by Fredrik Logevall

Book review by Les Davison

This heavyweight tome (866 pages) digs deep into the French effort to reclaim its Indochina colonies in the aftermath of WWII. The book starts with the Japanese surrender in 1945 and ends with the first US military combat casualties in Vietnam in July, 1959. It is meticulously researched and well written. If you are interested in the lead-up to full-scale US involvement in Vietnam - and are not intimidated by the sheer size of this book - it's worth a read.

Reviews are available on-line, so I'll just highlight two VERY minor tidbits from the book:

- 1) Female French helicopter pilots performed heroically on medical evacuation missions in Vietnam, flying an early version of the Hiller H-23. One of those was Paule Dupont d'Isigny. She reportedly flew over 4,000 hours in theater, completing numerous rescue missions – many of them under fire.
- 2) In support of its deployment to Dien Bien Phu, the French Foreign Legion airlifted in two (not one, but **two**) Mobile Field Bordenlos. *Vive la France!*



Crewmen of a U.S. helicopter dive for cover during a Viet Cong rocket attack on a Special Forces camp near Bu Prang in Vietnam. The action was caught on film by IPI photographer Sunshuke Akatsuka. Twenty of the enemy were killed in subsequent action between Viet Cong and South Vietnamese troops that had been shifted to the camp to repulse a strong Communist attack. Casualties among Viet troops and American forces were described as light by the U.S.

Well, not exactly . . . The helicopter here is almost certainly Falcon 512, because that was Bundy's ship – and he's in the photo. In fact, all four men here are 155 guys. From the left, Stagecoach pilot **Dave Churilla** is at the pilot door, Falcon crew chief **Greg Bundros** (still wearing his chicken plate) is kneeling, Falcon pilot **Jack Coonce** looks to be getting to his feet, and Stagecoach pilot **Ken Donovan** (sunglasses) checks for damage from enemy fire. Ken picks up the story behind the photo.

Ken Donovan, Stagecoach 28

My recollection is that my Stagecoach bird had landed and shut down at Duc Lap. While there, a Falcon gun team landed, and I saw A/C Jack Coonce get out to look his aircraft over. I could tell something was wrong. Jack said they had been shot up and had taken a number of rounds. I helped check for damage, and it looked like they had flown right over the gun position. The rounds started at the chin bubble, going straight up, along the entire length of the aircraft. The good news was, other

than getting Jack's full attention, the aircraft was still flyable and no one had been hurt. I had no idea anyone had photographed the scene.

I DEROS'd in December of '69, and was on my way home. I had a layover in Chicago, and I knew that wounded Falcon pilot **Rein Hofgesang** was in the Great Lakes Naval Hospital near Chicago. I got some change and the number and called and asked to speak to Warrant Officer Hofgesang. They were very kind and told me to call back in 10 minutes and they would get him near a phone. I called back and sure enough, I was able to talk to Hof for about 10 minutes. Sometime later, I got this newspaper clipping from him. It is now over 50 years old but I still have it, thanks Hof.

Ed: And Greg Bundros still has an old newspaper copy of the photo, too. A friend of his saw the photo, recognized Greg, and cut out the photo and sent it to him.

SHARING COMMO

Merrill Merman – I appreciate the "Incoming"; I'll view it as "friendly fire".

Bill Brooks – I was the Crew Chief on **Major Owen's** lead slick the night we went into LZ Kate. I'm not sure why I'm not on the crew list.

Herb Hess – Thank you for letting me know that **Dan Reeves** had passed away. We were Falcon armorers – and good friends – in '69. I sure will miss his telephone calls.

Vince Giarratano – Thanks for all that you do.

Jerry Heydenberk – Here's my new address and phone. I don't want to miss the next **Barb**.

Willie Jennart - My thanks to everyone involved in writing and sending the **Barb**. I don't have a computer, so I wrote a little story about my time at BMT the old-fashioned way – pen and paper. I hope that's OK. (*Ed: That is most definitely OK, Willie; see the story on Page 1 – and thank you!*)

Jack Frost – Sorry to find that "Uncle Joe" Parlas passed away. He was our first CO; a good man.

Mike Arthur – I like the new "Incoming," looking forward to the next one.

TAPS

John Quinn, a BMT pilot in '67, died in May 2019.

Dan Reeves passed away suddenly this past June. Dan was a Falcon Armorer in '69 and '70. He attended his first 155 reunion last year in Reno, he told me he wished he hadn't waited so long.

Jim Bales passed away two months ago. Jim was a 1st Platoon Door Gunner during '67-'68, he teamed up to fly with Crew Chief **Lee McGriff**. (After all these years, Lee still has Jim's back; he is helping Jim's wife deal with the VA. Well done, Lee!)

FLY HIGH, FRIENDS

BMT AUTHOR SEEKS PHOTOS

Mike Bengé, USAID in BMT

I've met a bunch of you guys over the years, I sincerely appreciate you including me in your BMT group. For those of you who don't know me, I was captured at BMT during Tet '68, marched to Hanoi, and spent five years as a POW. I finally got serious in writing a book on my memories of Vietnam; it's titled An Ugly American in Hanoi. There's a couple of photos I'd really like to have for the book, I'm hoping someone reading this might be able to help.

When I used to catch an early morning Stagecoach chopper down to Lac Thien, there often was a cloud of mist rising off the lake. Sticking up through the cloud, like castle in a Disney movie, was Emperor Bao Dai's summer villa/retreat on a hill overlooking the lake. Does anyone have a picture like that?

The other photo I'd like to show is the "Bungalow" (the MACV HQ) in downtown BMT - but I want a photo showing the ashes **after** it burnt down. Again, does anyone have a photo I could use?

Of course, if I do use your photo, full credit will be accorded. You 155 guys helped me out a bunch of times long ago in a far-away place, I'm hoping you can do it one more time.

Thanks, Mike

Ed: Contact Historian Les Davison if you can help Mike.

ASH and TRASH

NEW COMMO IS COMING VIA *E-MAIL*

We're trying something new. "Incoming" will be occasional **e-mail** messages with BMT-related stories and/or items of interest. At least some of the materials sent in these messages is likely to be pulled from on-line sources (such as Facebook). To emphasize, these messages will go **ONLY** via e-mail. If we don't have your e-mail address, you **will not** receive these communiques.

JINGLE BELLS, HO HO HO

Christmas is fast approaching. Be sure and remind everyone that you would like a hat, or maybe a challenge coin or even a mug. And remember that challenge coins make great stocking stuffers for children and grandchildren. Contact **Chuck Markham** at _____ or 254-xxxxxxx to order.

155 AHC SUPPORTS MONTAGNARD ORPHANS

Treasurer Jeff just sent off our annual contribution of \$500 to the Vinh Son Orphanage at Pleiku. Very glad we're able to send something to help those kids.

THE VIETNAM WALL

Approximately 630 women served with the American Red Cross in Vietnam as part of their Supplemental Recreation Activities Overseas program; we knew them as "Donut Dollies". Four of them died while in Vietnam, but their names are not on the Vietnam Wall because they were civilians.

ROSTER UPDATE

It's time to send out an updated roster of BMT guys; target date for doing that is January, 2020. If any of your contact info has changed, please contact Matt Matthews (see below). If you don't want your contact info to be shared with other BMT guys, contact any occifer. FYI, it has been our long-standing policy NOT to share or release the contact info in our roster to anyone other than BMT guys.

MISSION DEBRIEF

For their significant assistance in documenting the history of the Ban Me Thuot boys, the following are hereby promoted to the rank of Storyteller Extraordinaire:

Willie Jennart
Howard Ryder
Mike Temple

Jim Kohler
Gregory L. Ferris
Ken Donovan

Well done, gentlemen! Thank you!

Editor-this-time Les Davison

COVER PHOTO

A Door Gunner's View of the Mekong Delta

Stock photo by Larry Burrows, a well-known photographer of the Vietnam War. Burrows was killed during Operation Lam Son 719, when the helicopter he was in was shot down over Laos.

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