



BAN ME THUOT BARB

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



Sortie 74

March 26, 2020

MARLIN JOHNSON

Lew Sain, Stagecoach/Purple Gang

All day long on this April 20th, something in the back of my mind said it was an important date. I was observing a Bell 206 recurrent ground school for the FAA, and the topic was settling with power and density altitude. I could not resist, so I told the class an old war story about going in to rescue the crew of a Huey that had been shot down, and how I had to pump the collective to keep from settling back into the jungle.

On April 20, 1970, I was team lead of four First Platoon slicks flying FOB. The flight consisted of Bob Beaudrealt (with Larry Wyllie), Marlin (with Darek Richardson), Dan Fox, (with Rick Erickson), and Gene Breslin was my Peter Pilot. Marlin had Major Luisi's bird, remember the old man always got the latest arrival to the company and it being the newest was the strongest lifter. We had been dispatched to pick up a team that morning and it was Bob's turn to go first. The other three of us watched at altitude as he took a rocket to the tail section during the extraction. Bob made a text book spinning autorotation, everybody got out OK - and then he was on the radio asking for help while running for his life. If you remember, Bob was very large back then, and I felt he could use all the lifting capability he could get, so I radioed for Marlin to pick up the flight crew, and then Dan and I would follow to bring out the SF team. The mission was a success and we all were very glad to see Bob and his crew safe.

In the afternoon, being down to three ships, we discussed what we would do if the other team got in trouble. As fate would have it, around 4 or 5, the call came that they were fighting it out and needed to be extracted. I went to Marlin and asked if he would go first since he had the strongest bird, and he said, "OK, but when we get back, I want off B50. This is the last extraction I'll ever make." I told him that I would swap birds with him, and he gave me that sideward glance and said, "Forget it." Then he turned and climbed in the helicopter.

To this day, when someone says - even in jest - that it will be the last thing they will do, my mind goes back to that day. I was the last one of our group to talk with Marlin, and his last words have been with me all these years. I will never forget. We were family, and he will always be young and missed.

Ed: Marlin was shot down in the PZ, trying to make the pick-up. He and Darek were both killed; Crew Chief Charles Bigelow and Door Gunner Bob Guthrie suffered minor injuries but were rescued.

Falcon Crew Chief Fred Solis at work. *Geoff Jones photo*



TAPS

John Houston passed away suddenly late last year. “Howdy” was a pilot with the First Platoon “Purple Gang” during ’69 and ’70

JOHN PAUL”JACK DOYLE passed away 8/28/2019. Jack was Stagecoach 6 during 66 and 67.

I REMEMBER JOE PARLAS *Gary Hill, Stagecoach ’66 – ’67*

Years ago I was diagnosed with tinnitus. I tried to convince the VA it was due to my time in helicopters. They said NO, but I know the truth... I was the lucky left seat on the flight with Joe from BMT to Danang for his flight home. Unfortunately, with him in the back of the aircraft as a pax I reached over and engaged the HSI with a quick “pull” to snap it level. Immediately I felt a very sharp whack to my helmet, and Joe said, “Don’t ever do that again!” My ears started to ring, ergo tinnitus - and the fact that I never did it again. That is also why I seem remember him as “Jumpin’ Joe” Parlas, a good man.

Short Time Vietnam **Norm Simpson Falcon Pilot 1969**

On the 22nd of November 1969, our day started early, when two Falcon light fire teams from the 155th AHC were scrambled for a Tac-E at Bu Prang. The SF group of American advisors and their Vietnamese partners were being assaulted by NVA and requested Gunship assistance. My assignment was to fly as Peter Pilot with Les Davison, my mentor, Flight Lead, and now good friend. The one downside for me was to be, once more, assigned to a HOG ship, which only carried thirty-eight 2.75” rockets. I would have nothing to shoot on this mission; it was not my favorite armament configuration.

We launched and headed towards Bu Prang as fast as our Charlie Models would carry us at tree top level. Upon arrival in the area, we immediately established contact with the troops on the ground as well as the FAC. FAC then

assigned us our targets and recommended patterns of engagement. Since Les was Fire Team lead, our team was first into the fight. When we had expended most of our ordinance and fuel we then flew to the airfield at Nhon Co SF Camp, approximately 20 miles away. It was imperative that we return to Bu Prang ASAP to relieve our other Falcon Fire Team, so we always HOT! refueled and rearmed with our aircraft at the flight idle position in case we came under enemy attack. We could then crank to full RPM and do our best to get our grossly overloaded ships out of the fuel farm and airborne as quickly as conditions would allow. This was a dangerous and tricky operation, but one that we felt was important for the well being of everyone fighting on the ground as well as those in the air. Even though we tried to work fast, the fire teams would often pass each other flying to and from Bu Prang and Nhon Co. To allow each pilot some stick time, the AC flew while we were actively engaged in firing runs and the Peter Pilot often flew to and from Nhon Co.

As it turned out, this Tac-E turned into an all day engagement. We set it up that one light fire-team, consisting of two ships, was on station most of the time. This went well throughout the early afternoon until one of the ships in the second fire team began experiencing mechanical difficulties and had to shut down at Nhon Co. We then combined the remaining three ships into one Heavy Fire Team to continue the support mission. This went smoothly because the action on the ground was letting up a little, making turnaround times less critical. About 4:30 PM we were released and headed home from to Bu Prang. We were told by FAC that it was quiet but asked that on our way out that we look for enemy activity, but finding none we were then free to return to our home base in Ban Me Thuot. This was music to our ears since we were tired and hungry after a very active and stressful day.

Les let me fly as we headed for home, expecting no further contact. The area we were flying over was defoliated and burned clean. This is where my life would be changed somewhat and I would soon be leaving Vietnam. The first inkling that we were coming under fire was when I heard the crew chief jerk and throw a smoke grenade to mark a viable target on the ground. I immediately swiveled my head to the left and looked down. There much to my surprise stood 5 to 6 NVA dressed in black standing in a small clearing, aiming their rifles at us. We had passed over them by about 100 yards, but one of their rounds hit the aircraft, penetrating the soft underbelly and coming up just in front of the crew chief. It ricocheted off the bottom of my armor plated seat, and hit my left calf just at boot top level. It took out a golf ball-sized piece of muscle, broke my fibula, and exited out the left chin bubble, leaving some blood splatter behind.

The round came as a shock to me and caused me to shift my feet on the pedals. The aircraft yawed and rotated slightly to the left and then back to the right. Les noticed the movement, and asked, "What's wrong, did you get shot?" Before I could respond, he spotted the blood in the chin bubble and immediately took over the controls. He broke hard right, away from the enemy fire, while at the same time notifying the other two gun ships in our team that we had come under fire and that his copilot had been hit. They immediately brought heavy fire on the area around the smoke grenade on the ground. I don't know if they were

able to hit the bad guys, but it wasn't for a lack of trying. The outside noise was substantial.

We headed back to the SF Base at Nhon Co, where, as luck would have it, our good Dustoff friends were standing by with a Dust-Off ship. While in flight, Crew Chief Craig Mosher attempted to rotate my seat back and down to extricate me, but for some reason was unable to do so. When that didn't work, he just reached over the seat and jerked me up and over the seat back, and then placed me on the ammunition trays. Craig and the door gunner both proceeded to work on my broken left leg to stop the bleeding. A pressure bandage and a light shoestring tourniquet did the trick. The Dustoff medic at Nhon Co cleaned and dressed the wound, and then they flew me to the Medical aid station at Ban Me Thuot.

Our Flight Surgeon and a MASH Doctor were on call and went to work on me. They cut me out of my Nomex flight suit, and were about to cut the boot off my left foot. Even though I was in some pain, I knew that I didn't want them to cut off my perfectly good boot. I asked if they could cut the shoe strings, and I would grit my teeth as they then pulled the boot off of my wounded leg. They agreed and those boots went on to serve me well for the next seven years of my military service. As the saga continued, I was flown by Dust-Off to the Army Hospital in Pleiku.

Upon arrival at the hospital Dustoff pad, I was met by two nurses: one was a full Colonel, the other a Captain. It was obvious they had gotten word that a 155th Falcon crewmember had been wounded and was inbound. We had a very strong combat relationship with the Med-Evac unit located in Pleiku. They often staged out of BMT, and our Falcon gunships were frequently asked to fly cover for their missions.

The nurses took me into surgery, where my wound was cleaned and stabilized, and a temporary splint was applied to the leg. The doctors told me the wound was not life-threatening, but said little else. As a result, I was still unaware of just how serious my injury was. They did tell me that I would be sent to Camp Zama, Japan, where additional surgery would likely be performed.

The following morning, an Armor LTC visited me to award me the Purple Heart. He was going to award me a Bronze Star as well, but withdrew that offer when he found out that I was wounded in Aviation combat and not in ground combat. He maintained the Bronze Star was reserved for ground combat only. I am still not sure that was true, as several other pilots claimed to have been awarded Bronze Stars for their actions while flying. I very much wanted to tell the LTC what the Army could do with the Bronze Star, but thought better of it, and settled for a Purple Heart.

That same morning, the Old Man and our Ops Officer (Dean Owen and Tony Giordano) flew up from BMT to check on me. It was an unexpected, but very pleasant visit. I assured them I would be back as soon as my leg healed sufficiently to return to flight status. They said they would hold a job for me, though it might be a ground assignment in Operations. The following day I was transferred to a hospital in Cam Ranh Bay for the night, then flown on to Camp Zama, Japan for surgery to repair the muscle damage, set the broken bone, and a cast the leg. My convalescence there lasted about 60 days, then I was

recommended for reassignment. I was given an "Inter Theater Transfer" and assigned to the 350th AHC in Hanau, Germany. I spent the next 3 years on a Flight assignment there.

My stay in Vietnam was limited to just over 4 months, during which I had grown to respect and revere my fellow pilots and crewmen. I learned a lot from them, not the least of which, was pride in my unit and courage while under fire. In a way I felt like I had not earned my place in the 155th AHC. It was hard not to return to my unit, but evidently the Army and the Good LORD had other plans for me.

Since retirement, I have been able to reestablish contact with two Falcon pilots that were with me during some of my most memorable experiences. What a pleasure it has been to reconnect with Les Davison and Denny Fenlon. My strongest hope is that I can attend the 2020 155th AHC Reunion and reconnect with other fellow warriors of the 155th AHC.

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LARRY PLUHAR

50 years ago today, 9/27/69. Logged 4+30 h in acft # 15313 on B50 mission. This would be one of the hardest days for me on my tour. I was the primary extraction ship on a day when multiple teams were in contact and needed emergency extractions.

On the first extraction, initially, we got to the team while they were on the run under the trees. We dropped the ropes of the McGuire Rig and waited for them to attach their harness to the ropes. it seemed forever hovering over the trees with the NVA firing wildly into the sky trying to hit us or our gun cover. Then, on the radio, the team told us that not all the members had the harness and they could not leave them there alone. I decided we'd hovering in one area too long and saw an opening less than a klick away and directed them there. They made good time and we pulled them out while the Falcons kept the NVA busy. I believe several of the "Yards" were wounded.

No sooner had we dropped off the first team, we were called to emergency extract the other team in contact. This one would be easier as it was in a larger than normal opening in the jungle. The team came into the PZ from my side of the aircraft. One American was over the others shoulder KIA. Three of the Yards were WIA. The Team Leader yelled at me. "get the hell out of here, they're right on our ass!" I complied and lifted off as our door guns and the Falcons laid fire on both sides of the PZ. By the time we finished, we were low on fuel and it was getting dark. B50 always was hazardous mission and would not get any easier in the coming months.

THE XO SAYS YOU ARE INSANE

Ken Donovan, Stagecoach 28 ('68-'69)

The battle of Bu Prang was hot and heavy (late fall, '69), and I was closing on the 140 hour limit for flight time during the past 30 days. So they would start to assign you low hour missions. The admin run to Battalion was one of those missions. It was only about an hour to Nha Trang, so you only logged two hours for the day. The mission was a real piece of cake: sleep in, take off about 1000

hours, fly to Nha Trang, go to the big PX, have lunch at the Battalion Officers Club, and return to BMT at your leisure. On this particular mission my Peter Pilot was the new XO on his first mission.

The flight to Battalion was uneventful, we landed, refueled and shut the aircraft down, and this is where things got interesting. We got out of the aircraft and the new XO asked what we were going to do next. I told him we would check in at the company liaison office, and then go to the PX. After that, we would have lunch, and then fly back. The XO stated we needed to get back as soon as possible. I told him that I had no such instructions. I looked at my watch and told CE Mike Wilcox and DG Dave Clements that they were released to go to the PX and the EM Club for lunch, and told them to return by 1400. In a flash they were gone. We did get a chance to go to the PX and club.

We met up at 1400, and took off shortly thereafter. We climbed to altitude going through the pass to get to BMT. I was flying at about 1500 feet, but some of the hilltops were only about 8-900 ft. The new XO then started asking a bunch of “new guy” questions, like what would you do if a 50cal opened up on you from the hilltop at 10 o’clock? I immediately rolled about 90 degrees to the right and gave it some left pedal so we were dropping like a rock. I think I may have got his full attention with that one. No more questions, for a while.

As we flew west, the weather deteriorated. We were now flying IFR (I Follow Roads) through the pass and the weather was getting worse. With low clouds and heavy rain, the new XO kept asking if I wanted him to turn on the windshield wipers. I said no each time. (If you remember the wipers would scratch the windshield and that’s why we never used them.) By now we’re down to about 30-40 knots and I have my window down and the aircraft out of trim to the right so I can see better. It’s getting really bad. Once again, the XO asked if I wanted the windshield wipers. In my best John Wayne voice, I told him, “We will wait until it gets really bad.”

We made it back to BMT, did the post flight, and then I went back to the 2nd platoon hootch. I had been there for about 45 minutes when my platoon leader Dave Churilla came in and asked, “What did you do to the XO?”

“What do you mean, what did I do to the XO?”

Dave told me, “The XO says you are absolutely insane, and he never wants to fly with you again.”

My response was “Works for me, I think he is an idiot.” I never flew with the XO again, but that would not be my last run in with him. I left the unit a few weeks later, and I am pretty sure we were both glad to be rid of the other.

2020 REUNION – Indianapolis

The next reunion of the BMT boys will be in Indy. Rueben Hunter is in charge and it will be 11/19/10 to 11/22/10. This will take place at the Sheraton Indianapolis City Centre Hotel. The rates (room rates per night @ \$137 per night) and guarantees are very similar to 2018 rates at the Reno Reunion. Just like other reunions there will probably be a \$100 per person registration fee to cover the dinner and the hospitality room. Reservation number is 888-627-8186 toll free. Be sure to tell them

you are with the 115th AHC reunion to get the above rates. Parking is \$25 per day

but there is free parking within walking distance.



During a visit to BMT in 2006, our guide introduced us to Vietnamese coffee, Vietnamese style. Coffee goes into the strainer on top, pour in hot water, cover, and wait for it to filter through. Add a big gob of condensed milk – Numbah One coffee, GI!

Unlike during our time, BMT is now a prosperous, bustling city, at the center of the country’s considerable coffee industry. (Vietnam is the second leading coffee exporting nation in the world.) Here’s a photo of the coffee maker I brought back. I brew up a cup once or twice a week, always with Trung Nguyen coffee (available on-line). The package says, “Produced by Trung Nguyen Coffee Factory, Boun Ma Thuot City, Vietnam.”

Takes me back . . .

Did you know that the greatest non-reimbursable drain on the Association treasury is the Hard Copy BARB(snail mail) Those who receive these copies claim to have no access to email and if that is the case then we are happy to provide the hard copy. If however you just like the feel of paper consider this. 167 copies of the barb are sent by the USPS every quarter. Printing cost runs \$140+ and stamps are \$90+ per quarter. That is twice as much as we give to the Ban Me Thuot Orphanage each year. This does not count the hours of travel and folding and taping and stamping and labeling. So please if it is possible for you to get your BARB electronically let one of the officers, Matt Mathews if possible, _____@gmail.com, know your email address so we can take you off the snail mail list

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