



BAN ME THUOT BARB



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

Sortie 79

June 2021



REUNION INFO - NOW HEAR THIS . . .

Now that we either have been vaccinated or have it available to us, it is time to get excited about our Reunion. **REUNION INFO:** The 2021 155th Assault Helicopter Company Association reunion will be in Dayton, Ohio, at the Crowne Plaza Hotel (Now renamed Radisson Inn) the weekend of October 15 – 17, 2021. A block of rooms has been reserved for October 14 – 18, at the rate of \$135 per night including free breakfast, parking, and internet. Phone number for reservations: **844-207-7275**. Dayton is a rich location as it is the home of the U.S. Air Force Museum, and the home of the Wright Brothers. Rueben Hunter is the coordinator for the reunion assisted by Dave Pollock. We have been advised that the Crowne Plaza is being purchased by Radisson Inns. The hotel's computers are being changed over at this time. If you are experiencing difficulty in making reservations, please be patient. **10 June** or after would be a better time to make your plans at the hotel. See you at the reunion.

EVERYONE WALKED AWAY

Frank Uhring, Stagecoach 19

Here's what I think I remember from 50+ years ago. In Fall/Winter of 69/70, Stagecoach 152 was assigned to the 1st platoon as a dedicated aircraft, assigned to the ARVN 23rd Division Commanding General. It was equipped with a cabin radio console with multiple FM radios, so the general and/or his staff could talk to their people on the ground without using the aircraft radios. Also, there were seats all around the console. When I first came to the 155th, **Pete Agur** had been A/C assigned to the aircraft and the mission. When Pete DEROS'd, **Mike Arnold** ("Army") took his place. When Army went on R&R, **Dave DeSio** and I were assigned to fill in, until Army got back. It was not an 'exciting' assignment. In fact, I wondered if the assignment was punishment for something I'd done wrong? All we did was fly to artillery bases and infantry units in the field; all safe - no action.

During this assignment, most every time we landed and shut down, I would do a post-flight check - because I was bored, I had time to do it, and, as the A/C, I felt responsible for the aircraft. Well, on this particular day, I noticed that the engine oil in the two (upper and lower) sight gauges was getting darker after each sortie. In all the time I had flown before this, I had never seen the engine oil darken. Most of the time it was a light straw color, and it never changed. But on this day the engine oil would be darker after each shut down. I asked the CE about this, and he said that the oil was doing its job and not to worry about the dark color. As the day wore on, the oil kept getting darker and darker after each sortie, but there were no unusual instrument indications - except that the oil pressure needle kept rising after each shut down/start up. The oil pressure gauge had no max/red area, so I thought that high oil pressure was 'OK'. We all knew to worry about low oil pressure, but HIGH oil pressure ?????

Heading home at the end of the day, with the General and all his staff on board, we had a full ship. Peter Pilot Dave was under the hood, practicing instrument flight, while I kept my eyes outside

the cockpit and acted as his GCA instructor. I had called BMT City to request a straight-in approach; the request was granted. As we neared the field, I was monitoring/talking to BMT City on UHF, while talking Dave through his GCA approach. All was good until . . .

Fellow 1st platoon pilot **Lew Sain** came on BMT City freq and said something like, "City, we have an emergency in the pattern." I heard that, wondered who was in trouble, and started to look around for the aircraft in trouble. That's when the CE came on the intercom and asked what our oil pressure gauge was reading? (Perhaps the CE, being closer to the engine, could hear/feel that something was not right.) When I looked at the oil pressure gauge it was 'maxxed' out, up against the gauge "high" pin. (By the way, there was no max/red area on the oil pressure gauge !!!!!)

I took control of the ship from Dave, continued the approach, and told the CE that as soon as we dropped off our pax, we were putting this bird into Maintenance because the oil pressure should not be this high. And then I finally heard Lew on the City freq, trying to talk to me. He told me that **WE** were the pattern emergency, and that our ship was smoking from the tailpipe!!!!!!!!!! At that time, I had no indication of engine problems, except for the high oil pressure; no power loss, no noise/vibration, control was fine.

But before I could reply to Lew, the engine froze, the needles split, and the engine RPM went to **ZERO**. The instant loss of torque caused the ship to yaw 90 degrees to the right – but because we were going about 90 knots, the slip stream caused an immediate yaw back to straight ahead. All of this happened like a crack of a whip; fortunately, no one was thrown from the ship. I bottomed pitch and radioed City that we were going down in the ammo dump. One thing I remember was how quiet an autorotation is when you have no engine noise. Since we were in the pattern at 500 feet AGL, my ability to maneuver was limited. Luckily the ammo dump was right there, and the grass and bushes had just been burned off. I picked an open area between two ammo bunkers.

With the Master Caution light blinking bright and honking loud, down we went. I had my hands on the controls and was not going to let go. In flight school, during emergency training, I was told to "never... **never**" stop flying; whatever happens, you **never** take your hands off the controls (those were the days of steam gauges and mechanical control linkages). I told Dave to turn off the Main Fuel switch, because I was thinking that since we'd lost our engine, we didn't want the fuel system pressurized. I tried to recall the flight situation for autorotation. I slowed the ship to 60 knots, maintaining enough speed to keep the rotor RPM in the green while aiming for the flat area between the ammo bunkers. I remember telling myself to zero the airspeed close to the ground. As the ground came close, I started to slow the airspeed and pull pitch to slow our descent. I zeroed the air speed over our touchdown spot, and pulled all the pitch I had left. The collective was all the way up! I had never had the collective that high up, **right up to my armpit** – and we were still about five feet above the ground. Well, the ship basically fell five feet to the ground. We hit, and then rocked fore and aft in a cloud of dust. I don't remember feeling the collapse of the skids, but I do remember watching the rotor blades still turning, slowing down with a max angle of attack. I was really glad the blades did not hit the tail boom or ground - or any other things around us, and roll us over.

As the dust cleared, I was surprised to see a group of about 8-10 people standing in front of the ship. My first thought was, "Where did those people come from?" When I turned to check on the passengers, and saw an empty cabin, I realized that those people out in front of the ship were all the pax and the crew; they must have evacuated ASAP from the ship. Dave and I were still in the ship, no one had tried to help us out!!! My hands were on the controls, as the ship was still rocking a bit and the rotors were still slowing. I guess I was still trying to 'fly'. That's when Dave and I decided we should get out, too.

I turned off the Main Power switch. Dave pulled the emergency door release handle - but the yellow/black-striped handle came off in his hand. So we both used the normal door handles to open our doors. Jumping down from a ship that was flat on its belly seemed 'not quite right.' As we ran away from the ship, I got a quick jerk back on my helmet; I had forgotten to unplug my helmet cord.

The connections parted as I was running away. We went over to others and found that all were OK, no one hurt. So, I guess the old saying is true - any landing that you can walk away from is a good landing!!



NIGHT BLINDNESS OR TARGET FIXATION? *Norm Simpson, Falcon Pilot*

As a fairly new Peter Pilot with the 155th AHC in the fall of 1969, I was assigned to the Gunship Platoon “Falcons”. It seemed that as an FNG I experienced my fair share of night standby assignments during my first couple of months. One of my scariest flight experiences occurred in October of 1969 during a Tac-E (Tactical Emergency). While I was recounting it to Les Davison, he asked me to put it in an article to be published in the “Barb”. Reluctantly, I agreed with the proviso that other than my own name, I would not identify the rest of the crew that flew on that mission. While I do not consider the incident to be pilot error, some might find what happened to be embarrassing rather than the “**close call**” we experienced together in the heat of combat.

One of the first considerations I was exposed to after joining the Falcons was that we always utilized our pull down helmet visors while we were in contact and firing rockets. Rockets tended to blow small amounts of metal fragments back into the cockpit after they ignited. These fragments were dangerous as they often left small cuts similar to shaving cuts on our faces. Needless to say the entire crew was careful to keep our visors down to protect our eyes while in contact and firing rockets. Most of the crew, having been in-country longer than I, had acquired “cool” clear lenses and preferred them to the amber lenses that came with the issued flight helmets. Having made several unsuccessful attempts to find the prized clear lenses, I was stuck with the dark amber sunglass style lenses that came with my issued helmet. This situation left me with having to use the less “classy” amber lenses, but may have helped some of the crew avoid a condition known as “Night Blindness” or “Target Fixation.” Herein lies the story.

On a very dark overcast October night, I was rudely awakened at about 0200 hours for a Tac-E mission. A small Vietnamese village lying about 5 miles south of Ban Me Thuot was under attack by what was reported to be a company sized unit of NVA or VC. The Falcon light fire team crews rushed to our aircraft and launched quickly and headed out to the village under siege. As we arrived on station, it became obvious that a lot was happening in and around the village, which was located in a small clearing surrounded by large 80 ft. trees. My AC was a fire team lead, so our ship quickly set up a race track pattern putting our rockets along the north side while trying to avoid hitting friendly forces. The height of the trees required that we start our inbound run at about 200 ft. AGL, then breaking off and heading outbound at no less 100 ft. AGL. Our Charlie model gunship was equipped

with 38 rockets, but no miniguns or grenade launcher. Consequently, my job was limited to monitoring engine instruments, backing up the AC, keeping the ship clear of obstacles, and taking over if the AC became incapacitated.

On our second run inbound, I noticed that we were getting dangerously close to the tops of the trees before we turned outbound. I mentioned this to the AC, but he was either engrossed in the action or did not hear me. On the third run in, it became obvious that the flare from the rockets and the AC's clear lenses, combined to blind or distort his vision as to where we were in relation to the tops of the trees. For a second time I told him we were getting dangerously close to the treetops, but again he seemed so engrossed in what he was doing that he did not respond. My amber lenses dampened the flare of the rockets, and I could see that if I did not react soon we would be in the trees and in serious trouble.

Being left with no other option, I reached forward and pulled back on the cyclic stick - thus causing the ship to level and then climbing slightly. The AC then turned us outbound. The unaccustomed, deliberate movement in the controls startled the AC, and he immediately started to chastise me and threatened to report me to the company commander for taking over partial control of the aircraft without his approval. I kept my mouth shut and decided I would face the music when we got back to base, and to debate it now would only exacerbate the situation. Then much to my surprise, the crew chief spoke up and confirmed that I had warned him twice, that we had been very close to hitting the trees, and that my actions surely averted serious contact with the tree tops and prevented a crash.

We wrapped up our assault and headed back to base with very little conversation and the AC flying the entire time. Was this a case of night blindness or target fixation? I have my own idea, but only the AC could answer that for sure. When we landed and refueled, I helped secure the aircraft - then headed to Operations to face the music. It was quiet in Operations as well, and no one was there to meet me. Much to my surprise, my AC had returned to his hootch and gone back to bed for the remainder of the short night. The subject was never mentioned again. We went on to serve together on several other missions without conflict. I respected him as the fine pilot he was, and nothing further was said.

And, by the way, I held on to my less-than-classy amber visor lenses.

AGENT ORANGE PLUS 53 YEARS

Ken Donovan, Stagecoach 28

It started on April 25, 2010, when I was informed that I had an Agent Orange related cancer called Chronic Lymphatic Leukemia (CLL). On January 7, 2021, I started my treatment with a CAT scan. On the way home, I realized that I was more angry than concerned about what was to come.

Part was anger about what was to come, but the greater part was the fact that my door gunner, Dave Clements, and my Crew Chief, Mike Wilcox, two of the finest men I have ever known, were killed by Agent Orange before their time - both courtesy of the United States Government. The United States Government killed them just as dead as if they put a gun to their heads. I hope you will excuse me if I have a problem with that. (Please note that other than enriched plutonium used in nuclear weapons, the dioxin compound used in Agent Orange is the most toxic substance we make.)

When I started to think about writing this article for the *Barb*, I was sitting in the Infusion room at the Florida Cancer center, having poison pumped into me to kill the cancer cells. Which started me thinking, "WOW, 53 years ago when I arrived in Vietnam, I never thought that being treated for cancer would become part of my military experience.

A short time later, things got interesting. You see, being treated for cancer can be really ugly, and things were about to get really ugly. They had warned me that if I was going to have a reaction it would happen on the first treatment. About an hour in, all of a sudden, I did not feel right, it happened really fast. The next thing I knew, I was puking all over myself. I looked down at my hands,

and they were beet red. About that time was when the seizure started. I was shaking out of control, so hard I couldn't talk. I was trying to control my body, but it was not listening - a free ride, courtesy of the United States Government. The great nurses I have gave me some Demerol and everything calms down. I have had two other treatments with no problems. Again, the anger, how could our own Government do this to us?

I saw my doctor the next day and told him about Dave and Mike. I told him I knew I would die at some point, but that I wanted to deny the Grim Reaper a "Hat Trick", and die of something other than Agent Orange. The good news is that he stated he could make that happen.

Clearly, the Government and our country have changed over the last 53 years. For the record, I would fight again for and with the guys anytime, anywhere. Looking back, it has been some years since I would say that about the United States Government.

EIGHT SMILING FACES

Mark Stuart, Stagecoach 10

By now it was the summer of 1969, I was an aircraft commander (AC), and the 155th began supporting the 5th Special Forces Group CCS missions. At first we were flying support missions for a squadron of U.S. Air Force UH-1F helos based at Ban Me Thuot East airfield. Their Hueys had GE turbine engines with side mounted exhaust, they were painted camouflage colors rather than Army OD, and they had twin door mounted miniguns; so cool.

At some point the 155th assumed the Air Force mission. I believe these missions were classified Top Secret in the 1969 time frame, as we weren't supposed to be flying missions outside of Vietnam, but we did it every day. The SF teams were made up of two or three Green Berets and six or seven foreign volunteer (sometimes called "Mercenary") soldiers. I saw Montagnard's, Chinese Ming, (these guys were mean to the bone), and even some former American GI's. Teams would be inserted into an LZ somewhere in Cambodia, to conduct whatever; sometimes classified, sometimes not. Some days later we would get an extraction order to pick them up. Often the pickup LZ was under fire. Over time and multiple missions, our air crews often developed a relationship with one of the teams. The team Sergeant (always called "SGT Smith " for some reason) and the AC sometimes became friends. (I was known to trade stick time for a case of LRRP rations, as they were much better than our C-rations.)

I'm finally going to get to the point. One night about five days after we had inserted a team, I was awoken around 0400 by the CQ. He said the team had been discovered by an NVA element, was in contact, and needed an emergency extraction. It was still pitch dark as our flight of two slicks and two UH-1C Falcon gunships launched into the night and flew west. About ten minutes out of the AO, I made contact with the team. An out-of-breath SGT Smith told me they were running as fast as they could. He said the NVA troops were close behind, and they even had blood hounds chasing them. I could hear the dogs barking in the background. They were trying to make it to a clearing for the extraction.

A few minutes later SGT Smith contacted me and said that they were surrounded and couldn't make it to a clearing! He said, "Mark, were done for, say goodbye to our families." I said, "Pop Smoke we're getting you out!" I conferred with my crew and asked, "Are we in this together?" No hesitation at all, three positive responses; we were going in.

The wind was calm when I saw green smoke coming out of the tops of the triple canopy jungle. I asked SGT Smith to confirm green smoke, he said yes. I came to a hover above the treetops, and began a slow vertical descent into the trees. I flew, with the entire crew guiding us with small directional changes, left 10 feet, aft 5 feet, right 10 feet etc. etc. until we descended beneath the lowest canopy. We continued down until we saw the team members. I vividly remember the terrain, huge tree trunks, and fallen trees everywhere reminded me of the original King Kong movie. I couldn't set the aircraft down with the obstacles, so I came to a hover. The team members began climbing on board. I looked to my left and saw several NVA soldiers coming out of the tree line. After I heard the

Crew Chief say, "Everyone's onboard," the next sound was AK-47 fire. I wished I could have pulled an arm pit of the collective - but I had to go out the same way I came in, this time under fire directly below me. Upon clearing the treetops, I nosed over and we flew away at treetop level. I knew the aircraft was hit multiple times because the Master Caution light was on, and the Caution Panel looked like a Christmas tree - but our Huey kept flying. I looked over my shoulder at the team, and all I saw was eight smiling faces - including the Crew Chief and Door Gunner.

About a year later I was an Instructor Pilot at Fort Wolters, TX, and showed up at the flight line at 0600, as usual. The Flight Commander said, "You must be in trouble, because you are ordered to report to HQ in Class A's at 1100 hours. Oh - and get a haircut." (IP's back then had relaxed grooming standards, to say the least.)

I reported as requested, but instead of being in trouble, I was going to be awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for valor based on that mission. This was my first, and I received another during my second tour. I don't know who recommended me for this award, my S-1 or SGT Smith, but thank you. I wish I knew his real name.

SHARING COMMO

Ken Donovan - Shout-out to **Bob Beaudreault** for the powerful sharing of his PTSD experiences in the last *Barb*. Well done, sir!

Rueben Hunter - Here's some scribble-scrabble notes about how I got to the 155th. Thanks for agreeing to try to make some sense out of them, appreciate your help.

Jim Haga - Sad news, my good friend **Wayne Johnson** died last week; here's his obit.

FNG PETER PILOT *Les Davison, Falcon 2*

Mar '69: One of my very first days as a 2nd Platoon Peter Pilot, I was assigned to fly an Ash & Trash mission with **Jim Abbott**. We went through the usual preflight inspection, and climbed in the aircraft. I had already strapped on my Extra-Large chicken plate and buckled in, when I looked over to see Jim stash his chicken plate down between his seat and the console. I took note - but I did not remove my chicken plate. And I wore it all day.

All went as planned during the day. Jim was a quiet guy, but when he spoke, I listened. I knew I had a LOT to learn, and Jim was teaching. And then, sometime that afternoon, 155 Ops called several Stagecoach slicks and a Falcon gun team to rendezvous to respond to a Tac E. As we neared the assembly point, aircraft could be seen coming from several directions.

After we landed, all the pilots gathered to hear the plan; Stagecoach Lead conducted the briefing. Back at our aircraft, Jim briefed the crew as we pilots climbed in and strapped in - and I very distinctly remember him reaching over to pull out his chicken plate. Gulp! I was mostly ballast as our flight of several slicks Combat Assaulted ARVN's into the LZ - as it turned out, a cold LZ. I think we might have done two lifts, not sure.

Mission completed, we were enroute back to BMT. As we flew, A/C's bantered back and forth on the radio. Like I said, Jim was a quiet guy, but I do remember him contributing this: "That's the first cold Tac-E I've ever been on."

TAPS

**Ken Blankenship
Wayne Johnson**

FLY HIGH, FRIENDS!



The Wings of an Eagle

Though we no longer soar the heights of yesterday,
Feel not sorrow, for we rode the Wings of an Eagle.
We have raced death across the shadow of the rising sun,
and seen the brilliance of our souls in the darkness of a moonless night.
We have tasted the sweetness of the cup of life,
and felt life's great sorrow upon the loss of brother warriors.
And when we have flown our final mission,
Let it be whispered on the wind that we rode the Wings of an Eagle.

Dedicated to the men of the 155th Assault Helicopter Company

Ken Donovan, Stagecoach 28



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