



BAN ME THUOT BARB

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



Sortie 92

October 2024

FRIENDLY FIRE INCIDENT AT TUY HOA: 1966

Mike Trux, Stagecoach Pilot, '66 – '67

After 30 days at sea on the 4th Division Transport (Merchant Marine) ship, we arrived in Cam Rahn Bay mid-September. We waited at “tent city” Cam Rahn Bay while our helicopters were unwrapped from their protective insulation, put back together, and inspected. It was about a week before the first helicopter arrived ashore. The rest of the division was on other ships and eventually was sent to the Pleiku area.

HQ had decided that we would be trained by units already in-country. I was assigned to the 129th at Tuy Hoa. Someone from that company was sent to pick a couple of us up. They were bivouacked along Hwy 1 near the city. The USAF air base was a couple minutes south of us. It had a north-south runway along the beach. The Army was building a section for their compound on the west side of the runway. There were fuel bladders for us on the northwest side of the airfield, but the sand was horrible and unless we were totally out, we opted to call for the fuel trucks for most refueling at our staging area. I shared a tent with 1LT Tommie Roundtree. I flew with him and others doing ash and trash along the rice paddies and into the mountain regions for surveillance and insertion of LLRP'S (long range reconnaissance patrols). One of these early morning missions was supposed to go north of Tuy Hoa towards Qui Nhon.



Approaching Tuy Hoa AFB from the south. The Army section is on the left. *Trux photo*

We launched and flew north at treetop level, but only minutes into the flight the mission was called off. Flight Lead turned us east, the plan was to fly to the coast and follow the shoreline south to Tuy Hoa. As we neared Highway 1, we just missed the elevated powerlines by doing a slight flare. Just as we crossed HWY 1 there was a populated area and some buildings - and then we saw tracers coming from a tree line! Lead sped up, we followed, and the guns opened fire with rockets and machine guns. As I passed over the tree line, I saw two rockets go into the roof of a large building (perhaps 20' x 120') oriented horizontally to our path with Red Crosses on it. Gun ships saw no further tracers, so they noted the spot and called it in to command. We all left to return to camp.

Before we could get to the shore line (less than two minutes), we were told by command that a friendly unit was receiving fire and to report immediately to HQ. By the time we landed and the Mission Commander got to HQ, the story had changed. It seems that Diem's son was

leading a squad in North Tuy Hoa. They were drinking heavily, prompting the target practice on our passing helicopters. We were no longer in trouble and were told the son would be disciplined. We were never to hear of it again. I was told Diem apologized for his son's actions.

After I was assigned to the 155th at BMT, I never talked to anyone in the 129th again. It does seem eerily familiar to the recent article in the Barb. The recent article stated they were ROK troops which I think is more plausible because Diem's son was a pilot and should not have been there. Tuy Hoa history shows that Korean troops at that time were covering that area. I was new in country and had no idea who was where and when, or the scheme of things. I later worked with the Korean troops at Nin Hoa and, except for the insignias on their uniforms, I had to study a face very hard to see the nuances in the faces and I did not know either language. I do not know if the LRRP's were ROK or ARVN. As for the hospital being blown up, we were happy to hear that there were no casualties, and the hospital was no longer in use.

REUNION INDIANAPOLIS – THE WRAP

If you missed it, too bad; we had a really good time! Some last minute cancellations due to medical issues and/or Hurricane Helene kept our numbers down; only 19 BMT guys were there. Reunion Host **Rueben Hunter** worked his butt off, he deserves all the credit for a great reunion. The Holiday Inn proved to be an excellent venue: the Hospitality Suite was perfect for round-table war stories, the banquet meal was on time and nicely done, and the staff were helpful throughout.

Among the attendees, **Jim Stallard** was the only guy who went over on the USS Iwo Jima, 59 years ago. (And Jim got to be the oldest 155 guy at Indy, because **Fred Yamagata** had to cancel. Hope to see you next time, Fred – and Joyce, of course.) **Terry Westbrook** was a sartorial standout at the banquet, resplendent in his 1970 khaki uniform. Storytelling moments-to-remember were many. **Frank Uhring** told about the time he flew low over a scenic waterfall and saw a tiger sitting on a nearby rock. **John Ahearn** and **Rein**



Hofgesang shared their stories of being wounded in late '69, spending time at the 71st Evac Hospital in Pleiku, then Camp Zama in Japan, and finally ending up in hospitals near their homes in the US. And **Norm Swafford** told the “behind-the-scenes” story of the infamous BMT mortar attack tape – which started so innocently, with Norm strumming his guitar and singing.

Helicopter rides by the Huey 369 organization were a highlight for several 155 guys and gals. In fact, two of the guys who rode the Huey slick quietly told me afterward that the “click – click – click” and tell-tale whine of the engine start sequence unexpectedly brought back some long-buried emotions. Good stuff! Another time worthy of note was VP **Joe Harrelson's** invitation for folks to “Sound Off” to the group at meal's end. **Keith Lane** offered a fine tribute to the eight men lost in the '68 mid-air. **Wayne Cranford** praised the 155 women who stood by their men during the war – and then after they came home. And several pilots complimented and thanked the enlisted guys for busting their assets in Vietnam, working long hours every day and then pulling guard duty every second or third night on top of that. A special time for remembering.

BMT guys at Indy were: John Ahearn, Ron Byarlay, Norm Swafford, Keith Lane, Terry Westbrook, Ed Koroshetz, Dave Pollock, Rein Hofgesang, Russ Kogut, Wayne Cranford, Steve McCartney, Jim Stallard, Dave Bennett, Buzz Arney, Charlie Nichols, Frank Uhring, Rueben Hunter, Joe Harrelson, Les Davison.

All in all, a great reunion! It's always special to get together with other BMT guys – and their gals, too - even after all these years.

STAGECOACH 586 STILL STANDING GUARD



Driving through northern Michigan this past summer, I detoured a bit to visit one of the slicks I'd flown at BMT as a 2nd Platoon Peter Pilot



during spring of '69. At the Vietnam Veterans of America chapter clubhouse just outside of Cheboygan, 586 is still lookin' good. The H model was mounted on a pedestal there back in the 90's to honor all the Vietnam vets – and the helicopters that supported them. If you happen to be in the neighborhood, stop by and render a salute.

Les Davison

SHARING COMMO

Cliff Allen - All good here, sorry that I won't be able to make the reunion. I'm just heading out the door, gonna try to catch me some catfish tonight.

Fred Yamagata – Joyce and I had hoped to join you all in Indianapolis, but it just wasn't in the cards.



Gilbert Terry – I sure hated to miss the reunion in Indianapolis, but I had to help my brother out some. Now I'm getting back to volunteering at the Mighty 8th Museum – and I can't wait for the next reunion.

Tom Hunt – I hope everyone enjoyed themselves at Indianapolis, I wish I could have been there.

Jim Day (CCS, RT Rule) - Wish I could be with the Falcons and Stagecoaches for the reunion. Our aviation support unit members have over the years asked why I love you rotor heads so much. My answer is always the same; "When we called you always came - even though you knew how bad it was."

Dave Pollock – We had a really good time at the reunion, thanks to all those responsible. And thanks for sending me the roster.

Ken Donovan – Sorry I wasn't able to attend.

CAMP ALPHA AND A NIGHT IN SAIGON

*Jim Haga, Stagecoach17/Falcon 10
Nov '66 – Jul '68*

After graduation from flight school at Rucker sometime in early November, 1966, I drove home to the Philly area and enjoyed some time off before heading to Vietnam. At the airport in Philly, I met up with a few of the guys from my flight class (66-17), and we flew to San Francisco together. After a day or two there, Pan Am had a bunch of us on a 707 and we flew off across the Pacific. The only memorable stop for me on that flight was Wake Island – something about being in the middle of the Pacific on that little speck of coral reef sort of appealed to me – and of course the WWII history of the place. I don't remember much of the arrival details at Tan Son Nhut airport in Saigon, beyond being an 18 year old and experiencing the sights, sounds, and smells of SE Asia for the first time. I suppose we were bused to Camp Alpha, where most arrivals were processed out to their individual units after a bit. I spent a few days there, and I do have a few interesting memories. I remember the first night, because Tan Son Nhut came under mortar attack, and I experienced for the first time, but certainly not the last, what it was like to drop to the floor and pull your mattress over your head. I remember thinking, "Ok, this is your first night in Vietnam, and you're getting mortared – not looking good for long-term survival!"



But the most vivid memory I have of my time at Camp Alpha involved a guy named **Jim Conde**. Jim was in my flight class, but we were not in the same platoon, so we knew of each other but hadn't really hung out a lot. Anyway, he turned up in the next bunk over from me, and I guess on day two or thereabouts at about 1500 in the afternoon, he told me that he'd procured a jeep ride and for me to get into civvies because we were going downtown. And he meant Saigon! Now I distinctly remember being told by someone in authority that we were not

permitted to leave Camp Alpha and we were not permitted to go into Saigon, but in an hour or so I found myself walking the streets with Jim, and thinking – “who is this guy, and what am I doing here?” I was fending off the street vendors trying to sell me everything under the sun, and we were stopping in every bar that we came across. That’s where I first learned about Saigon tea. Jim was very nonchalant about all this stuff. Anyway, things get a little blurry after this. We did get a hotel room, and I remember standing outside watching ARVN tanks rumbling down the street in front of us – there was a 2200 or 2300 curfew, I think.

I don’t recall how we got back to Camp Alpha the next day, but we did make it back – none the worse for a night out on the town. It was quite an experience for me for sure. Jim went on to serve with the 187th AHC, and I caught a ride to BMT East, I think on a Chinook, heading for the 155th. A few years ago I learned that Jim had passed away at age 59. Also, that when we were out in Saigon, Jim was NOT on his first tour in ‘Nam – nope! It was his THIRD tour – and his previous tours had been with 5th Special Forces. That explains a lot. He never said a word about his experiences, but I sure wish I had gotten to know him better.

VIETNAM WAR HISTORY UPDATE: the Napalm Girl

Phan Thi Kim Phuc was photographed naked, terrified, and in anguish moments after having her clothes burned off in an attack when she was 9 years old in 1972. Thereafter, she became known as “the napalm girl.”

“I remember June 8, 1972,” she begins. “I saw the airplane and it’s so loud, so close to me. Suddenly, the fire everywhere around me. The fire burned off my

clothes, and I saw my arm got burned with the fire, I thought, ‘Oh my goodness, I get burned, people will see me a different way.’”

“Nine years old, I became a victim of war,” Phuc continued. Describing how she initially felt about the Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of her, she said, “I didn’t like that picture at all. I felt like, ‘Why he took my picture when I was in agony, naked, so ugly?’ I wished that picture wasn’t taken.” Phuc went on to explain she went through 17 operations after being hit with napalm, and described the pain she endured. “It built me up with hatred, anger, bitterness,” she said, asking, “Why me? Why that happened to me?”

“In 1982, I wanted to take my life, Because I thought, after I die, no more suffering, no more pain.” But she found the new testament in the library in Saigon. That same year, she became a Christian. Phuc says her faith changed everything. “My enemies list became my prayer list,” she told CBC. “I forgive everyone who caused my suffering. Even the pilot, commander, people controlling me.”

The author and activist now works with children and has built an orphanage and a school. “Now, I am so thankful.”



From Blaze Media on the Internet

WHAT'S NEW IN THE OLD NEIGHBORHOOD?



The new Air Traffic Control Tower, commissioned at the Boun Ma Thuot Airport on 29 Jul 2024.

You might remember, a long time ago this airport was known as BMT East Field. It's different now. As you can see, some improvements have been made.

Yet, the past lingers here. Local lore has it that ghostly images of Green Hornet flyboys

and tiger stripe camo-clad CCS warriors are sometimes seen wandering in the area after nightfall – most often on nights when the moon is full.

THE NEXT REUNION: WHERE/WHEN/WHO? (or is it whom?)

Following a very successful Indianapolis reunion, thanks to Rueben Hunter and his assistants, we need to consider a follow on. If we're to have another reunion, we will need a location, a date, and a sponsor. There are some who would prefer meeting every two years and others who would prefer each year. As to location, some prefer a particular city, and some would leave it to a volunteer sponsor. So far we have heard Omaha, Nebraska, and Dayton, Ohio, but no sponsor has volunteered for either place. Request each of you consider all three questions and advise your officers soonest as to your preference.

THE NOT-SO-GREAT FALCON TURKEY HUNT

Jim Askren, Falcon 4

I suspect I have told this story before, but the deer story reminded of the day before Thanksgiving in 1965 when I decided we needed some fresh turkey and I had spotted some in an open field near VC mountain south of BMT. My plan was to fire a rocket near one and either knock it out with a concussion so the gunner could shoot it, or it would be hit by some shrapnel.

Unfortunately, neither occurred. I had a direct hit with a 2.75 inch rocket. No turkey meat was left, just feathers - LOTS of feathers, all over the field - and the rest of the birds had scattered. We flew back to Army-issued turkey.



CHRISTMAS - THREE TIMES - IN VIETNAM

Pat Lundquist



1970 at Ban Me Thuot was my first Christmas away from home - as well as the last Christmas for the 155th AHC. **Larry Tabbert** asked me to decorate his fridge for the occasion (see photo). I used orange and black felt pens, because that's the only colors we had. A week and a half later I tossed my gear on my new bunk at the 243rd ASHC in Dong Ba Thin.

I spent Christmas of 1971 assigned to the 61st AHC in An Son (Lane AHP).

Christmas of 1972 was spent with the 611th Transportation Company Direct Support Unit in Can Tho. By then I was a civilian working for NHA, so only had myself to blame for missing Christmas at home that year.

To all you guys who made it home, Merry Christmas to all!

MORNING FORMATION AT THE WALL

Anonymous

It's a picture-perfect fall morning, dew is heavy on the grass as we take our positions. Our Morning Formation (BMT guys, family, and friends) this day is on a grassy knoll overlooking The Wall; we've come to honor our fallen brothers. "High Flight" is perfect; the words lift us. But the Roll Call is difficult, as always; good men, taken too early. The lump in my throat comes right away - but hearing the names of guys I flew with is always the worst. There are tears, I'm not ashamed. Some (many?) of us thinking, "Could have been me." Or, maybe, "Should have been me." Survivor's guilt; not as bad as it used to be - but still there. Is that the same as PTSD? Maybe . . . We were so close, a band of brothers. We were there for each other - and some didn't make it. That still hurts. Always will. Lucky to have served with such a fine group of men. Honored to be included in the group. Humbled by the thought that these brave men find me worthy of inclusion. Truly, brothers.

Life goes on, but we will never forget those who flew and fought with us. Proud to have served with every one of you.

Reprinted from Barb Sortie 72

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Cover Photo:: Jim Askren, Falcon 4. There's no "155" on the pilots' door, so this is probably before A/1/1 was redesignated "155 AHC" in December, '65.



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