



# BAN ME THUOT BARB

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



Sortie 94

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## FALCON NIGHT STANDBY MISSION

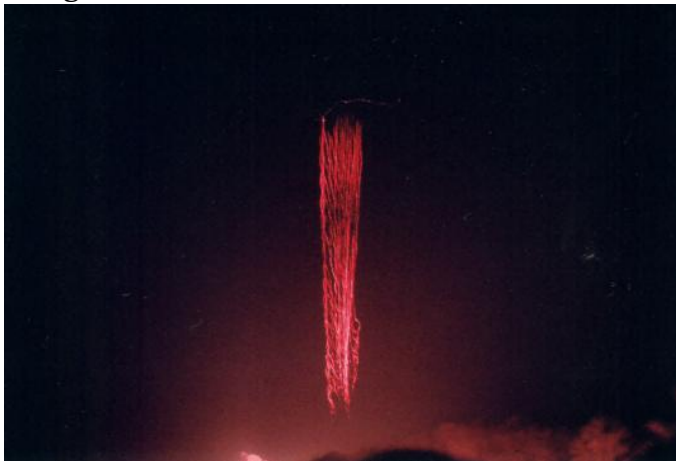
### Les Davison, Falcon 2

30 Oct 69 Evening in the O club at Camp Coryell, sipping a Coke; it had been quite a day. Our Falcon fire team had been pulled from B-50 (that rarely happened, CCS were a very high priority mission) after a Joker gunship was shot down at Firebase Kate. Escorting two Freight Train Chinooks into Kate, we took heavy fire – and some hits. I was no longer “cherry boy.” Winding down in the O club.

The camp PA blared, “Falcon standby crews report to your ships. Mr. Davison and Mr. Coonce, report to Operations immediately.” Jack and I were in Ops within a couple of minutes, Captain Tony Giordano didn’t waste time or words. Pointing on a map, he said, “Reports of VC in a village east of here, along the road to Ninh Hoa. No US on the ground. Downtown wants you to go check it out.”

Our gunships were quickly airborne, following the highway east. Clear and moonlit, a fine night for flying. I was Falcon Lead, Jack was A/C of the trail ship. Routine stuff, Falcons had flown this same mission numerous times to numerous villages in the area. We would fly over the village, and the VC would decide they should be elsewhere. Ho-hum. Like I said, a fine night for flying.

As we neared the village, we dropped lower. I radioed Jack that I would overfly the village at low level and instructed him to stay off to one side. Nav lights and rotating beacon were “ON” as we flew toward village center. We were about 200 meters from the edge of the village when a wall of tracers blossomed from within the village. End of ho-hum mission! A lot



of things happened all at once; the cyclic was hard over right and back to initiate a 180, and I was yelling into the radio, “Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot!” As we turned, no tracers followed us. Maybe we turned away in time? We got ourselves away from the village and took stock. Everyone was OK, none of our crew had felt any hits, and all the instruments were green. Neither Jack nor any back seaters had fired their weapons, thankfully. (I was visualizing the news headline: “Army Helos Fire on Village, Kill Women and Children.” That’s why I yelled into the radio – pretty sure it’s the only

time I ever raised my voice on the radio during 18 months in-country.) Deep breath, continue mission.

I radioed 155 Operations and told them what had happened. The reply was not unexpected; “Standby.” We orbited well outside the village for perhaps thirty or forty minutes, and eventually Ops instructed us to RTB. Back at City Field, we slid into our Corral revetments and shut down. The post-flight inspection found one small caliber hole in each main rotor blade: we had escaped – but it had been a close call. Jack and I reported on the

mission to Operations, but there wasn't much to say. As we walked back to our hootch, I made a mental note to myself: "Lesson Learned This Night - Always expect the unexpected."

Postscript: A few days later, in an idle moment, my thoughts went back to the tracer fire that night – and it dawned on me that all the tracers had been red. Could it be that the RFPF's had clocked out of their ARVN jobs (it was well after 1700 hours) and clocked in for their nighttime VC shift using the same weapons?

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## **NIGHT MISSION, REMEMBERED DIFFERENTLY**

**Bob Maddox, Falcon 1**

I think I was in the left seat with Les on this one, but my memory is somewhat different. Our ship was lit up like a Christmas tree, and Trail was blacked out (no lights) as usual. Clear night, but I don't remember the moon; the jungle below us was totally black. As we approached the village we could see a large bonfire, which we had been told would be in the middle of the village (or compound) for us to identify the friendlies. VC were reported to be just outside the perimeter.

Suddenly the night was lit up with red tracers right off the nose of our ship. There were so many and so close that you couldn't count them. I distinctly remember you expressing don't shoot; and pulling the nose up slightly as if to avoid flying into the wall of tracers (a reflex) - then breaking right.

The trail ship had already put a few rockets into the area where the tracers came from before you called don't shoot.

I remember hearing later that a scout party was sent out the next morning from the compound. They found blood in and around the rocket impact area. Maybe that is why we received no more fire - too busy dragging their dead and wounded away. Loved those rockets. I do remember that the bullet holes were about halfway out on the blades, and I thought how close they were to the nose.

Your thoughts on postscript are probably correct. They learned a lesson the hard way. DON'T MESS WITH THE FALCONS!!

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## **WAS IT ALL WORTH IT?**

**Ken Donovan, Stagecoach 28**

I just finished watching the movie "Flags of Our Fathers" about the flag raisers during the battle of Iwo Jima. If you have not seen it, I would highly recommend you do so. It got me to think, was it all worth it? From the war aspect probably not. Looking back with the advantage of hindsight, millions died for no good reason. Von Clausewitz once said, "war is politics by other means." Given the fact North Vietnam achieved its goals, and the United States did not, the war was not worth it. Given the lasting negative impact on American society to this day the war was not worth it. Please note I have seen documentation that Robert McNamara, then Sec of Defense, knew as early as late 1965 that the war was unwinnable. That is why both he and President Johnson would quit in 1968. From what some of the guys have related to me about their trips back to Vietnam, it would appear they recovered better than present day US society. Were the wounds both physical and emotional that we carry with us to this day worth it? Speaking for myself I view them as outward signs that we kept the faith and our commitment to our fellow soldiers, something that is not understood by our fellow Americans. My experience was "we fought with honor, kept the faith with our fellow soldiers, and were courageous when we had to be.

For me what was the worth it was the shared commitment and bond only those who have shared combat together know and understand. An unlimited bond where each of us was prepared to put our life at significant risk to save the other. Friendships that have passed the test of time and remain unbroken to this day.

We are now in the twilight of our years, for me the war 56 years ago, more for some of the early guys. Each time I hear of the passing of one of us, I mourn the passing to another one of the good guys.

In a few years, like the WWII generation, we will pass into the pages of history. It is my wish and hope history will treat you with the respect and honor that you so richly deserve.

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## **I THOUGHT WE'D BEEN HIT BY ARTILLERY**

**Jim Askren, Falcon 4**

Subtitle here could be "Flying with Captain Gru" – and that would be Maintenance Officer Phil Grushetsky. Capt. Gru liked to fly guns, so I took him out on Dusk Patrol with me one evening. While he had the controls, I was looking out the right side for any suspicious activity. Suddenly, there was a tremendous explosion. There was plexiglass all over the aircraft, the nose cover flew up and off, avionics were all out - I thought we had been hit by a 175. I quickly grabbed the controls, armed everything up, and turned to see what was going on. After a few passes over the area, I caught the culprit, a rather large dead tree trunk sticking above the rest of the trees. We had cracked it. Capt. Gru moaned and told me to park it by the Maintenance tent and not say a word about the incident. When morning came, I found #4 as good as ever, out on the pad and ready to fly. I never heard a word about it from anyone.

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## **MORTAR MISADVENTURES AT CAMP CORYELL**

**Keith Lane, Stagecoach 21 & Falcon 5, May '67 – May '68**

Incoming mortar rounds always brought sudden loud noises and a fear of being hit, regardless of how safe the bunker was or how thick the mattress you hid under. It took me about ten years to get looking for a bunker when I heard similar sounds back home. The very first time I heard the mortars was about a week after I got to Ban Me Thuot. Even though I had initially trained as a 111C (Mortars and 106 Recoilless Rifle), the sound still startled me - even though it was outbound. I suppose we were fortunate that first few weeks, because outbound was all there was. When Charlie decided to send them inbound, however, things changed dramatically.

Our hootches had bunkers built between them with entrances either inside the hootch or at the ends. In the dark it was hard to tell. Each bunker had two layers of sandbags for the walls and a C-130 pallet covered by another two layers of sandbags for the roof, but it was still quite scary during the incoming attack. The aftermath varied considerably. At first, Charlie concentrated on the Corral with all the helicopters, but later he started aiming for the personnel quarters, clubs, and office buildings.

One night I was in the shower, thinking it was safe because they never hit us after 2200. I was all lathered up at about 2230 when I heard the rounds being fired in the distance. Rinsing quickly, I grabbed my towel and ran for a bunker. About halfway there the first round hit and my shower shoes came off as I ran a little faster. Then my towel came off, too, but it was still somehow in my hand. It was so dark I couldn't see the hand in front of me. I managed to find a bunker - but I couldn't find the door and was yelling for someone to tell me where it was. Finally, I heard a voice telling me to come inside the hootch. When I got inside after what seemed like an eternity, the guy next to me remarked that I was all wet. I told him I was naked, too, as I had just been in the shower.

It's really amazing how much room I suddenly had in that crowded bunker.

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## **A LONG-AGO CHRISTMAS AT CAMP CORYELL 1968**

**Ken Donovan, Stagecoach 28**

One of the things that most all Vietnam vets have in common is that we spent at least one Christmas “in country.” At some point during the recent holidays, my thoughts turned to my own Vietnam Christmas.

The story started on Christmas Eve. I was a new aircraft commander, and we were conducting air assaults east of BMT in an area known as Happy Valley. I remember flying number 2, that’s where new A/Cs were assigned because it was an easy position to fly. In the AO, the good guys had pushed the enemy up against a U-shaped bend in the river. As a result, the VC were surrounded by the river on three sides, and the good guys were blocking the only way out. We had been flying in reinforcements all day. At some point in the afternoon, Operations radioed to remind all 155th elements that the Christmas truce would start soon. “All 155 aircraft, 30 minutes to truce,” came the broadcast.

We continued to assault troops in before the truce started. The last lift touched down with only about 3 minutes to go, then the Falcons made one more pass and expended everything they had left. It was very late in the afternoon; heading back to BMT, we flew towards the setting sun.

We landed and did the post flight, then I went back to the hootch. I took a shower and put on the one-piece flight suit I still had from flight school. The Second Platoon pilots were already having a party in our bunker, so I went down the steps to join in. As I entered the bunker two of the guys grabbed me, and a third slapped a large chunk of fudge in my face. It stuck to my face and hair, and all the guys got a big laugh. But when I looked around, I did not feel like the lone ranger; everyone was wearing fudge - and so we partied on. I ended up in a corner of the bunker sharing a bottle of Beefeater’s gin with a flight school classmate, Dick Pugh. We were drinking it straight out of the bottle; I have not touched that stuff ever again. (Sadly, Dick died a few days later when the Battalion admin bird went down on take-off at the end of Runway 06.) I think the only sober guys that night were the standby crews.

“Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the Hootch, not a creature was stirring not even a rat”- that was, until the mortar rounds started impacting. It was time to hit the bunker again, this time the fudge was not being served. We did the usual thing; waited until the rounds stopped and then went back to bed.

I guess the best happened on Christmas Day. Say what you want about the Army, but they go all out to make sure no matter where you are, every soldier gets a great Christmas meal. I spent the day flying Christmas turkey and mail to the troops in the field. I look back on it now as not a bad way to spend Christmas Day.

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## **A DAY IN THE ‘NAM**

**Keith Lane, Stagecoach 21 & Falcon 5, May ‘67 – May ‘68**

I was in the O Club one night when we started getting rounds very close by. Too many rounds too close made running for a bunker very hazardous, so I dove into a corner of the double thick layer of brick wall. I didn’t even know I was on top of another guy until I heard him start to say the Lord’s Prayer. Taking stock, I realized I was protecting him pretty well, but nothing was covering me - so I reached over to a chair and took the two thick cushions from it and curled up under them. Still, my right hand and left knee were exposed - and when we got a direct hit on the club, a piece of shrapnel lodged in both. After a quick visit to the medic, I flew the flare ship for five hours. The next morning, I counted something like twenty-eight holes in those two cushions.

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**US Army Vietnam News Reports Information Office, HQ US Army Vietnam  
For Immediate Release November 18, 1969**

**Les Davison, Falcon 2**

**CHOPPERS, ARVN TEAM DOWN 102 ENEMY**

Helicopter gunship crewmen of the 17th Combat Aviation Group supported Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) 22nd Infantry Division ground troops in a four hour battle with an unknown number of enemy soldiers near the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) Camp at Bu Prang yesterday. A total of 102 enemy soldiers were killed in the battle, 72 by gunships, tactical air and artillery strikes.

The ARVN troopers engaged the Communist force yesterday in the intermittent rolling hills and heavy woods two miles east of the camp, located 110 miles north-northwest of Saigon.

“The ARVN soldiers were on a sweep outside the camp’s perimeter when they began receiving indirect fire from a wood line kicking off the battle,” said Warrant Officer John L. Davidson (sic), Miniosek (sic), Ill. “Falcon” gunships of the 17th Group’s 155th Assault Helicopter Company who were supporting the ARVN infantrymen when fighting broke out made several rocket and minigun sorties of (sic) the NVA force. “We spent the whole day over the area of operation,” commented Fire Team Leader Davidson (sic), “and it was dusk before we got back to Ban Me Thuot.”

As the battle developed, gunships from the 170th, 92nd and 48th Assault Helicopter Companies also moved into the area to support the Vietnamese forces in contact with the enemy.

*BACKSTORY: Bruce McInnes handed this to me at the Phoenix reunion, said he’d found it in some papers he had kept. I remember the action and, as best I can remember, it is factually accurate. Our Falcon team expended five times that day. When we weren’t rearming and refueling, we were flying and firing; it was a long day. But I don’t remember ever being interviewed by a reporter. Could have happened, but I don’t think so – especially given that my name and hometown (especially) were badly misspelled. My best guess is that this Press Release was filed by a REMF PIO from a Saigon bar – and I doubt that it ever got published anywhere. I do wonder how my name got in here. Anyhow, that’s MY story, and I’m stickin’ to it.*

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**THE BIGGEST FIREWORKS SHOW I’VE EVER SEEN**

**Keith Lane, Stagecoach 21 & Falcon 5, May ’67 – May ‘68**

In August ’67, we were sent up north, flying out of Phu Bai to support Khe Sahn for about a week. This is the mission when Johnnie Gann was injured. The Third Marines had been firing a mortar over their ammo dump, and somebody short-charged a round and it went into the dump. We watched for three or four hours while it blew spectacularly.

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*We ask all of you that receive the BARB by US Mail to please send us your email addresses to save the postage and the effort to put the newsletters together. Let Matt Matthews at **stagecoach293@gmail.com** know of any corrections/new articles/eMail addresses.*

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## RETURN TO BMT CITY FIELD

Pat Lundquist

When the 155th stood down, I got transferred to the 243rd ASHC (“Freight Train” Chinooks) at Dong Ba Thin. One off day I was bored, so I asked a 243rd crew if I could tag along on a resupply milk run. The pilots had no problem with that. Our first stop was Ban Me Thuot to pick up a ¾ ton vehicle that had seen better days. We slung that down to Duc Lap. We were cruising at altitude while I was laying on the deck looking down past the ¾ ton to the jungle below when I spotted two large piles of leaves moving along a trail. The Crew Chief was not all that interested: spotting enemy activity was evidently not our mission that day. We dropped off the vehicle, then picked up some blivits to deliver to another firebase. Then we flew back to BMT for a lunch break.

The entire place was surreal, almost a ghost town with very little activity and hardly a GI in sight. I had a chance to BS with the control tower guys, who said they were the only GI’s left at the field. One of them was grouching about why they were even assigned there since the VNAF pilots never paid attention to them anyway. He said the Vietnamese would get out on the runway and then he’d hear a pilot say, “We go now” and away they went. I suppose they were there in case GI’s needed to drop in and pick up a ¾ ton vehicle.

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### TAPS:

**Dave Churilla** – Mar 25 Dave was a 2nd Platoon pilot, during the last half of ‘69 he was Stagecoach 26. During the siege of Bu Prang and Duc Lap in late ‘69, he flew into the Volcano. For those who weren’t around then, “flew into the Volcano” is high praise. Stagecoach 26, Ken Donovan, attended Dave’s funeral.

**Robert Akers** – Oct ’24 Bob was pilot during 1970.

**Norm Simpson** – Apr ‘25 Norm was a Falcon Peter Pilot during the summer and fall of 1969. He was with the 155th for less than six months, but he made the most of his time. He was shot down in Cambodia on a B-50 mission (everyone got out OK), and then he was wounded supporting the besieged Special Forces camp at Bu Prang during November. The wound was serious enough to require his evacuation to Japan, and then back stateside. It took a good while for Norm to finally make his way to a 155th reunion – but after the first one, he never missed another.

**Thomas Blevins** - passed 3/2/24.

**Charles Barkley** - Avionics 69/70 passed October 14, 2022  
Talked to his wife on the phone and assured her he would be remembered.

**Thomas Coley** - passed 4/30/25. He was 95 years old. Master Aviator.

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## **Chuck Markham's Legacy – A SPECIAL DONATION TO THE FRIENDS OF VINH SON MONTAGUARD ORPHANAGES**

As the 155<sup>th</sup> treasurer, I worked very closely with Chuck Markham. Chuck was our Quartermaster. He took care of ordering inventory, such as T-shirts, hats, pins, cups, etc. for all of you to select/purchase. As you are aware, Chuck passed away recently.

Chuck would keep receipts of postage paid to get your items to you, also receipts for inventory additions or reorders from various suppliers. He and I had an informal arrangement of reimbursing his costs at each reunion. He brought me all his current period receipts. I tallied these and then wrote him a reimbursement check from the 155<sup>th</sup> fund.

When Chuck passed, I contacted his wife Mary knowing that the 155<sup>th</sup> still owed Chuck money. She sent what receipts she could find. I totaled these, and it came to a total of \$807.94.

I next contacted Mary to let her know how much we would be returning to her. She stated that she would like to donate \$500 of that to the Vinh Son Orphanage in Chuck's name. This will be done. God Bless you, Mary!

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## ***Send us your stories, share them with others!***

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### 155<sup>th</sup> AHC Association Officers

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Officers' contact info is shown above. PLEASE contact Les if your address, phone number, or e-mail address change. If you have any questions or matters of concern relating to the Association or BMT, calls and/or messages are welcomed by all the officers.

And if you just want to call to say "hi," we'll take those calls, too – gladly!

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*Bad day at the revetment. One of our guns took a mortar round. Ouch!*

155 AHC Association

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