

Slicks Are For Kids

I felt lucky, incredibly lucky. Three weeks ago I'd been processing through Cam Ranh Bay expecting to be sent to a line outfit, considering that I was a draftee with an 11B10 infantry MOS. But instead I was at LZ Sally, breaking rockets for the gun platoon.

I couldn't figure out why the Army had assigned me to the 188th. All I knew was, I was going to be a helicopter door gunner, not a ground-pounding grunt. Was it my 20/10 eyesight? The fact that I'd qualified Expert on the M-60 at Fort Polk? Or was it just I'd been in the right place at the right time? Never mind, once a slot opened up I was going to get to fly. Dig it! In the meantime, I pulled practically every detail they had: KP; crap burning; garbage hauling; digging drainage ditches. But "breaking rockets?"

It had me stumped. Was I actually going to destroy rockets? Eventually I found out it meant breaking open wooden boxes and putting air-to-ground missiles together by attaching warheads to rocket bodies. I'd learned to respect weapons and munitions at Polk and I didn't think much of screwing high explosives together. All I could think of was the friction I'd be generating attaching one metal piece to another. Was one of these things going to explode in my hands?

After I helped assemble a couple of dozen rockets, our detail of FNGs loaded them into a trailer hitched to a jeep. As the sergeant in charge of the detail climbed in the jeep and began to drive away, motioning with his free hand for us to follow, someone remarked, "Can you believe it; the sumbitch ain't even givin' us a ride. What an a-hole."

We shuffled down the road toward the railroad tracks that separated the maintenance flight line and airstrip from the rest of the camp, making our way past the motor pool to where one of the gunships was parked. As I neared the one that they called 'the Hog' and got a close look at the squat, ugly, complicated-looking beast, I was in awe. This was a Huey gunship and it looked extremely menacing and deadly. "I'd hate to be on the receiving end of that..." I thought as I began to struggle with one of the rockets.

A group of enlisted guys were hanging around the ship. They were pretty intimidating too: unshaven faces, scuffed boots, stained uniforms, cigarettes hanging from their lips, playing grabass and trading expletives with each other. Another was squatting on the open engine deck, working on the turbine and saying nothing. The crew chief, I found out later.

One of the gunners came over to me and said, "I'll take that cherry," removing the rocket from my arms with an experienced sweep of his hands. "Effin' new guys" another said as they began unloading the trailer and carefully sliding rockets into the pods. I felt naked and vulnerable. I WAS new. It showed in my face, my wide-eyed attitude and in the tentative way that I carried myself. Welcome to the Black Widows 'New Meat.'