

BW6 HAS A BAD DAY!

LZ Sally
MAY

It started out like a hundred other days in Viet Nam with Kjell (The "Troll") Tollefson stumbling through the darkened tent, flashlight in hand, passing out mission sheets and kicking cots to wake us up. On this particular day, I was assigned to fly a DCS mission in support of the Red Hat ARVN unit from Hue Citadel. I was partnered with CWO Ken (The "Pig") Pokorski as Aircraft Commander. It was around the first of May 1968. I had been in the unit only two weeks. We made the pickup (standard load five little people and some mortar ammo) at the Citadel along with a wing ship from the company and proceeded out toward the mountains west of Camp Eagle. We were soon in the foothills when we observed a tailrotor chip detector light. A tailrotor failure in the mountains would not be a cool way to end the day. We decided to return to the Citadel. If we had a problem on the approach we would simply make a running landing. It sounded like a good plan and our sister ship allowed they would escort us back. The plan was flawless until we were about ten feet short final and near zero airspeed when the tailrotor stopped cooperating. "Pig" did the only thing to do—he rolled the throttle off and attempted a hovering autorotation. We bounced slightly (in a level attitude) and drifted to the left. Well wouldn't you know, the little people had planted a rice paddy in the Citadel and it had a functioning dike around it! The left skid contacted the dike and the aircraft inertia did the rest. She rolled on her left side, and the rotorhead separated clean as a whistle when the leading blade hit the ground. When everything stopped moving and we realized we were still alive, we got out after attempting to shut the engine down. Alas the fuel control unit had been smashed. There she lay running at flight idle, dumping fuel overboard and running under the tail pipe. We knew it was going to burn! Our wing ship headed to the other side of the Citadel for a big fire extinguisher. Then we remembered we had the little people and all that mortar ammo on board so we climbed back in and threw them and the ammo out (rather unceremoniously) and moved off to a safe distance to watch the fire! Magnesium makes a pretty blaze with tall showers of bright white sparks and enough heat to turn the barrels on the door guns to powder! Very impressive all in all!

BW6 had been called by our wing man and he soon arrived in the C&C ship to pick us up. It was evident that politics and war are inseparable when the first thing Major Jack Johnson asked was, "Do you guys have your 38's?" It was a good thing that the fire had left about six feet of the tailboom and the offending tailrotor assembly intact because it proved to the accident team that the tail rotor slider assembly had lost a Carter pin and nut. The whole thing had backed off and locked the tailrotor in neutral pitch, so pushing pedals was only stretching the control cables! But I digress—back to the story! We were no sooner airborne and heading back to LZ Sally when BW6 received a call that "another aircraft was down from enemy fire." This turned out to be CWO Patrick (The "Hulk") McCrady on a DCS between Hue and Sally near the beach. He had taken rounds which shattered the tailrotor gearbox, necessitating an autorotation to a nearby rice paddy. Due to a heavy load, low altitude, and slow airspeed, The "Hulk" had smiled the skids and as we approached to pick up Patrick and his crew, The "Hulk" was observed cussing blue blazes and shooting into the tree line with his deadly 38 pistol!

Soon we were airborne again with a heavy load, when much to our amazement and despair we received the call again, "BW6, you have another one down and burning at Camp Eagle!" Well this was a mess because it was on one of the Division Log Pads! It was our pal, CWO Thomas Tuttle and crew. Usually we dispatched around 5:00 a.m. or first light for these missions. It is relatively cool at 5:00 a.m. The crew chief had started the day wearing his Army issue field jacket, but by this time (about 10:00 a.m.), it had warmed up considerably and the lad was using it for a seat cushion. As the aircraft departed the Log Pad, it was customary for the crew chief and gunner to clear for other traffic. This was prudent since the Log Pad was down in a gully, and the CE had to stand up and holding to the Christmas Tree lean out to survey the area.

Well guess what? You guessed it! The seat cushion (field jacket) flew out the door and what do you think it did? You guessed it again! It proceeded to tear the tailrotor off (sound familiar?) gearbox and all! The aircraft was at about 30 knots and nose low when it lost the whirly appendage and proceeded to spin to the right making a 360 degree circuit before slamming into the wall of the gully with such force that it threw CWO Tuttle (seat and all) out through the greenhouse and onto the ground where he discovered he had only minor cuts and scrapes to show for it. The aircraft also provided a fine pyrotechnic display for all to see.

Yes three in one day, a bad day for sure for BW6! But nobody killed and, as I recall, we all were back up the next day to do it again.

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I write this little story to remember some of our comrades and the way we were, young, immortal (we thought) and gung ho. We are no longer young of body but we are ever young in our memories. It was good to fly with all of you back then----- Fondest regards. Ernie Pratt BW43/3 1968/69