

FROM THE PILOT'S SEAT

By Charlie Johnson

Some of the scariest missions I flew as a gunship pilot were middle of the night extractions with the LRRPs in contact. "In Contact" usually meant a bunch of VC or NVA surrounding the five or six man LRRP patrol. It was always bad enough to be doing anything out there in the middle of the night but with our guys in contact, and they had to get extracted or die, close (or "Danger Close" I think it was called at times) gunship and artillery fire was frightening. It was always heartening to hear the LRRP leader telling us on the radio that we were close but we could bring it closer ... knowing that meant, on the ground, that mini-guns, rockets and door guns were hitting close enough to hurt the bad guys more than the good guys. When I think about some of the missions I don't know how we even got a slick in to pick them up sometimes without losing the aircraft and crew. I think it must have been more luck than skill that let us get away with it.

I have heard stories from the LRRPs after such missions telling us how much they appreciated the support and how they wouldn't trade jobs with us for anything in the world. I didn't know it at that time but it appears that was a common feeling among all combat veterans. I had some ground duty my second tour and I can tell you I will take the helicopters anytime, especially if it is gunships so you can at least shoot back.

I recall also missions where we were going to outsmart the wily enemy and have the slick set down three or four times, have the LRRPs get off on the third or fourth touch and go, only to have the slick take fire on one or two of the touchdowns. I don't know how the LRRPs worked up enough courage to even get off the helicopter some times.