

10 October 1995

George G. Reese Jr.

[REDACTED]

Dear George:

I must open with an abject apology for the delay in this reply to your very interesting letter. As my wife explained, during your more recent phone call, a first letter was somehow lost in my computer (and, although my old 'Mace' deletion recovery program assured me that it had been found), no amount of effort would retrieve it for reading or printing. Therefor, I shall once more attempt to answer your questions - however, please believe that the intervening years since 1962-63 have dimmed my memory somewhat!

First, I regret that I have no articles of uniform or patches from that period. Indeed, they disappeared rapidly into the hands of my family. However, I shall attempt to both answer your direct questions and provide some anecdotal information. Incidentally, John Foley was PIO for the 57th-120th; and later went back as a gunship pilot. He has recently suffered a stroke and has not yet recovered all of his speech ability. He remains tall in my mind as one of those intrepid and remarkably talented warrant officer aviators who carried the early efforts of combat aviation in Vietnam.

I think that you might appreciate a bit of background, to include the peculiarly strange situation, within which the first aviation units in Vietnam were required to operate. All units were administered by the 40th Trans Bn, which did not have operational control (until just prior to the time when the 145th Combat Aviation Bn was activated, as the newly designated aviation companies came into being). This meant that the individual companies were assigned in support of major ARVN units (such as the 7th ARVN Inf Div, HQ'd at My Tho, or the 4th Corps, at Can Tho, both south of Saigon, located on the Mekong. This resulted in some really interesting relationships with both the Vietnamese forces and the U.S. advisory units!

I joined the 'Deans' on the 4th of October 1962, having been sent to Vietnam with two other majors, by direction of the C/S Army, to take command of the 8th, 31st and 57th Transportation Companies (Light Helicopter) (H-21). I must tell you that there were serious problems with these companies - and the commanders who had brought them into country were not on hand to greet us. For my part, I found the basic problems to be low morale, poor discipline, confused leadership, sloppy maintenance and absolutely no recognition on the part of higher authority, of the need to train former transport crews in the principles of direct

combat control. I was very fortunate, having been trained in the Army Air Corps, as a bomber pilot, in WWII; and had enjoyed command of an aircraft maintenance company in the Korean fracas; but more than that, I was fortunate in finding some of the finest WO pilots and commissioned officers I had ever (and since) encountered. They continued my education in the H-21 and I did my best to teach the elements of formation flying, aerial gunnery, air discipline and command organization.

However, I also inherited a small group of totally unfit WO's and enlisted men, who did not accept the premise of combat risk as a part of their service. I worked with these men for several weeks, noting system failures which did not check out when they had left the action and had returned to base. Then a particular incident exceeded my patience: several WO pilots decided to bring charges against their platoon commander for 'endangering their lives,' while he was carrying out a small, independent mission. My investigation revealed cause for courts martial of the WO's - and as I was preparing charges, they beat it into Saigon and signed in to the American Hospital, with a couple of hippy shrinks. Group decided to avoid local prosecution and shipped them stateside, where they were eventually boarded and separated from the service. This did not entirely solve the problem; and in the process of ridding the 57th of the bad apples, I elected to reduce the company strength from 125% to about 90%. And then a strange thing happened - many of the aircraft were unfit to fly in any event - and volunteers to fill cockpits showed up from all sorts of agencies!

Anyway, the good guys from the old bunch buckled down and new blood soon filled the empty slots. The new pilots were WOJG's (wobblies) who needed a lot of training - and they logged a lot of hours learning to get heavy loads in and out of confined areas, before they flew regular missions. They did fine.

Let me touch on the structure of the transport helicopter companies, which were 'separate' outfits, designed to operate alone, with reinforcements, as required. They were large, adding up to more than 500 men, including field maintenance, medical, signal repair, quartermaster fuel, engineer water purification and gunner detachments (these last from the 25th Inf Div, Hawaii). Extra pilots were assigned to fly 22 H-21's, 5 L-19's(O-1A's) and an L-20(U-6A). I won't attempt to itemize the ground vehicles, but they included a fire truck and about a dozen fuel tankers. Seven of these, manned by brave US drivers and Vietnamese helpers, were distributed around the delta, based on US advisory or ARVN units, to service flight operations. Needless to say, coordination of these tankers (and replenishment of gas caches) was a critical element of mission planning.

At this point, I must introduce an impression which I received shortly after arrival in Vietnam. My first mission was the hurried relief of a small mud fort cum village, north east of Saigon. The VC had mortared and machinegunned the people and had wiped out the fort defenders when we arrived. We got the troops in, then began to evacuate the civilians under light small arms fire. As we lifted off and climbed out over palm trees, with about 26 souls on board, I noticed a small girl wearing a

pinafore soaked in blood, standing in the doorway. I looked into a pair of big, brown eyes and knew why I was in Vietnam. I have never lost the conviction that the war was the right thing to do; and I can only be thankful that we in aviation had the opportunity to lead the Army.

Let me touch briefly on formation and gunnery. I found the 57th (as did the other outfits) flying a thing called 'staggered trail,' which was really a line of choppers, struggling to stay together, with all trailing ships flying in roiled air. This was pure poison, particularly for tandem rotor choppers (where the aft rotor blades are always laboring in disturbed air), causing pilots to fight to hold position - and worse, pull extra power, which quickly shortened engine life. In our case, we were using poorly rebuilt engines, which failed in a period as short as 50 hours. Consider the effect of this on transmissions, drive shafts, et al., and you may perceive that it was a daily struggle to put enough aircraft in the air to lift a short company of light infantry. I digress, but all of these things were immediately crucial. However, tactically, we did two simple things of major worth: we adopted and trained in echelon formations and installed a flexible machinegun on each side. This had the immediate effect of placing each aircraft in clear air, allowed tight formation control enroute, on approach, landing and takeoff to and from tight LZ's, and gave us free, uncovered protective gunfire on both sides of the formation.

Let me add here that the guns were mounted in homemade (we used bed frames) mounts, which swung outside of the fuselage, swiveling the gun and ammo can inside the mount. The guns themselves were modified, from pistol grip backplates, to double hand grips and thumb triggers. As a point of interest, the long bodied H-21's landed in a nose-high attitude. This characteristic tended to cut visibility from the cockpit and we often took fire directly in front and under the nose. With a step extended from the fuselage, the harnessed right gunner was able to swing out and lay fire directly beneath and ahead. This was a remarkable source of comfort!

Well, we extended our engine life experience, improved our maintenance, learned to fly as a fighting team, got our troops and ourselves in and out of hot places quickly, while returning effective fires against Viet Cong weapons. Of course, we learned new lessons each day; and through the medium of post-operations critique, using the input of all crews, applied our lessons promptly. I will not tell you that we were contending with first class enemy troops, because, with few exceptions, they were not. Furthermore, the local VC units were then equipped with ancient Mouser rifles and even some weapons made from gas pipe, which used black powder to fire large lead pellets. However, as time passed, VC units in training became Class A units - and the improvement in their gunnery became pretty obvious, as they were armed with automatic rifles.

Permit me to add one more vital administrative element. I had an opportunity to also use experience gained in the Korean war, where, as a Transportation/Aviation member of the 8th Army staff, I observed the problems of lack of unity of command, in

maintenance functions, among the 6th and 13th Transportation Helicopter Companies (H-19). I found the 57th organizational maintenance and the field maintenance detachment people feuding. Solution? I did early what future aviation company TOE's did later - I placed all of the maintenance under one officer and combined the lot. That, and sorting out NCO's who had forgotten their proper functions, began a long haul to make the 57th's aircraft capable of sustained operations.

I don't know, really, if history speaks of the nature of aviation operations in the early years; but I think that the long distances which we flew - sometimes several hundred miles at a jump, just to reach our troops (without effective fighter cover, dependent upon our own ingenuity and capability to recover our downed aircraft and crews) best characterizes the kind of thing we did. Long hours were the rule: off the ground in pre-dawn darkness (and often storm), to fly a couple of hours to pick up troops (and refuel from an often uncertain cache), quickly finalize assault plans, lift troops and return again to refuel and await insertion of a reserve force -or, often, retrieval of the strike force, under fire; and return to homeplate late at night. We lost aircraft in the LZ's, from time to time - and were forced to destroy some of them. However, we had a good recovery record - and we never left an aircrew behind. Sometimes aircraft went down enroute, disabled by gunfire or, more likely, because of engine failure. The efforts subsequently mounted to recover the ships and crews often became more complicated than an assault. I remember with great warmth the attitudes of the Vietnamese commanders, who provided troops (which had to be stripped out of some vital force and transported) to secure the downed craft, while the maintenance teams flew in engines and/or otherwise repaired the aircraft for flight. A night on the ground - or in a swamp - working on a disabled ship, protected by a short platoon of non-english speaking infantry, could be a mighty lonely experience.

But let me try to address your specific comments and questions. To begin, the white diamond was the recognition device of the 57th, which I established, to afford quick and positive identification of 57th aircraft during multiple-unit assault operations. These were fairly common in the delta region - and especially in the 'D' zone, which on one unique occasion, involved more than 150 aircraft (US Army choppers, USAF prop fighters, bombers, paratroop transports, VNAF fighter bombers and a few H-34 choppers, and some really good Navy attack bombers - all of our aircraft, with the exception of the UTT UH-1's, being a bunch of antiques).

The toppled choppers and L-19's in the photo, were the result of a 'sort of tornado' which struck Tan Son Nhut airbase shortly after we had returned from a morning operation, within sight of Saigon. The AF weather people failed to warn us, but having observed the squall line building with unusual speed, the XO, who was overseeing post operations procedures, managed to get a few trucks out as windbreaks, as the weather moved in. All, however, being fueled and maintained, were not yet tied down; and some of those skidded on the PSP and flipped, falling into steel

stake and barbed wire barriers. As an aside, I was hurriedly meeting with an IG, on a routine visit from USARPAC, in the 'Shawnee Teepee' officers club, when a section of the roof blew off. Needless to say, it was an eventful day - and not one of my favorite memories. However, since we had two extra H-21's, and with a few loaned aircraft, we were back in business in a couple of days (the hulks of the severely damaged ships supplied needed parts and remained sad mementoes during my remaining time with the outfit).

Incidentally, a '57th Medical Evacuation Detachment,' which used a red 57 in a round patch, was co-located with the 57th Trans and the UTT. The light grey cotton flight suit, which you noted that BG Stillwell was wearing, was very likely one of the standard issue flight suits which we wore, until green, lightweight jungle fatigues were issued in '63.

Permit me to add a tale or two about our favorite gunner-general. General Stillwell did ride with the UTT frequently - and was known to be a deadly shot. I know of no time when he flew with the H-21's; but flying with the gunships was clearly the proper way to avoid possibly embarrassing exposure to troops not necessarily known for loyalty - and to exercise a secure ability to personally observe both ourselves and the Vietnamese in action. The general also flew many places in an L-19, which he had been taught to fly, by a former instructor on his group staff. He was not really very proficient, but his aide, an aviator, flew with him. Some of the 57th captains drew this duty occasionally - and always reported interesting events (he liked to open the side windows in an L-19 and spray tree lines with an AR-15). Let me relate a tale involving the UTT.

The 57th and a platoon or so, of the 93rd, were operating out of Tay Ninh, close to the Cambodian border, with the Blue platoon of the UTT in support. We had put two companies of rangers into a hot area on the border; and had returned to refuel. The reserve was closed up with the choppers, when we received a sighting report from one (of two) of our L-19's which were maintaining contact with the rangers, that a small force of suspected VC were moving within about three miles of Tay Ninh. I passed the word to the Special forces rep and the ARVN ground commander; and we began to organize the air strip for defense. Then, suddenly, the UTT cranked up and tore off to the north - and I thought, 'now here's a hell of a situation,' because I was the mission commander, also in command of the 93rd elements and the UTT platoon. Fortunately, the Blue platoon leader accepted my radioed order and returned before the rangers called for the reserve. However, I was without gunship support until they were again refueled from a short supply. Needless to say, I was not happy - and surely didn't need the consternation shown by the Special Forces officer and the Vietnamese ranger commander. I approached the 'Blue' leader, expressed my displeasure and asked for an explanation. He was obviously extremely embarrassed and suggested that we walk away from the aircraft. There I learned that Stillwell, who was standing behind the lead ship, had ordered the UTT out.

General 'S' never mentioned the incident - and neither did

I! A year or so later, the old man was injured pretty badly in a jump at Ft. Bragg. I went down to see him in the hospital - and he laughed and asked me if I was still a hardnose. Some months later, he was lost at sea, in a C-47 which went down between the mainland and Hawaii, as the legend goes. I wonder still.

A few other things occur, as my memories are stirred. Let me touch on a few, wherein we put to use the aviator skills we had honed during the peace years:

During a second day phase of a 'D' Zone operation, when a weather change brought in a blanket of low stratus (remember that stuff?), we banked on luck, decided to fly, loaded troops at Song Bey, organized the formations with an experienced instrument pilot in each element lead, sent an L-19 ahead to penetrate the cover and locate the LZ area; and sent another L-19 with an FM beacon to hold over the IP; then, in timed flight descended through the stratus (very thin) and put the troops right on the target. The stuff was breaking up as we came out, which was fortunate, as I lost an engine and got to shoot an autorotation into a very dusty area peopled mainly by elephants.

During another weather-haunted operation against the U-Minh VC battalion (a Class A unit), in the U-Minh forest, right on the edge of the Gulf of Siam. We landed in a familiar place called Cau Mau, to pick up troops, in time to see an anticipated fog bank roll in from the sea. On the spot, I proposed a contingency plan to the ARVN division commander, who bought it. In short, with three L-19's, we sent two to hold station at prescribed points off shore - and used one to lead the formation of, I think, about 15 transport choppers. Screened by the fog, at low level, we achieved complete surprise. The 6-ship UTT lead, not required for flank cover, followed the L-19 scout, and hit the VC camp and LZ's head on with a beautiful display of rocketry. The 21's held great formation, landed intact and came out slow, on the tree tops, steering a prescribed course. Admittedly, the whole thing could have been a disaster with lesser pilots, but with the Deans flying, it was a roaring success. The UTT went back as the murk cleared and had a field day shooting up VC fleeing into the swamp. Our return with additional troops and, later evacuation of the troops was, fairly uneventful.

And then there was an operation out of Phan Thiet, on the coast of the South China Sea, aimed at an area characterized by cross compartments - and about as miserable an area to get into as can be imagined. Just about everything went awry initially. I think that this one was planned by MACV: and included a three pronged ground force attack, artillery support to be fired on call, the UTT (two platoons) to fight as a separate gunship force, to hit some hardened targets; VNAF and USAF aircraft to soften things up ahead of time - and two H-37's (brought in from Korea) to haul out anyone who got zapped. You guessed it. This was a mammoth screwup. The VNAF and USAF came late and hit the wrong areas (thank God). The ARVN artillery did not respond to fire missions, but opened fire after the choppers were lifting blocking forces and liberally sprinkled our line of flight. The UTT, attacking without artillery preparation, caught hell and had three ships down in the first half hour. The H-37' pilots earned

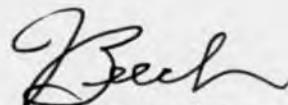
their pay pronto, and had the downed UH-1's slung out of the battle slick as a whistle. The 57th - 120th) came out of it with a lot of holes, but no casualties. As I recall, I caught a bit fuss later, from a MACV colonel (artillery advisor) who couldn't land at Phan Thiet, when his Otter pilot arrived late and found the airstrip covered with helicopters. That was old 'Coal Bin Willie' of Ft. Bragg fame - a damned fine soldier and a good friend to aviation.

Then there was the worst of all. After a long day's work with the 31st, out of Rach Gia, on the Gulf, we hit unexpected trouble. We left three 57th choppers sitting in a flooded rice paddy just off the Rach Gia runway, with engines fouled by bad fuel. We then refueled at Soc Trang, grabbed at bite to eat and headed for Saigon. A 57th H-21 coming north from Soc Trang with four 57th pilots and three 31st pilots, was shot down and crashed on 'VC island' in the Mekong River, at about 10:30 pm. We hunted for it, with searchlights, until Bn called off the search. Ground troops got in by boat the next day and recovered the bodies. This came after about a month of maximum effort and was a powerful blow to tired crews. General Stillwell stood all Delta aviation down for two weeks - time which we used to rebuild morale, recover and repair aircraft and hold a large planeside memorial service, as seven fine aviators, a crew chief and a gunner, went home in flag draped caskets. This was 1963 and we knew what that war was all about.

Well, I look back on that time as the best, most satisfying professional period of a 34 year career. Later, I returned to Vietnam in 69 - 70, to a job on the USARV aviation staff. This job fortunately gave me ample time to get out and fly with the Aviation Brigade and assorted US Division units. It was a different war entirely, but I found the same dedication in the aviation outfits. The years have blurred the past; and my memory tends to bring back faces and names no longer clear to me. I was indeed fortunate to have left those times whole in mind and body; and to have served with the Army's best - aviation.

George, it looks like I got carried away. This has turned into a rambling narrative of times forever lost; But please accept my best wishes for you and your endeavors.

Sincerely,



Darwin D. Beauchamp  
Colonel, USA  
Retired