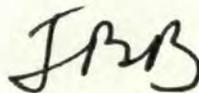


January 24, 1988

Dear Fred,

I am sending you a copy of a short piece I have submitted to The New York Times. I have submitted it for consideration to run in a one page section of The Sunday Magazine Section called About Men. You will realize after reading it that its genesis was in the windy letter I sent you earlier this month. If it is eventually published, you will have been one of the first to read it. If it is not, and this truly is a long-shot, I hope you enjoy it. I spent a lot of time and five or six different drafts to get it into this shape and whatever may happen I consider the effort well worthwhile.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, consisting of the letters 'JRB' in a cursive, stylized font.

"Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! Witch Doctor Five is down. Over."

It is March 3, 1971. The voice that comes over the radio belongs to Lt. Ralph "Butch" Elliott. His UH-1C helicopter gunship has crashed in Laos about 20 miles from the South Vietnam border. He had been attempting to rescue me after I had been snookered into the wrong landing zone by an awaiting North Vietnamese Army force. An ambush.

Another voice comes over the air: "Witch Doctor Five is down just west of (landing zone) Lolo. He's crashed in the trees. Chalk two take over the flight. I'm going down to look for Witch Doctor Five." It is the voice of Maj. James Spratt, our company commander.

Maj. Spratt is trying to rescue my would-be rescuer. His effort is futile. He is driven off by heavy ground-fire.

These voices from the past are on an extraordinary tape I received last fall. This amateur "You Are There" production documents about an hour and fifteen minutes of an emergency combat assault during an ill-fated operation called Lamson 719.

This misadventure began early in February 1971 with the reopening of the abandoned Marine airbase at Khe Sanh. Our mission was to airlift South Vietnamese troops by helicopter into Laos and move them, leap-frog fashion, west to the Ho Chi Minh Trail in order to cut that vital NVA supply line in two. All along the way the NVA had positioned murderous anti-aircraft defenses. During the forty-five day operation 102 aircrewmembers and ninety helicopters were lost.

Lt. Elliott and I eventually made it out and back to Khe Sanh and relative safety, although the airfield was under rocket and mortar attack when I rode in on the med-evac helicopter. All the rest is a tale for another time. A war story.

It all began when I arrived in July of 1969 in Mineral Wells, Texas at Ft. Wolters, the Army's Primary Helicopter Flight School. It was a no-nonsense approach to learning to fly: you soloed in about fifteen hours or you were "washed out" of the

program. Most of us made it and for the next couple of months we practiced approaches and takeoffs, maneuvered into confined areas, alighted on pinnacles, flew day and night cross-country navigational problems and struggled with emergency procedures that would get us on the ground in one piece if an engine or tail rotor failed.

We tooled around over the central Texas hill-country in vintage helicopters, bubble-nosed two-seaters, museum pieces today. After that, it was on to Savannah, Georgia to complete the advanced portion of training: instrument flying, the introduction to the UH-1 or Huey helicopter that most of us were destined to fly in Vietnam and, finally, something called "Tactics" that was supposed to prepare us for actual combat flying.

Our instructor pilots had already had a tour in Vietnam and were capable teachers. They guided us through these "school book" solutions to various combat situations but later, over drinks at the officers' club, imparted a more practical curriculum.

Of course, you didn't know anything about flying when you got to Vietnam. I'll never forget my first mission. It was a combat assault and there were three or four UH-1 helicopter troop ships and a pair of our gunships. Each gunship wore a shark's toothy grin, a legacy from Gen. Claire Chennault's World War II Flying Tigers.

I was flying in flight lead with Lt. Bill Smith, a laconic Yankee from Massachusetts. Not only was he the flight leader but he was talking on at least three different radio frequencies, giving instructions to our crewchief and gunner, maintaining order within the flight, briefing various ground commanders, getting artillery clearance and all the while patiently explaining to me why this and why that. I was deeply impressed and greatly dispirited. It wasn't possible to learn how to do that in one year. Surely, this guy was on his third consecutive tour and had logged thousands of hours in the air

doing the impossible everyday.

Fortunately, I had some good teachers: Lt. Smith, for one, always calm no matter how egregious the blunder—that he would let me make the mistake was truly enlightening if not stupendously frightening; also, Warrant Officer Chuck Uhlich, more by-the-book, but he knew that book backward and forward and ~~no~~^{Warrant Officer} Jeff Zavelas, company wiseguy, but behind whose smirky facade was a true purposefulness, "You may think I'm a jerk but one day you might have to save my ass so I'm going to show you how to do it."

When you finally got it all down and had been designated an aircraft commander and could drop into a jungle clearing with only inches to spare all around or land on a ridgeline, under fire, with rotor rpm bleeding down to ^{the} point-of-no-return because the ship was dangerously overloaded with an emergency resupply of ammunition, nothing seemed impossible.

With your hands on the flight controls and your feet on the pedals, you and the helicopter became one mechanism of flesh, blood, bone and steel control tube, life and energy pulsating through control linkages and hydraulic lines and all of it sheathed in an olive drab skin of magnesium alloy.

We were getting the job done—the job of flying helicopters in a foreign, mostly hostile country. Those of us who did it can consider it a distinct accomplishment. Normally, the flying was routine, even boring but troops got moved and fed and the mail arrived in the bush daily. At other times, it was a real test of skills with unpredictable weather and the gloom of night just as deadly adversaries as an NVA .51 caliber machine gun.

We were no "Lafayette Escadrille," with silk scarves streaming, but our contribution was unique. It was the Helicopter War and, right or wrong, they could not have lost it without us.

This July there is a reunion in Fort Worth of the Vietnam Hel-