

NIGHT VERTIGO

Captain Terry P. Gardner

AS AN ASSAULT helicopter company, the 116th was primarily engaged in combat operations in support of the 25th Infantry Division based at Cu Chi, Republic of Vietnam. The slicks (Hornets) and the guns (Stingers) provided support ranging from combat assaults to the usual routine (ash and trash) missions.

We had become well versed in the aspects and techniques of a combat assault and, along with the ground units of the Tropic Lightning Division, had developed into a coordinated team that could work extremely well together in any situation. Due to this fact, both the 25th and the 116th had a high regard for each other and often it was this mutual respect that caused the two to give just that little extra or to "hang it out" a little further to help the other guy.

Such was the case late one evening in August. With the monsoon season well at hand, we were aware of the torrential rains and high winds that can literally pop up out of nowhere. It had been an easy day. Eagle flights just north of Saigon had experienced absolutely no contact. The ground troops of the 2nd Brigade had conducted reconnaissance in force missions but failed to turn up any action.

Being close to release time, the battalion commander decided to insert his unit in a landing zone (LZ) just north of a village complex where it would secure for the night. As pilot of a UH-1C in fact and in flight, I took

in and completed the lift. All that was left now was to cap the LZ sweep and to cover a few slick loads of resupply.

Typically, after an especially boring day, the ground troops began to take light sniper fire from the south. It was release time for us but we weren't about to go home. As we reconned ahead, one of our ships took heavy fire that subsequently forced him down in a secure area. After assuring his safety we returned to the area of contact to find the VC. With the ground commander's help we pinpointed Charlie's location and made some firing passes.

At this point C&C (command and control) elected to send us to Cu Chi as we were low on fuel and ammunition and could provide little cover. It was almost completely black in the area of operations (AO) and we had seen ominous thunderstorms building up to the north earlier in the day. Nevertheless, we elected to stay on station to cover the last slick resupply and to cap just a little longer for the infantry.

As we were approaching the 20-minute fuel warning light, we monitored that the slick load was delayed and C&C ordered us to return to Cu Chi for fuel. Enroute back the slick completed his resupply with no fire and it seemed things were quiet in the AO. C&C then released us from the mission.

About five miles out of Cu Chi we hit some steady rain and good strong gusts of wind. It was difficult to see the base camp but we

continued flying. We advised C&C of the situation and he replied that he would be enroute in a few minutes.

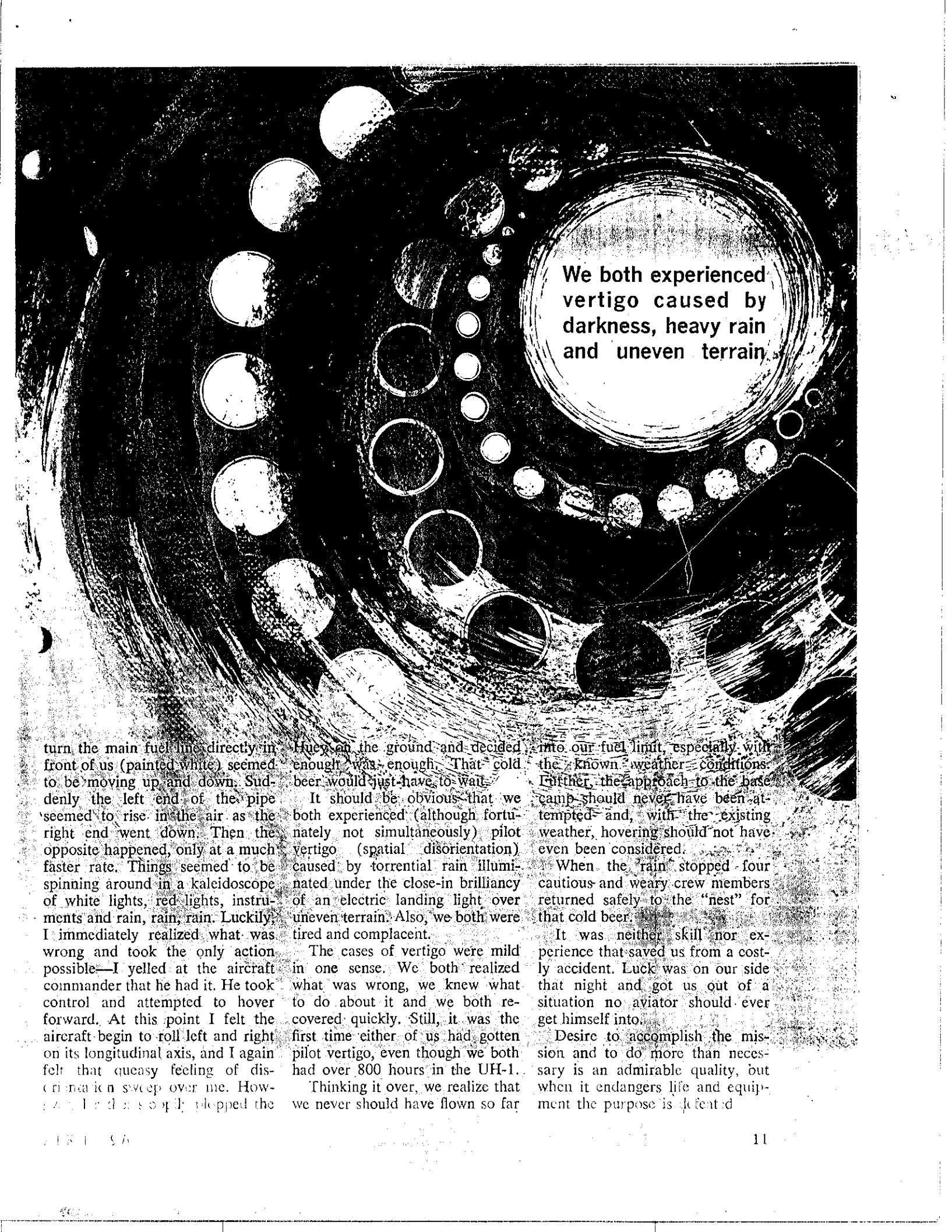
Nearing Cu Chi we received weather reports from the tower and were advised of low ceilings, extremely heavy rains and poor visibility. On the downwind leg, the rain seemed like a solid sheet of water, and we could hardly make out the refueling area. But, we didn't care. All we could think of was some hot chow, a shower and a cold beer. Besides, we were well into our 20-minute light and had nowhere else to go.

As we turned base it seemed like all of the South China Sea was being dumped directly on our aircraft, and I had to fly instruments to maintain attitude and altitude. At about 200 feet we could more or less see our destination and on final we managed to avoid perimeter wires, bunkers, poles and Chinooks that lined the approach path. Now we had it made. An approach to the ground was made with no problem.

Now that we were in the refueling area it seemed a simple matter to pick the aircraft up to a hover, do a left pedal turn and move to a refueling point. This is where our problems began. Number one, the rain was stronger; number two, there was no visible horizon; and number three, the only light available was from our search and landing lights.

As I picked the aircraft up everything seemed to be in order. But after completion of the pedal

turn, the front of to be mdenly t seemed right en opposite faster ra spinning of white ments ar I immed wrong a possible coman control forward. aircraft l on its lon felt that orientatio etc, I



We both experienced vertigo caused by darkness, heavy rain and uneven terrain

turn the main fuel line directly in front of us (painted white) seemed to be moving up and down. Suddenly the left end of the pipe seemed to rise in the air as the right end went down. Then the opposite happened, only at a much faster rate. Things seemed to be spinning around in a kaleidoscope of white lights, red lights, instruments and rain, rain, rain. Luckily, I immediately realized what was wrong and took the only action possible—I yelled at the aircraft commander that he had it. He took control and attempted to hover forward. At this point I felt the aircraft begin to roll left and right on its longitudinal axis, and I again felt that queasy feeling of disorientation sweep over me. However, I let the cockpit flopped the

Huey on the ground and decided enough was enough. That cold beer would just have to wait.

It should be obvious that we both experienced (although fortunately not simultaneously) pilot vertigo (spatial disorientation) caused by torrential rain illuminated under the close-in brilliancy of an electric landing light over uneven terrain. Also, we both were tired and complacent.

The cases of vertigo were mild in one sense. We both realized what was wrong, we knew what to do about it and we both recovered quickly. Still, it was the first time either of us had gotten pilot vertigo, even though we both had over 800 hours in the UH-1.

Thinking it over, we realize that we never should have flown so far

into our fuel limit, especially with the known weather conditions. Further, the approach to the base camp should never have been attempted and, with the existing weather, hovering should not have even been considered.

When the "rain" stopped four cautious and weary crew members returned safely to the "nest" for that cold beer.

It was neither skill nor experience that saved us from a costly accident. Luck was on our side that night and got us out of a situation no aviator should ever get himself into.

Desire to accomplish the mission and to do more than necessary is an admirable quality, but when it endangers life and equipment the purpose is defeated.