

It was just a whisper over the tac push, "This is five one mike. There's fifteen more of them coming up the trail toward you." The whisper was strained taunt. It was sweaty and tinged with fear as it rose up to us from the eastern ridgeline of the A Shau Valley. That whisper was all we needed to tell us that this mission was not going to be a piece of cake.

Even at 1700 feet above ground level the A Shau Valley was not a sight to inspire thoughts of comfort or welcome. The Valley had a haunting beauty that spelled mortal danger under brilliant green foilage. Like most of I Corps it was pock marked from arc-light strikes and the impact of uncountable artillery rounds. Unlike the rest of I Corps the Valley of Death had other scars that held a peculiar fascination for me as a pilot. The floor was littered with the remains of too many birds of war that found there a final resting place. These crumpled metal toys rested far away from most prying eyes in the AO. Eyes that could see these toys did not want to be reminded of the frailty of the aircraft that they flew night and day through Southeast Asia's skies.

It was, I imagined as I stared at it for the first time, the fabled elephant graveyard. Tarzan was right, the graveyard existed. The lost graveyard of elephants was there on the valley floor snug between the jungle shrouded ridgelines. Unlike Tarzan in his movies, I knew these elephants did not struggle to this graveyard driven by some overpowering imprinted instinct. What I knew for a fact was that John Wayne killed these beasts.

Odd thoughts have a habit of racing across your brain when the pucker factor begins to climb. Some of those thoughts and sensory inputs sear into the brain and remain there, burned scar tissue that refuses to heal even after more than two decades. The slightest familiar odor or sound can bring those memories racing back.

There are times when I can still hear the slap of the rotor blades and feel their thump vibrate my insides as they slashed through the air. I can hear three radios squawking and the crew all talking at once over my headset and marvel at how I could possibly understand them all and continue to function. At times the acrid pulse - rising smell of cordite is fresh in my nostrils as is the heavy wet smell of the jungle, the perfume of tropical blossoms mixed with the scent of garlic browning over cooking fires and Joe - the - Shit Burner's smoke mixed with the odor of JP-4 in the early morning preflight light. There is that strange smell of burning rice fields in the delta giving off so much smoke that you had to use your nav and landing lights in the daylight. I can smell the wounded Grunts as they hop or are carried, pulled, hoisted or half thrown in deadly urgency aboard our Dustoff Huey. I can smell the sweat of the Grunts mingled with the heavy rotting smell of the jungle that would cling to them after days in the field. And I swear I can smell their blood too. It was a smell that came too often.

Some impressions I want to remember. Some I do not. But I have got them all, burned somewhere deep in my mind. And right there among them is that haunting whisper.

Just a few days earlier my two roommates, Lt. J.D. Lawson and CW2 Bill Yancey and I had been transferred to the Air Ambulance Platoon, 326th Medical Battalion of the 101st Airborne Division(Airmobile), from the 45th Medical Company in flush toilet-hot showers and nurses Long Binh. It was near the end of Lom Son and close to my 24th birthday, a day that I have always considered I was lucky to see.

To reach Camp Eagle that day we hopped flights up the coast from Vung Tau where we had been enjoying a bogarted three day in-country R&R. That R&R we felt entitled to for having ferried a Huey from Long Binh to the 237th Medical Detachment at Phu Bai and as one last fling before joining the Screaming Eagles. Our route followed the coast the entire trip and we were captured by the incredible beauty of nearly deserted wide white beaches sliding into water that graduated from pale blue-green to almost purple as it deepened. It was an absolutely gorgeous sight that makes me believe to this day that someday there will be a booming tourist industry in Nam to rival any beach resort in the world. The ferry trip also gave us an opportunity to fly our baggage to and briefly inspect our new home.

Finding Phu Bai from the air was not a problem, however, we had some difficulty in locating or in believing that we had found Camp Eagle even when Phu Bai Approach said we were right over it. Baffled by not being able to find it one of us replied to approach that the only thing below us was a huge fire support base! Welcome to Camp Eagle...

It did look like the biggest firesupport base we had ever seen. Scattered over the red-yellow colored earth was a truly amazing sight. It was nothing like the disorganized order of Long Binh where the roads were paved and the clubs, swimming pools and tennis courts provided easily identifiable landmarks. One very identifiable landmark that could only be seen from the air was a huge peace symbol some GI carved into the earth outside of the compound. That sucker must have been at least big enough to fit perfectly inside of a football field. Camp Eagle gave one the impression that at one time the entire 101st Airborne Division had been loaded aboard a gigantic C-130, the tailgate had been dropped and the entire division had simply been dumped out and left to scatter among the hills outside of Hue-Phu Bai.

Since we were allotted seven days to accomplish the in-country ferry flight from Long Binh and had not yet signed in to the 101st, our plan was to drop off our worldly belongings at Eagle Dustoff, deliver the aircraft to Phu Bai Dustoff and beat feet for Vung Tau for a couple of days before signing in to Eagle. After

introductions were made at the 326th head shed we set out to follow our plan to the letter. At Phu Bai we caught a hop to Danang where we spent the night. We ate dinner that night at the real China Beach which, as a TV serial, became pure Hollywood BS hardly resembling reality. The next day we caught a ride to Saigon on a C-130 jammed with about 120 ARVN's who had been in action in Laos. Getting a hop to Vung Tau out of Saigon was no sweat and after three memorable days savoring the delights of Vung Tau we hopped our way on a variety of aircraft back to the virtual doorstep of Eagle Dustoff.

We signed in to our new unit, gathered our previously stored gear and were shown to our new quarters. It was a tin roofed, non-insulated typical hootch that because of screens covering half the walls and the building's proximity to the flight line, filled with a certain amount of dust as each aircraft hovered in and out. Only time, ingenuity and lots of sweat was to improve what we were given as quarters, but it was a hell of a lot better than a poncho in the boonies.

As night came on we had barely started to settle into our new hootch when the ops officer stuck his head in the door and said he needed a pater pilot for a mission. Yancey was drinking a beer and JD, for what I believe was one of only two alcoholic drinks that JD had in Nam, was also sipping on a beer. That of course left only me to go fly into the night sky with strangers in a very unfamiliar and decidedly unfriendly night sky. Having a dumb attack or a surge of John Wayne fever I forgot the first rule of being a member of a military force in a combat zone or anywhere for that matter - never volunteer.

I had most recently been flying Dustoff across the fence into Cambodia from Tay Ninh to support the latest ARVN attempt to kick Chuck out of his sanctuary. Where, according to then President Nixon, there were no American troops in Cambodia at the time. Pitchblack Cambodia at night in bad weather with people shooting at you was not fun, but that episode in my tour is, in itself, another story. However, at this particular moment I felt I was an experienced combat pilot with enough night time to no longer sweat bullets. I had landed at night in hover holes without lights, guided, unbelievably, by zippo lighters(I know, I thought those were BS stories in flight school too, but a lot of that BS became too true later, except for the 'Black Syph' I guess.), strobes and, on unfortunate occasions, muzzle flashes. I was nearly an AC in my old unit so I thought what can be so bad about a night mission in northern I Corps? Not to my credit I was rather ignorant of the fact that in the past the guy trying to waste us was generally VC, but now that guy was NVA. The guy no longer carried only an AK-47 or an SKS. He carried an enhanced set of armament that could really make you see green basketballs. Flaming green basketballs coming at you was a sight that made you long to be somewhere safe to see if you really did need a hammer to drive a pin up your seriously constricted nether region. Another fact that slipped by at that moment was that down south we infrequently pulled hoist missions while up north almost every mission was a hoist mission.

Hoist missions were dangerous under the best of conditions. During a hoist mission your helicopter was halted not above, but nestled in the trees often well over 150 feet high as you tried to keep it rock steady to avoid hitting those trees with your main rotor or your tail rotor. You listened to your medic and crew chief on hot mike as they stood on the skids, fully exposed, giving you instructions. They told you where the jungle penetrator was at all times, how many feet right, left or up and down you had to move to avoid striking something. They told you how the Grunts were doing with the wounded and when to break ground with the patient on the JP and when to leave. They also told you where the fire was coming from when the bad guys decided you were just too easy of a target to resist. After I became an AC I never required any crewmember to stand on the skids because of the danger involved, but they all did it anyway. Not smart maybe, but the guys who did their job in the back of the aircraft will always be admired by me as real life heroes. Hoist missions were always a little nerve racking, ^{but} never more so than at night, with the Grunts in contact and half the helicopters in RVN flying around your head as you tried to get the wounded out.

That night those simple facts overlooked by me turned out to make a substantial difference in my perspective of the remainder of my tour and served to make that night one of the most memorable nights of my life. ~~However, having~~ ^{as the mission} committed myself, I gathered my gear, a helmet and my security blanket, a very large chicken plate that had I had swiped from a Cobra revetment at Xuan Loc somewhat earlier in my tour. (If the owner of that chicken plate is reading this, I hope you did not need that protection as much as I did. The original chicken plate issued to me at the 45th was an extra small and it rapidly shrank before my eyes as I sat in my first hot LZ. Later, when I spied that extra large chicken plate sitting in a revetment my survival instincts took over and I merely did a one for one exchange.) Outside our hootch the ops officer introduced me to CW2 Fred Behrens, who was to be the AC for the mission. Fred asked if I had a weapon. As I shook my head no he said 'come on' and we ran to his hootch which, as I recall, housed a small personal armory. He grabbed a holstered 45, tossed it to me and we were off to the flight line.

I asked what the mission was. Fred said he was not sure other than it was a hot hoist with multiple urgents. Translated that ment that there were wounded Grunts in the LZ who would die shortly if we did not get them to back to the 85th Evac in Phu Bai. It also ment that the bad guys who had just wounded them were still there and trying their best to finish the job. At that news my pucker factor started to climb.

Running after Fred on the way to the flight line, I noticed we had accumulated a small entourage that later blossomed into our crew for the mission. One of the group, Danny McFadden, was hobbling along on crutches because, as I later found out, of a stab wound in the leg that was ~~self~~-inflicted during a rather

unusual mumbly-peg game. He was also carrying a Thompson sub-machine, a weapon that I had only seen previously in the movies. Dan Wagner, the crewchief, and Flores, an OJT medic rounded out our crew. Fred ran up to one aircraft, opened the door, grabbed the log book, flipped it open, said it was red X'd and ran to another one. At another Huey he did the same except for saying that this one was OK and for me to get in and crank her up. "What about preflight?," I asked, knowing that nobody in his right mind ever flew an aircraft without a preflight. Fred replied, " We don't have time!" I jumped in and cranked her up. Curse you John Wayne.

From this distance I sometimes wonder what besides the bleeding and dying Grunts had compelled me to climb into that bird and yell, "Clear! Coming Hot!!" It does no good to wonder anymore. It is certainly evident that we who flew Dustoff had a very special mission in that war. It was a job that will probably never be duplicated because of all the diverse facets of the war. We saved lives which in any occupation is a noble pursuit, but in Nam, in a war I doubt if anyone considered it a particularly noble pursuit. It was pulling bleeding, hurting people out of the most unimaginable circumstances. ARVN's, RFPF's, civilians, the enemy, GI's and even babies. We picked them all up - night and day, rain or shine. Sometimes the evacuee, after being hauled safely on board, would hug the nearest crew member in a show of gratitude for being pulled out of a tight spot still breathing. At other times times gratitude would be expressed in bars, on those rare occasions when you were not on duty and you could get to a bar, if the Grunts discovered you flew Dustoff you could not pay for another drink. There were reasons beyond counting for flying Dustoff, but they all boiled down to a personal feeling that if it was me lying out there bleeding could I count on someone flying in to get my butt out. We did our damnest, especially when it came to getting U.S. troops out and to a hospital. Dustoff built a helluva reputation, some said at too great a cost to our own crews' lives, for hanging it out and doing the job. I think not one of us will ever have a regret for what we did as Dustoff crews and most would probably do it again. That night though, none of us in the crew of Dustoff 93 were thinking about free drinks as I cranked the aircraft.

I backed 442 out of the revetment with the 45 covering my family jewels and Fred talking on the radios and pointing out directions to me, we were on our way into the night skies. We had not gone far when Fred tuned in to the tactical push and we heard the urgent mixed chatter between Dustoff 913, the C&C bird and the Grunts on the ground. The Grunts were in heavy contact with 2KIA's and 20 WIA's, several seriously wounded. From a distance you could see flare after flare being dropped on the site that was to be our LZ.

As we flew closer the LZ grew into a living nightmare vision in a glass bowl surrounded by darkness. Low hanging clouds and smoke from flares being dropped reflected eerily the orange-white burning magnesium glare and the

bright lights of explosions. Bursts of red and green tracers were piercing up into the night sky in stitches and erratic ricochets bounced in every direction. Silhouettes of blacked-out helicopters weaved in and out of this bizarre scene planted in the tree tops of a hill not far from FSB Bastogne.

I flew us in close to the LZ then Fred took the controls from this total stranger flying peter-pilot in the next seat. My job would now be to talk to the guns, monitor the engine and trans instruments and stay ever so lightly on the controls. In any LZ the pilot not actually flying was always light on the controls in order to immediately takeover if the other pilot took a round. If Fred got hit that night and lost consciousness his instructions to me were to climb, fly north and call Phu Bai approach. Sounded simple, but in those surreal moments I just listened and never really considered the area was a strange mountainous AO at night that I had never been in before and to get a combat damaged aircraft out of this mess might not be that easy.

We were almost on top of the LZ now and we could see Dustoff 913 at a hover trying to complete a hoist as tracers continued to flash all around his Huey. He was having a difficult time and taking hits that forced him to break off. Dustoff 913 had one wounded on board as he was forced from the site. As we watched 913 Fred slipped 442 down the hillside a little then quickly popped her back up to take 913's spot as he left, almost on his tail, then came to a stationary hover in the middle of the nightmare.

The crew in the back was now on hot mike transmitting every breath and outside sound. There was a lot of rapid heavy breathing brought on by the tension and excitement. The gunfire and explosions were staccato jack hammer sounds in our ears. The medic started the JP down. "The JP's on the way down 10-20 -... two feet to the right...40 -20 from the ground... almost there...it's on the ground." For a split second it seemed the bad guys did not know we had arrived, then, "We're taking fire at six- thirty!" "Taking fire at nine!" "Taking fire at eleven!"

McFadden, sitting in the left rear hell-hole was screaming, "I can see them running on the ground shooting at us!!" and blasting away with the Thompson. Wagner was clearing the bird and firing his weapon and the medic was guiding the hoist. All three in the back were reporting fire and I could see tracers blazing over the nose of our Huey. Fred, amid the pandemonium, was keeping the bird as steady as possible.

I tried to remain calm but could not remember the call sign of the Cobra ARA gunships that were covering us. When we started taking fire I simply called them "guns" and gave them the contact in clock headings off our nose. As the reports of fire came in from the back of the bird, I quickly covered most of the clock and told them we were targeted from 360, which, as it turned out was fact.

The Cobras opened up around us tossing in rockets as they skimmed and circled us in the flarelight.

Expecting at any second to see the engine gauges start unwinding, indicating that something vital had been hit, my eyes were everywhere - in and out of the cockpit. "He's on the JP, break ground. Comin' up...ten feet... twenty..." Why was it taking so long? It was almost as if time had slowed and we were moving in slow motion. We could not leave until we had the patient close enough to the helicopter to at least have him clear the treetops when we left the LZ. The noise and the tension were incredible. To just sit there and wait while you were silhouetted against the flares as the target of opportunity for the bad guys was not easy, but it sure was an adrenaline rush. There was too much noise and commotion to tell how many hits we were taking. "Twenty feet from the bird...ten feet. Got him! GO! GO! GO!" Fred grabbed an arm full of collective and nosed 442 over as I called out max power and radioed to the guns our departure heading. In an instant we bolted out of there and were on the way to Phu Bai with a Grunt who had a gunshot wound through the chest.

Once out of any LZ after a pickup it was always the same. The break in tension was an explosion of relief for the crew. Clear of danger we all jabbered loudly about what we had just survived. It was amazing how, despite the fact that after flying into LZ's in one of the noisiest machines known to warfare, unless taking fire we would all whisper in hushed voices over the intercom during the extraction as if talking in even a normal voice would alert the bad guys to our presence in their AO. Then after departing the LZ and in the relative safety of the air our voices would rise a dozen decibel levels because Chuck could not hear us now.

The flight to the 85th Evac was uneventful, but it provided me with an opportunity to see more of the AO. Our patient was unloaded at the hospital pad then we repositioned to POL to refuel and check for combat damage. Inspection revealed that one round had entered a little too close to the 42 degree gearbox. Fortunately it did not cause any serious damage. The left side as well as the underside of the bird had tiny pock marks covering large areas. It was as if they were trying to bring us down with a shotgun.

Since 442 appeared to be in one flyable piece we had a quick vote about going back out to the hilltop to make another attempt at pulling out wounded. The outcome was a foregone conclusion and before I knew it we were again communicating in hushed voices as we closed for a second time on that boiling man made thundercloud on the hill.

The second trip into the site was more of the same only more violent as we started taking fire the instant the aircraft dropped into position. It was a wilder ride with the volume cranked up to the max. How we got that JP to the ground

through that fire and the Grunts managed to strap their wounded buddy on is a tribute to the bird, her crew and the Grunts - with a good measure of luck thrown in. Again, at the height of this tension, slow motion seemed to envelop everything as my eyes burned into the gauges and my whole being willed them not to move. I could swear there were things floating through the cockpit, but before I had a chance to think about that I was being thrust forward with my head tilted up and looking out the greenhouse. Only I was not looking up at the greenhouse window, I was looking out level with the horizon and what I saw froze in my memory and made my mind tell me that I was about to die.

Something, probably an RPG, had exploded close behind and below us lifting up the tail of 442 causing such a nose down attitude that Fred had no choice but to pull pitch in an attempt to recover control. 442 was headed out of its hover at a high rate of speed without a second to warn anybody. As the aircraft blasted up and forward the sight that greeted my bulging eyeballs through the greenhouse window was a blacked-out Cobra charging out of the smoke, fog and low hanging clouds directly at us from the left. We were about to have a mid-air collision with the Cobra and it flashed in my brain that there was no way we were going to avoid tangling our bades with his skids. We were only feet apart as I braced for the imminent impact. It never came. To this day I will never know why we missed that Cobra and plunged into the clouds escaping the pickup site once more, but we did. We brought out with us another wounded Grunt who, at twenty feet below the aircraft had a wild ride through the treetops and gunfire. He picked up a few branches and bruises before the crew hauled him aboard. His injuries from ploughing through treetops at our speed were minor compared to the hole in his chest. The crew of Dustoff 93 delivered him safely to the 85th Evac and I believe his only comment was, "Why'd you drag me through the trees?" Poor guy did have leaves and branches stuck in him. Less than two weeks later two blacked - out Cobras had a mid-air over T-Hawk and all four pilots died.

Having been more than lucky so far and with the Huey having no serious combat damage we decided to go back and give it another try. The third time was the charm because the groundfire was so intense and conditions so bad it was impossible to make further extractions and C&C cancelled further ops until first light. Four Eagle Dustoff birds, including us, received combat damage and one pilot was wounded at that site. We each received the Distinguished Flying Cross for our work that night. (The battalion awards officer said later that we had been put in for the Silver Star, but it had been downgraded by Bn HQ because we should not have flown 442.) When General Tarply presented the DFC's he explained why things had been so hot that night. We were extracting wounded on top of an NVA regiment that the 101st had been looking for during the previous six weeks.

During the next ten days Fred and I pulled duty together a couple of times. I gained a great deal of respect for Fred's abilities as a pilot while I learned more about the AO. On the tenth day I was pulling duty with CW2 Rich Di Boye. Late in the day we were alerted for a mission that was somewhat garbled in its content. The request was to pickup a wounded crewchief. A wounded crewchief on the ground was rather odd. It had to mean that the crewchief had either fallen out of his aircraft, was left on the ground or the aircraft had crashed. The coordinates indicated the location was on the edge of the A Shau Valley. We saddled up and headed for the Valley.

After clearing with arty we tuned in to the tac push. That was when we heard the whisper. "This is five one mike. There's fifteen more of them coming up the trail toward you." The sound of that whisper was so different that an immediate change took place in the crew. I for one was wishing we had not popped off the front doors because I did not like the idea of being a more visible ^{individual} target. It was evident that the situation on the ground was deadly serious. The voice on the ground told us there was no way we could come in because the Grunts could not expose their position. C&C and guns were on their way to provide support and we circled some distance away waiting for the show to begin and ^{our} clearance to go in.

It was not a pleasant wait because we had a ringside seat to a situation where GI's were in desperate trouble. We were ready and willing to help but were not permitted to go in. Circling we watched the show and the drama develop with the Cobras rolling in hot on the area. We continued to wait for clearance to go in. After a period of time it was evident that with our fuel burning up we would not be able to remain on station for much longer. Somehow, I do not recall whether we called for a another Dustoff or C&C did, but Fred Behrens appeared on the scene and relieved us to go refuel.

While we were refueling Fred received clearance to go in and pick up wounded. Covered by the Cobras he flew in and without a recognized shot being fired at him by the bad guys, 913 picked up wounded and left the LZ without taking a round. We passed him on the way back to the pickup site as he was taking his patients to the 85th Evac.

Arriving back on site we were again put on hold and began to circle out of the way as the Cobras and a Canberra bomber worked the area over. While we were refueling one of the units from Division attempted an insertion. Two of their were hit and the lift diverted from the ridgeline LZ to the valley floor. The Grunts inserted there began moving toward the ridge several clicks to the northeast where their