

The Second Tour
by Mike Sloniker

My first tour in Vietnam was from Dec 67-Nov 68 as an artillery Lieutenant in Battery C 2d Battalion 319th Field Artillery (2/319 FA), 101st Airborne Division. Towards the end of the tour, I was around a couple of CH-47 company areas (242d ASHC at Cu Chi and B/159 ASHC at Camp Eagle) and noticed how well the aviators lived. In the last month, I flew some artillery air observer missions in OH-6's from Battery A 377th FA at Phu Bai. I was profoundly impressed with the ease the pilots displayed in flying, and with what they taught me to do in the cockpit. The potential of knowing I could fly straight and level, anticipate the pilots needs, and work as a member of a well trained team would influence my next four years.

Upon returning to the states, I found out quickly that I was having adjustment problems, particularly around Thanksgiving and Christmas. The one year tour placed me into many friendships that were nonexistent in the states. I kept wondering what everybody in my old unit was doing. In Jan 69, I asked to go back and was told there was no way. I then asked if I could go back as an advisor, and was told no again. Since I was really getting desperate, I almost asked about Special Forces, when the assignment officer asked if I thought I could pass a flight physical and some aviator test called the FAST test. I passed everything and thought I would be gone in a flash. However, it took a while, but I got to flight school in Mar 70 in ORWAC 70-38, with orders that said "Duty in Vietnam," at the completion of flight school.

The minute I got orders for flight school while a gunnery instructor in the Field Artillery School, I was immediately given an administrative job. I was told by my boss that my decision to go to flight school would reflect on my officer efficiency report. Because his face was red, and he was hollering, I did not ask how it would reflect. When I got the OER in late February, it was neutral, not one that reflected the hard work of teaching gunnery, but one that said I was present, not tardy, and had no absences. That was a seminal moment in my education that non-rated career field artillery officers definitely didn't like field artillerymen who were aviators.

Flight school was not easy, I quickly learned I was not a natural helicopter pilot and this was going to be hard work. I never thought I would not graduate, but I was always surprised when the instructor pilot would be highly critical of something I thought I had done pretty well. As a consequence, I never took anything for granted.

In October 1970, we anxiously awaited our orders when the decision was made to send only those Field Artillery officers who got an AH-1G or CH-47 transition directly to Vietnam. The rest were scattered to Ft Hood, Ft Bragg, Ft Riley and Ft Carson. I went to Hood, walked in with AR 95-1 and said "I am here to fly." The personnel pukes sent me to 2d Armored Division Artillery, where the DivArty Commander said "Welcome to 2 AD, your change of command date for taking command of one of my artillery batteries

administrative paperwork to prepare the company for standdown. Sounded fair to me. Little did I know, I would get the education of a lifetime.

I was assigned on paper as the assistant Platoon leader to Jim Hipp, 1st Platoon Leader. Hipp was on his second tour also, and his second tour in the 174th. In spending 23 years on active duty, I learned a lot from many different sources. From Hipp, I would see my best example of natural leadership by example. Jim had an exciting flight in his first tour on an IFR flight to Duc Pho that was published in Aviation Digest as a lessons learned. If a peter pilot was listening, he was getting constant positive instruction.

Flying became the center of my universe. I was privately amazed at how easy it became each day to hover, maneuver in and out of the revetment, navigate, fly formation and keep position with the collective, and sort out talking on the radio. In two weeks, from August 2d to 16th, I flew 60 hours. This was in 8 total days, because I did additional duties, took a flight physical, conducted an article 32 investigation, etc.

I was assigned to begin an Article 32 investigation that was wild. The purpose of the Article 32 is to determine the next course of action to take. A maintenance test pilot (CW2) in the 178th Assault Support Helicopter Company (ASHC), a CH-47 Chinook unit, was being counseled on his Officer Efficiency Report (OER) by his company commander in the unit messhall, which was down next to the beach.

The OER was a bad one, the CW2 took exception to the rating, pulled his .38 and started shooting across the table at the CO. When the gun came out the CO hauled ass out the back door and ran like hell. The only victim was the table in the mess hall and the door frame that the CO ran out of. I hope the CW2's maintenance test flights were better than his aim. At my recommendation, the CW2 got to go back to the states, early.

As the flying progressed and I felt more at ease, I became more confident. My personality allows me to be comfortable with the situation at hand. Even though I outranked everybody, being a captain, I flew with, I never felt that I outranked anybody, anywhere. This helped me immensely when assigned as the peter pilot (co-pilot) to a WO1 aircraft commander. All, but one, were extremely professional. All the veterans of Lam Son 719 were absolutely no-nonsense in the cockpit. They were constantly instructing.

This one young stud, that I flew with only one time, was totally unable to maturely give instruction, and was still feeling the effects from the night before. I had been making the pickups at the logistics (log) pad across from the USO and taking them to Firebase 411 all day long. About 1:00 PM, the "aircraft commander" started making comments about the stair step approaches, and how long it was taking to land the aircraft on the pinnacle at 411. Cowboy Martin, right up there at the top of the list of best aircraft commanders I ever flew with, had told me to start the descent with the collective, and once it was established, start pulling the collective up. By now the density altitude was getting high. So my "aircraft commander" from Hell,

does the approach that begins with the collective being dumped to the floor, and we are going down fast. At 100 feet, he starts pulling pitch, but good old Dolphin 423 just keeps coming down. After a mighty flare, we bounced real good on the pad. The grunts unloaded the Ballantine beer and the C rations. The slick had a good vibration in her after that, but only when empty. He took my hard landing writeup out the logbook. I told CPT Ty Manning the aircraft had been bounced, he looked at the saddle mounts, said something to the maintenance guys, and they got the vibration out. I had a feeling that in time this guy would crash and he did during August.

In August 1971, the 16th Combat Aviation Group at Chu Lai was averaging 6 days between accidents. The Group Commander decided that the whole group was to go to a hangar one night and listen him say, "knock that shit off." He did, we didn't. The accidents ranged from slicks spreading skids on autorotation after being shot up, crashing on the side of LZ Center and almost rolling down the hill, crashing on 411, ending up inverted and watching the Group Commander walk over and turn off the fuel, and raising nine kinds of hell with the aircraft commander. It went on and on.

Because of the distance from the hooches to the flight line, we would sometimes pull flight line standby with crews for 5 slicks and 2 guns. This was always hot and boring. Always. Sometimes missions would be sought to just get some flight time. At 1:00 PM August 29, 1971, I distinctly remember the Sharks getting bounced and WO Al Harris running, sleepily to the aircraft. About an hour later the aircraft returned without Big Al and was parked down by the Warlords, where a water truck washed out the insides. Big Al had bled and died in the gunship.

In 1989, I would write:

WO1 Allan L. Harris

12 Dec 48 29 Aug 71

Ettwanda CA

02W05*

Big Al was the only casualty in a UH-1M that was bounced midday to cover an extraction NW of LZ Professional. Aircraft commander was Chuck Blake. All deaths are tragic and sometimes senseless. This one was hard because the Americal was standing down, and everybody's thoughts were of going home or being reassigned to another unit. The pilots that flew in LAMSON 719 were very noticeably quiet and reserved after the loss of Big Al. Bill Wilder was the CE.

(* Location on the Vietnam Memorial, Washington DC. Al is on the second panel to the left of the apex that is in the center. His name is easy to find. Just look up to the grass at the top, come down 5 rows and there he is. I can always find it.)

In September, the 23d Infantry Division started standing down in earnest. One day you are working a firebase and next day it is gone with Vietnamese all over it like ants on a piece of chocolate cake. The old guys would always like to fly over the abandoned firebase and impress us with their command of the English language. Neat stuff like, "I used to take a dump right over their on that side of San Juan hill, or remember the hard rain storm and we almost couldn't find Charlie Brown."

Some things really got dicey. The Sharks had to cover the

self propelled Artillery howitzers as they left the SF bases. Covering them was a piece a cake, compared to the demonstrations the Artillerymen faced in Quang Ngai. I never knew if they were demonstrating because the Americans were leaving, or if they were demonstrating in honor of the Americans leaving, or just out in the streets raising hell. Urban warfare is not a good place to be running around with a gunship.

For some reason, I had two occasions to fly all day, eat supper and go back and fly flare missions all night. Never quite understood why we didn't get the day down so that we would be alert. I was really surprised the first time I fell asleep at the controls. I caught myself before the AC found out. He was probably sleeping, too. Imagine my shock and horror, when I learned about the Army policy towards crew rest in 1973.

In September 1971, the PX started to have some glaring shortages, because of the impending stand down. We got some CA's up near Da Nang and at the end of the mission made a run on the PX at Freedom Hill. First thing I didn't understand was you couldn't walk from the helipad to the PX. You were supposed to get a ride, and not walk along the road. Then, I thought I was buying a taco from the Donut Dolly at the USO there, until I ate it. She was nice to look at, but didn't know the first thing about putting a taco together. Not a multidimensional lass.

The PX at Chu Lai was really short the basic items. The hootch maid said I needed to get sooo folly and soof. Lt Jerry Coffman, who lived in the same hootch and understood what the hootch maids were saying, translated it to shoe polish and soap. The Vietnamese really butchered the English language. Pizza at the Officer's Club was feesa. They butchered a lot of other things too. The only way you could get to the PX was to ride an old former Navy grey International bus driven by a Vietnamese who did not understand that you had to have momentum in each gear before you shifted. He would just shift for the hell of it. It pained me to feel the way he was lunching the bus's transmission.

On the way back from the Freedom Hill PX at DaNang, we made the obligatory low level run past the big white Buddha statue. As we cleared Marble Mountain to the south and gained altitude, we had a crew chief, SP4 Jarrett, shoot the moon so we could take pictures. He was bitching because he said was cold. We were bitching when we got the pictures back because he had a nasty ass, and balls that hung down to his knees. Fortunately, the sight wasn't too well in focus.

The flight was in formation off Hawk Hill when someone told told CW2 Jim Story he had smoke coming out of the left rear of his aircraft. We landed near a Korean Marine Compound, and found out the right rear of the aircraft was loaded with cigarette cartons and one of them got hot back there.

During this same period the stand down began in phases and it was called Keystone Robin or Keystone something. The commander of the 132d ASHC, the "Hercules," was cleaning the mud off the inside of his jeep with a steam cleaner when he found out that the mud was holding the jeep together. The more mud he removed the bigger the holes got. The inspection criteria was obviously written by some REMF logistics puke at Long Binh

sitting underneath an airconditioner. People starting hiding things, dumping equipment out in the bay. Somehow the generals got wind of it and they started showing up unannounced. The following story was told to me, so it could be somewhat not completely true.

One of the Brigadier Generals was standing in the open area on the airfield between Chu Lai East and Chu Lai West when he started sinking in the sand. He was hollering as he fell out of sight. His aide ran over and saw that he had fallen into a big hole. The big hole had a Marine Corps mighty Mite jeep, some F-4 Phanthom engines, and other big stuff conveniently stashed in this big underground room. The PSP that was used for the roof corroded through and that is what caused the general to fall through. I remember some off shore Marines being flown in to look at the stuff and trace the serial numbers. In fact, I now remember distinctly seeing a crane out there pulling items up out of the hole.

One of the deaths in the 174th that you could just see coming was poor skinny Max Miltovich. The following is what I wrote in 1990, when I had talked to Billy Wilder:

PFC Emil M. Miltnovich

24 Jan 53 26 Sep 71

Rock Springs WY

02W25

Max was the gunner on Cpt Keith Deans aircraft, UH-1H #522. He was killed by hostile fire while the aircraft was at a hover over a single ship hover hole SE of LZ Professional. The weather was rainy, overcast and windy. The aircraft took multiple hits with only one KIA, Max. Numerous other Dolphin aircraft had made landings and takeoffs out of that hover hole prior to the incident. This attack caused the launch of four more Shark guns to assist the two already on station.

#522 went from Chu Lai to Can Tho to Bien Hoa from Oct 71 to Mar 72. The aircraft was last seen in A/229th AHB 1st Cav in Jun 72.

Bill Wilder talked to Max's dad in Jan 90, which was the father first contact with anyone who knew his son before he died.

Source: Mike Sloniker Oct 88/Bill Wilder Jan 89/Morgan Mills Jul 91/the memorial service leaflet.

We all remember how Max stepped through the greenhouse on a preflight. He was an operations clerk and should not have been flying. Max was the last death in the 174th.

On October 7th, I was the peter pilot in flight lead, flown by LT Moran from Nebraska. Moran was extremely good in the aircraft, but not much on personality. In all the years since, I have sorted it out as the after affects of Lam Son 719, and burnout. I enjoyed flying with him and appreciated all the things he taught me, but he was not someone I sought out when we weren't flying. In this flight we were making a single ship approach to a hilltop to drop off grunts and were about 5 feet off the ground when the gunner SP4 Godbolt told me to pick it up, then he hollered "**pick it up, don't land!**". He saw a wire stretched out from a grenade. According to what he saw, when the skid pushed down on the wire it would have pulled the spoon loose and exploded. I have this episode on an audio tape, and it is

amazing how fast everything happened. Just another day in the Nam.

On the second week in October, we turned the aircraft in after a fly-by. The Sharks were stripped of weapons and flown to Red Beach. The Dolphins had to meet some half baked VNAF selection criteria at Pleiku, that was put together by our own Air Force. You wondered whose side the Blue Suiters were on when they said we had to get rid of the aircraft communication Y-cords and put in the the single station units. The Y-cord allowed the crew chief and/or gunner to share his intercom system without disconnecting. I guess the US Air Force got their expertise from all the combat assaults they made. Just one more reason to hate the Air Force.

My distrust of the Air Force stems from my first tour where I began to first wonder just whose side they were on. I was an artillery forward observer with an infantry company during TET 68. Our mission was to chase down the VC units northwest of Saigon in the 25th and 1st Inf Div AOs. I went into the month of Jan 68 as green as a lieutenant can get. By the end of Jan, I knew fire support coordination down cold. Adjusting 105's while in triple canopy is the toughest because adjustments are made on sound. Same for 155's. 8 inch rounds were tricky to adjust because they came singly and were so loud. Adjusting an Air Force air strike is a totally different proposition.

Air strikes I requested almost always consisted of F-100's that dropped snake(usually 250 lb bombs), nape (napalm), and guns (20mm). When an F-4 got diverted, there was no telling what was on the fighter. On two occasions I was told they had 250's and they dropped 500's. We got casualties from those drops and not from shrapnel, but from the concussions that literally raised us up off the ground. It was the first time I thought the Air Force was either lying or didn't know what was hanging underneath the aircraft. The infantry company commanders never hesitated to get all over my ass when they perceived the company had not been properly briefed and was surprised by the blast.

The worst part was having to shut down the artillery for the airstrike. This is an open announcement to the bad guys that big shit was coming. That's when they would get closer and hug our ass. I really appreciated the FAC and his calm voice, but deep down thought he was more interested in the air show he was seeing than the tactical mess I was in. On one occasion, the FAC left because he needed to refuel, we were in contact, the FAC said he could see his replacement FAC coming up, and left. No FAC showed up, so we had to jump on the lull in the noise to get the Artillery cranked up. When the FAC finally came back and wanted to shut down the artillery, I said I need something more reliable than the Air Force, and got an ass chewing from the 3d Bde commander on the fire control net. Again, at age 22 I began to wonder just whose side everybody was on. I still am weary of Air Force dudes, active or retired. Probably just a failure on my part to communicate, and be understanding.

Tragedy struck during the 176 AHC's (The Minutemen) final flyby. Typhoon Hester's heavy monsoonal rains had hit Chu Lai in advance of the Typhoon, which reduced visibility. At the end of

the flyby the flight went inadvertent IFR and one of the slicks hit the water. One of the crewmembers was found clinging to the fuel cell. The story I heard was that he was the sole survivor, however this is not supported by the KIA list in the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association (VHPA) directory, the Defense Intelligence Agencies list of KIA's nor the KIA list at the US Army Aviation School.

The day I left, I was sent to a tin Butler building at 8AM that was next to the aerial port. There I received all my records that were in huge files inside the building. I sat there until 4PM when the last possible C-130 took a load of us to Saigon. For entertainment, the Americal provided us the enjoyment of watching My Fair Lady, which is about an English aristocrat who made a bet that he could teach elegance and grace to any poor lady. When the words "The rain in Spain occurs mostly on the Plain," were said, it was raining like hell outside. One of the grunts threw his boot at the screen. That was the most excitement we had until the C-130 arrived.

Two days later, I opened a Pacific Stars and Stripes and read that Chu Lai was blown away by Typhoon Hester. LT Coffman came down after me and related the story. Everybody just sat the storm out in their hooches as the hooches were blown off their foundations. No body counted noses for two days, so people had no idea what to do. The messhalls were blown away, so everyone stole food from the refrigerators instead of letting it rot. He said the smell of cooking steaks was everywhere. Water was scarce and there was no electricity. By the way, all those personnel, finance , flight, medical and dental records at the airfield were blown across the runway and up the the distant mountains. Some of the hangars blew down on the aircraft that were being prepared for turn-in.

Personalities

This section is my recollection of others not mentioned before and what I perceived from the short time I was in the unit before it stood down.

Maj Spratt/WO1 Chick Luther Spratt's actions showed that he really cared about his people, however by August he was really burned out. I felt bad for him, because the battalion commander was on his ass constantly. In one instance, I knew I was right about his burnout was when he took Chick Luther's AC orders away. Chick was flying the 11th Bde Cdr all day, and the COL's S-3 was an aviator getting a ground tour in. Wish I could remember that prick's name. I remember Chick had to make some downwind approaches into a firebase because of the tactical situation. When Chick landed that night, Spratt was waiting for him. Spratt had been called earlier by the prick S-3 who said that Luther was unsafe and trying to kill everyone in the aircraft with his approaches. As in every story there are two sides. Unfortunately, Luther lost his AC orders. Luther is still pissed to this day. I will never forget Chick. He was, and still is, BIG. Tall with a thick strong upper body, he looked like a linebacker and never wore a hat. I have always appreciated his no nonsense professional demeanor.

Chuck Miller The night he made AC, the other AC's got him drunk and made him walk the bridge railing on the bridge that crossed over the pond near the officers club. His pilot technique (PT) wasn't for shit and he fell into the pond that we all pissed in when we left the club. His clothes stank so bad, the hootch maid couldn't get the smell out. Still he was a good AC and a good teacher.

Mark Samuelson Mature beyond his years. I really enjoyed flying with him, because of the way he taught you to fly the mission and the aircraft, and his great patience. He was with me the night I got made an honorary warrant. It wasn't until 1992 that I found out why I was made an honorary warrant. I had been in a flight of 5 slicks and two guns that had warrant officers in every seat but mine. PJ Roths said the flight was almost perfect if it had not been for the real live officer (RLO) pollution in one aircraft.

Guy "Cowboy" Martin The best AC in the company that I flew with. He took great pains to explain everything to me. What stuck the most was the survival gear. He said once you auger in all you will have is what you have on your body. All the happy shit we would hang over the seat would stay in the aircraft, because we would be hauling ass to get out. From Apr to Jun 1972 in and out of An Loc, his words came back to me many times. I had the best stocked survival vest and best chicken plates in the company. Ironically, in October 1993, I watched a very young WO1 climb into an Apache at Ft Bragg, and check his survival vest before strapping in. Memories of Cowboy came flooding back.

Duke Varner Only person I ever knew in Vietnam that could fly all day, take off his helmet and not have a hair our of place. I did not know him well in the unit, but do remember the great respect he had from the AC's I flew with. When they heard one-niners voice on the VHF, there was always some respectful comment.

Jim Mitchell Jim was a free and easy laid back guy. I enjoyed flying with him, but got real annoyed with him when he got close to his DEROS. Jim started finding reasons to not fly, and the other ACs would make comment about it. At the time, I thought it was a horseshit deal to try to pull. In June 1972, when I had my 24th out of 24 months in Vietnam, it was all I could do to strap on the Huey and fly missions into the air defense hell at An Loc. If the missions up there were really predicted to be bad, I would throw up behind the aircraft before take off. Only then did I have an appreciation for what was mentally affecting Jim Mitchell.

Neat places to eat

Advisory Team 16-TAM KY. Best dinner rolls I ever ate in Vietnam. Don't remember much else, except these guys were appreciative of the helicopter support

2d ARVN Division compound-Quang Ngai. Tight place to park, good food. I thought we were going to get into a fire fight by the aircraft when one of the Dolphins crew chiefs went brain dead and stole a VNAF helmet out of a VNAF Huey that was fitted with a minigun. It got tense.

Pictures of 174th people that I have today:

Maj Dale Spratt

Maj Ed Brown, the last commander of 174th in Chu Lai

Cpt Don Peterson

CPT Dean Hicks

CPT McGaffick

LT Carl Flemer

Lt Pooser

LT Talafose

LT Moran

CW3 Chuck Blake

CW2 Jim Story

CW2 Jim Mitchell

WO1 "Dink Six" Blanton

WO1 Mark Samuelson

WO1 Guy Martin

WO1 Bill Miller

Sp4 Runnels

Sp4 Parks

SP4 Godbold

Sp4 Jarrett

SP4 Yoshiro

Pictures of places I flew in the 174th that I have today:

Chu Lai before and after Typhoon Hester

DaNang

Tam Ky

Quang Ngai

FB 411

Tra Bong

Tien Phouc

LZ Exedrin

LZ West

Hawk Hill

Arty Hill

LZ Dottie

Riverboat South

Daily Record

	Flt time	Total time	Aircraft Commander	MSN
August				
2	arrived 174th			
3	In processing	and flight physical		
4	Hearing test			
5	2+45			
6	7+30	10+15	Kinsey	AMC
7	10+15	20+30	Mitchell	RS
8	grounded cold			
9	3+25	23+55	Blake	MACV
10	9+20	33+15	McGaffrick	C+C
11	6+00	39+15	Luther	MACV
12	nf			
13	9+40	48+55	Boston	RS
14	6+20	55+15		MACV
15	NF Company standdown-			
16	5+25	60+40	McGarrick	C+C
17	6+30	67+10	Early	CA
18	9+45	76+55	Hipp	RS
19	3+40 (N)	80+35	Johnston	FLARE
20	NF			
21	4+25	85+00	Hipp	AMC
22	8+30	93+30	McGarrick	C+C
23	5+30	99+00	Martin	CA
24	1+30	100+15	Aron	Mnt
25	8+30	108+45	Miller	RS
26	3+15	112+00	Mitchell	RS
27	6+00	118+00	Story	CA
28	9+15	127+15	Story	CA
29	1+00	128+15	Story	RS
30	11+00	139+35	Martin	CA
31	1+00	140+35	Young	Mnt
September				
1	5+00	145+35	Boston	CA
2	5+30	151+05	Flemer	C+C
3	NF down high time			
5	2+15	153+20	Aron	Mnt
7	11+30	165+00	Kinsey	AMC
10	3+30	168+30	Flemer	C+C
12	1+45	170+15	McMahon	RS
13	5+00	175+15	McMahon	Flare
14	4+15	179+30	Boston	RS
15	6+15	186+15	McMahon	MACV
16	5+45	192+00	Waller	CA
17	7+00	199+00	Miller	RS
18	6+00	205+00	Martin	RS
19	7+45	212+45	Martin	MACV
23	2+00	214+45	Martin	MACV
24	7+45	222+00		CA
	Miltovitch shot in the head			
26	1+30	223+30		
27	5+00	228+30		
28	7+40	236+10		
30	8+30	244+40		CA

October

2	10+30	255+10
3	6+35	261+45
4	5+00	266+45
5	5+15	272+00
6	8+15	280+15
7	10+15	290+30
8	2+50	293+20
9	5+40	299+00
11	1+20	300+20
12	2+10	302+30 last flight in 174th flyby
19		left 174th for reassignment to A/229 AHB 1st Cav III Corps (Bien Hoa)

53 days of flying out of 77 days assigned to the 174th.

It is odd what one remembers. Until 1988, my Vietnam service in the 174th was just something I did for three months. Then in July 1988, Carl Flemer told me to look up Fred Thompson at the VHPA reunion in Ft Worth, which I did. Five minutes after meeting him for the first time, I felt like I had known him all my life. At that point, he and I started piecing together a list of all the known losses in the 174th. Our initial list was about 13 names. Today, **July 16, 1994**, we have traced and verified 55. I was fortunate in finding many by getting into the Defense Intelligence Agency's South East Asia Casualty (SECAS) list. It was a tough task, but necessary, because if we don't remember them, nobody else will. I was the last RLO assigned to the unit. I can now reflect on how fast I made AC in my second unit, because of the thoroughly professional one-on-one training I got in the cockpits of the Dolphin slicks. I guess you have to get old to appreciate anything.

*174th Assault Helicopter Company
Dolpins/Sharks
"Nothing too ridiculous"*

Mike Sloniker

July 16, 1994