

Under the Hurricane

Mike Skinner

Arthur

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I was moved by Geronimo's, Black Cats, Mule Skinners, in III Corps, Shrimboats in II Corps, and Varsity and Playtex in I Corps. All I knew, as an artilleryman, was call signs, and which unit dropped one of guns from altitude (Shrimboats in May 1968 enroute Dak To from Dak Pek).

Either the Geronimo's or Black Cat's blew over the battery latrine at Phouc Vinh in April 1968 with our artillery battalion commander in it. The 47's had to fly into our gun positions in the northwest corner of Phouc Vinh and lift the 105mm (M-102) howitzer directly out of the pit. The flight path put the aircraft over the battery latrine, which started moving around after the first sortie out. The Bn Cdr was in the area watching the move, when his last meal kicked in and he headed for the crapper. The chief of firing battery, SFC Arthur A. Radiconi, mentioned the "Old Man is in for a surprise." A CH-47 blew the latrine over on its door, so he had to climb out the little flap doors in the back where Papa San slid the cut off 55 gal drums in and out. He was covered in diesel fuel and excretment. The troops loved it.

We made at night assault under the Mule Skinners from Cu Chi in April 1968 somewhere east of Dau Tieng. The LZ was illuminated by 155mm and the 47's flew under it. The sight of the Muleskinner's mule on the Chinook's forward pylon, illuminated by the flares was ghost like. A few months later, I got night "tactical emergency" (Tac-E) resupply from the Mule Skinners in early September 1968, firing support for Fire Support Base Buell II, north of Tay Ninh. Gary Roush was flying the aircraft that night, and absoulutely put the load on the light. I was under that light.

We exceeded the rate of fire for our guns that night and had tubes glowing red in the dark. At first light, the firebase, which I think was called "Sheridan" looked like it had been the target of the ground attack. Empty boxes, fibers, and shell casings, caused us to spend about 3 hours getting the mess

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From December 1st 1967 to March 3d 1968, I was a third string replacement forward observer with the infantry in the 3d Brigade. 101st Airborne Division, visiting scenic Phouc Vinh, Song Be, the Phu Tho race track in Saigon when it had low grazing automatic weapons fire, instead of horses on it, the Ho Bo and Bo Loi woods, and lots of trees and bamboo on a line from Ben Cat, west to Dau Tieng. I was able to start the Tet Offensive of 1968 with A Troop 2/17 Cav at Song Be. A and B Troops were then ground cav units; A Trp had M-60 machine gun jeeps, and 106mm jeeps, and B Trp had M-113's. During my time with them, they were dismounted infantry knocking around in the bush. That entire period I viewed the Chinook from afar.

In March 1968, I got to see this leaking, windy, noisy trash hauler up close, in fact, I couldn't get away from it until November when I left. As the fire direction officer (FDO) of C Battery 2d Bn/319th FA, my remaining eight months in country would consist of moving 45 times, averaging a move about every seven days, all by the CH-47.

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which I would learn later was an autorotation.

In October we moved from Phouc Vinh to Camp Evans and then to the mountains out West. We left Phouc Vinh and the "we were winning when I left" 1st Cav came in and pacified III Corps. In my second tour, first tour as an aviator in 71-72, I would benefit from the 1st Cav's efforts until the roof fell in during the Easter Offensive.

I went up to I Corps by myself, because we had a supply sergeant killed, I had to identify the body, inventory his gear, ship it home, and write a draft letter to the parents for the battery commander. He was killed near Cu Chi, so all the admin work was done there. Some how, during that period, I got invited to go over to the "Muleskinners' " club in Cu Chi. I remember looking at polaroid pictures of the pilots on a wall and one guy having magnet ass under his name. What I remember most was the nurses that showed up. Don't remember what they looked like, all I remember was that they were round eyes, they were around aviators, the aviators were in an air conditioned building, and they didn't sleep on the ground.

When I got up to Phu Bai, I went initially to Camp Eagle. My battery was traveling to Phu Bai via a Korean Navy operated LST, which would provide endless stories about who threw up and was sick, once they got to the firebase. There I ran into Roy Lowery and Gary Jones, who were retread warrants, and now captains flying for the "Varsity," in the 101st. They lived in very nice hooches, that had a Seabee built and supplied water heater heated hot water shower. I had probably 5 or 6 hot showers in 67-68, in fact, probably only had 5-6 showers in 67-68. I met Jones and Lowery (VHPA members) at Ft Sill OK in Aug 67 in the Field Artillery Officer Basic Course. On Saturday's they would fly Chinooks, finishing up a Chinook transition at Ft Sill.

Sometimes, I would fly in the jump seat. Afterwards, when I would drive home, I would notice how my 65 Mustang would have less rattles after a Chinook ride. After a couple hours, my hearing would come back, and so would the rattles in that ragged Mustang.

Once we got the battery into Eagle, the "Varsity" took us to FB Bastogne. The ONLY purpose we could have been sent there for was to acclimate us to deep mud, high angle fire, sniper fire in the firebase, and overcast. Fortunately, that did not last too long, and we were "rescued" by the "Pacyderms" and taken up to Camp Evans externally. My RTO told me that a Chinook called "Pack of Worms" was inbound, which I thought was an original thought was an original thought, coming from him.

After a few days at Evans, we went to an old 1st Cav firebase named LZ Miguel. It was in the wrong place for the 101st, so we built FSB Rakkasan further up the mountain. Probably did it just to keep us busy. I would deros off that mountain, not knowing C Battery would be destroyed at 0310 May 13, 1969 at FB Airborne, while supporting the 3/187 Inf at Dong Ap Bia (Hamburger Hill). I almost extended six months to stay in the battery back in June 68, but the something happened to the paperwork it did not happen, and I did not ask why. I will not forget them and I leave the attached memorial on Panel 25W,

registered. This was usually done by an air observer, who would observe the gun fire at a known point, i.e., the intersection of a trail and a creek. Once the corrections had been applied in the FDC, we would shoot a battery one round (one round per all six guns) and ask the AO to check the sheaf (the impact pattern of the battery in the target area). This was our way of seeing if anyone was fire short or long and make appropriate adjustments. Then the Chinook would come with a full water trailer and an externally slung food resupply. He would backhaul expended 105 brass. Sometimes you got a fire mission-a lot of times we would just sit around. Everything came in spurts. The next time we would see the Chinook, would be around 4PM with ammunition resupply, and the orange mail bags.

On the days we would move, it would take 8 sorties to move 6 howitzers, one 3/4 ton truck and the battery commander's (BC) jeep (which would be moved internally). Sequence of movement was for the advance party (me, two chart operators, the FDC chief, and 2 or 3 cannoneers) to go to the next position in a Huey, followed by the externally slung, CH-47 transported, FDC 3/4 ton truck, then the guns, followed by the BC's jeep. The CH-47 would land, the gun crew would run in and sit on the floor-no seat belts ever!, then the Chinook would hover over the load. We would usually give the finger, from inside the Chinook through the hole in the floor, to a battery mate who was under the Chinook hooking up the load. The last gun out would be hooked by the Chinook guy hanging out of the hole using a "shepard's hook," to grab the doughnut and put it on the hook.

The slings were always treated with great care in my battery. SFC Radiconi would smoke a gun chief (an E-6) if he found the sling gear laying out in the rain. The M-102 howitzer was the foundation for the load. It had three sling points on it; one on the barrel, and two opposite each other on the trails. Each point would secure one sling, which would be joined at an iron horse-shaped clevis, which also had the doughnut (concentric circle, lift device, if you ever had to re-order one). Also attached to the clevis was the sling attached to the A-22 bag, which carried a basic load of HE, Illum, beehive, WP, and Improved Conventional Munition (ICM) called "firecracker." We traveled light, so howitzers did not have duffel bags hanging off them, making the unit look like a bunch of ragbag gypsies. Sometimes we would be on firebases with 1st Div or 25th 105mm batteries that had the split trail M101's. THEY carried the world draped over their tubes.

I could never tell if the 101st did it better, or the 101st delighted in hassling the troops. We were always "soldiering," so we didn't know better. We would have loaded like gypsies if we could have gotten away with it.

I can only remember fat guys being on the Chinook crews. We always thought they made the fattest guy the one who had to lay on the floor for the whole flight looking through the hole at our gun. On one flight, I was on the last flight out when our aircraft took fire. I was so tired that I can remember being fascinated at how the floor looked after bullets went through an area between my legs. I was not fascinated with the descent,

cleaned up for backhaul when the Chinooks came in the morning with a full water trailer (water buffalo). The routine with the Chinook was never ending and we took for granted that it was our lifeline.

In May '68, we were told to cover up our division patch, and all vehicle bumper markings with green tape. We moved quickly from Phouc Vinh, III Corps, to Dak To, II Corps, by C-130. Upon off loading the 130's we were trucked over to a helicopter pad, near the airstrip and slung loaded out by the Shrimboats to Dak Pek.

Something caused a delay, and I was sent to Dak Pek in a Huey. For some reason, we were put on the ground at the airstrip next to the SF camp at Dak Pek. While we sat there and waited, a Caribou, flown by a USAF crew, tore a wing off on landing and crashed. All 38 souls on board got out. The crash closed down the fixed wing traffic into that camp. After the excitement of the crash, the afternoon rain fell, turned everything to mud, then the Chinooks arrived.

The Fire Direction Center (FDC) equipment was transloaded from the back of the 3/4 to a jeep trailer at Dak Pek airstrip. Then we were told the trailer had to go internally to our mountain top firebase, so we began the "great push the trailer into the Chinook adventure."

The ramp was too steep and the mud on the ground and on the ramp eliminated traction. So we were then told they would winch in the load. As the trailer cleared the ramp, the cable broke, and whipped up to the front of the aircraft. It missed the crew members, but scared the hell out of the pilots, who immediately took off after they insured the trailer was clear. I have a memory of the center post on that Chinook's window being knocked out, but cannot find anyone to verify. A Huey came along, and took the trailer up to the mountain externally on slings. Should have done that in the first place.

The razorback mountain top we were on was exciting. This was our first exposure to mountain tops that were shaped as sharp as the back on a razorback. In 1990, I read in, "The Rise and Fall of an American Army", by Shelby Stanton that we were near the Laotian border and south of Kham Duc, which was overrun at the same time. We were required to fire most of our missions high angle with the tubes pointing near vertical during the fire missions. When the guns traversed, they could not do so, simultaneously, because of the narrowness of the mountaintop.

I couldn't get off that mountain and out of II Corps soon enough. We were only up there two weeks, but it was an eternity. At night, the top of the mountain would be in a cloud, and would be cold. Naturally, all we had to keep warm was poncho liners. The red and green lights shining on the aiming posts at night was the only illumination up there. The cannoneers always were quiet at night, except for the tedious harassment and interdiction (H&I) fires that were shot intermittently all night long. They seemed to be whispering the commands at night in the clouds, as they received their instructions from the fire direction center.

The days we weren't moving were very tedious, long, and boring. In the morning, base piece, gun number 3, would get

ON MAY 10, 1972, THE CREW OF UNITED 157, A CH-47A FROM THE 362D ASSAULT SUPPORT HELICOPTER COMPANY, 229TH COMBAT AVIATION BATTALION, 3D BDE (SEP) 1ST CAVALRY DIVISION PICKED UP SOME OF THE BRIGADE INFANTRYMEN AT THE SANDY PAD AT BIEN HOA TO TAKE THEM FOR A WELL DESERVED BREAK AT THE SEASIDE CITY OF VUNG TAU. ENROUTE, ONE OF THE BLADE RETAINING PINS FAILED, THROWING A BLADE, CAUSING UNITED 157 TO FALL FROM THE SKY. ALL WERE LOST, FOREVER GONE, NEVER FORGOTTEN.

THE FLIGHT CREW OF UNITED 157

CPT BARRY C. TOMLIN  
1LT SAMUEL HARRELL  
SP5 ALVIN R. ELENBURG  
SP5 LARRY S. MUSTIN  
SP4 TERRY D. NEISS

THE INFANTRYMEN

SGT MIKE J. AGUILAR  
SP4 OSCAR AGUILAR  
SGT WILLIAM A. BOATRIGHT  
PFC STEVEN E. BOWERSOCK  
PFC CLINT E. CARR  
SP4 DENNIS G. DUNNING  
SP4 DAVID CRUZ FLORES  
SGT DIETER K FREITAG  
PV2 JAMES D. GROVES  
PFC DALE L. HAYES  
SP4 WILLIAM F. HENAGHAN  
SP4 FRANK T. HENSON  
SP4 DONALD E. HOWELL  
SP4 FREDDIE JACKSON  
SGT JAMES C. JENSEN  
SP4 THOMAS A. LYDIC  
SP4 GARY R. MONTELONE  
PFC DEAN A. PHILLIPS  
PV2 JACKIE RAY  
SP4 RICHARD RIDGEWAY  
PV2 AGOSTO E. RIVERA  
CPT KENNETH ROSENBERG  
PFC JOHN T. SABLAN  
SP4 CLARENCE L. SAULSBERRY  
SP4 RAYMOND J. SHIKO  
SP4 DAVID W. SULSER  
PFC THOMAS E. WOOD

THEIR NAMES ARE NEAR 01W20

every Memorial day and Veteran's day at the Viet Nam Memorial in Washington DC.

On my second tour, which was a flying one from 71-72, I was again deeply affected by the Chinook. On May 10, 1972, at a distance of about 2 miles, same altitude, I saw a CH-47A go down near Long Thanh North. It was CH-47A, 64-13157, from the 362d ASHC, 229th AHB 3d Bde 1st Cav(SEP) and went down at YT 168 032. The aircraft commander was CPT Tomlin and the copilot was 1LT Harrell.

"United 157" was a flight of four Chinooks that picked up infantry troops at the Sandy Pad at Bien Hoa Army Base. The troops were being taken to Vung Tau. As 157 neared Long Thanh North airfield, other Chinooks in the flight described 157 as exploding like a lightbulb flash. Since there had been an increase in NVA activity at An Loc, the aircraft was thought to have been shot down. The remaining CH-47's sped from the area. It was learned later that the Chinook had a material failure of a blade retaining pin. 5 crewmen and 27 soldiers were lost. I also leave the second attached memorial in their memory at the Vietnam Memorial.

The Chinook was our link to the world in those firebases. We found out how important they were when we got weathered in and got no resupply for days on end. Without the Chinook, the field artillery would not have been able to function. Odd as it may sound, sometimes the best sound of the day was the sound of a CH-47, and the voice of a pilot who sounded like he was talking out of a bucket.

May 13, 1969, Firebase Airborne, A Shau Valley

At 0310, the firebase was attacked by sappers. When the battle was finished, 1 1/2 hours later, 26 Americans were lost, with 62 wounded. 21 of those lost were from Charlie Battery 2nd Battalion 319th Field Artillery, 101st Airborne Division.

39 North Vietnamese bodies were found on FB Airborne, which would account for a US victory.

The cannoneers lost were:

CPL Edward A. Clarke	Mar 22, 1948	Downington PA	25W096
SP4 Thomas M. Connell	Dec 23, 1947	Ft Wayne IN	25W096
SSG Kenneth T. Cruise Jr.	Jan 8, 1946	San Francisco CA	25W097
PFC Thomas W. Davis	Jan 12, 1944	Garner NC	25W103
CPT Moulton L. Freeman	Sep 4, 1933	Port St. Joe FL	25W099
SP5 James R. Gohagin	Oct 31, 1947	Atmore AL	25W099
CPL Gary J. Greiner	Jul 7, 1949	Polson MT	25W109
SGT James C. Harper Jr.	Mar 11, 1948	Nicholls GA	25W101
SP4 Eric B. Johnson	Mar 13, 1945	Laurens IA	25W102
SP4 Richard R. Kelley	Jul 18, 1949	Weymouth MA	25W102
SSG Donald R. Kraft	Dec 15, 1946	Sappho WA	25W102
SGT Bobby G. Lawrence	Feb 2, 1948	Sacramento CA	25W103
SP4 James A. Margro	Feb 12, 1949	New York, NY	25W105
SP4 Arlen J. Miller	Jun 8, 1948	Emmaus PA	25W106
PFC Warren P. Nix	Dec 12, 1942	Los Angeles CA	25W108
SP4 Roger D. Ross	May 11, 1950	Haywood CA	25W110
CPL Thomas W. Sadler	Oct 30, 1948	Oakland CA	25W110
CPL William F. Silver	Dec 18, 1947	Vinton VA	25W110
SGT Francis A. Souza	Sep 26, 1946	Orange CA	25W111
PFC Wesley W. Stevens	Oct 28, 1950	Peterson MN	25W111
PFC Lynn J. Wieser	Nov 1, 1949	Gothenburg NE	25W114

For those of us who came with the unit from Ft Campbell KY on Dec 1, 1967, this day, May 13, 1969 ended the unit as we knew it. Although we had returned by Dec 1968, we knew many of those listed above because of the influx of replacements in May-June 1968.

We trained them, we served side by side; we won't forget.