

First Mission

I am sure every aviator remembers his first combat mission, and I am no exception. It was nothing extraordinary, except that it was my first time. In hindsight, the mission was almost prophetic in addressing the futility of the war as we were allowed to fight it.

My arrival at Camp Holloway in 1965 in a C-123 with a load of grim South Vietnamese infantry soldiers was in late morning, I think. I moved into a hooch (that was easy; carried it all) and did some in-processing. I thought one of the strangest questions on one form was, "If you are lightly wounded, do you wish for your next-of-kin to be notified?" At least I could see things were serious. From the supply room I drew a weapon, flak vest, web gear, steel helmet, and other equipment and was told I would get a unit check ride the next day. We carried all our personal flight gear with us, of course.

I learned that my unit, the 119th Aviation Company (Airmobile, Light) had only UH-1Bs, organized into one platoon of gunships and two platoons of slicks. Great, I thought. I flew UH-1As and UH-1Ds in flight school, from where I had just graduated, but had only one ride in a B-model. Everyone assured me it would make absolutely no difference, and they were right. On the morning after arrival I was introduced to CW3 R. D. Miller, the senior unit instructor pilot. He explained me through all the forms in operations and we filed a local flight plan. He said he was glad I was a non-smoker and if he had his way, no smoker would be allowed to enter or leave flight school. Whatever. He would give me a check ride that morning and we were to fly a mission together that afternoon. (No way to flunk this ride, I thought.) Mr. Miller was an extremely likable, jolly individual, and obviously knew what he was about. For now it was still "Mr. Miller" and "Lt. Oualline," but later in the tour it was all "R. D." and "Chuck" and we were good friends with no respect lost between us. In months to come, he and I would land hard on a mountain pinnacle and break both cross-tubes, but no one was hurt.

I already knew that there was no rank in the cockpit, aside from flight experience. He was the IP and the aircraft commander. One would be turned loose with a Huey, as an aircraft commander, only after learning to fly again. Almost nothing in flight school prepared us for flying in the central highlands, always overloaded and at high altitudes. The "go-no-go" plaques on our dashboards were totally ignored. Had we obeyed the torque reading rules set out on the plaques, we would never have taken off! Density altitudes of 5,000 feet and higher were common. Before this year was out, I would twice fly to over 12,500 feet, without oxygen, trying to avoid thunderstorms and cloud cover. And whoever heard of a spiral approach in school?

We pre-flighted a weary B-model that looked triple its true age. So help me, the tail boom skin sometimes actually rippled in flight. And once during the next year I found an 8-inch crack in a horizontal stabilizer. There was no factory armor protection then, so the 119th had improvised with some steel plates under the seats and some thick pieces of plexiglass inside the lower part of the windshield. I wondered if these really would stop or turn bullets. I was told that pilot seats should be adjusted to the full-down position, to get maximum protection from surroundings. Although I had never flown from this adjusted position, I took the advice for the next year and soon became accustomed to it. I told R. D. that I had flown a "B" only once, but he said, like everyone else, that it did not matter. I ran through the start procedure, and that, at least, seemed to be the same as we were taught.

We were not allowed to do touch-down autorotations for the check ride because we had no proper place to land (the Holloway runway was PSP) but we did some power recoveries to a field just outside the barbed wire. I did O. K., considering I had not flown for almost two months. The only noteworthy thing was a compressor stall experienced by R. D. during one demonstrated power recovery. That was the only time in my life I ever heard an actual compressor stall. R. D. took it in stride, and he was at the controls, anyway.

“Some of these engines are a little tired,” he said.

All in all, I thought the check ride was pretty easy. I would come to realize why. They just wanted to find out if we knew one control from another and had some semblance of flight sense. Most of what we learned in school would be re-learned shortly. If you had a pulse and could hover, you passed the check ride. (Not that I did that badly, you understand.)

Operations briefed us in their Quonset hut for the afternoon mission. We were to fly to Duc Co, one of the Special Forces camps supplied by the 119th, to pick up and return American bodies to the SF HQ at nearby Pleiku. Bodies! On my second day? Naturally, I tried to appear cool and collected. We would be escorted by a team of gunships, not a good sign. I was told we never landed at certain camps without gunship cover. Duc Co was right on Highway 19 and only a few kilometers from the Cambodian border, which the highway crossed. In a few months I would be heavily involved in fighting all around the camp, which was to be under siege, and there I would receive some of the heaviest enemy fire of this tour. For this mission, we were told there were friendly patrols outside the camp's defensive barbed wire, so there would be no automatic return fire if we received any. Targets must be identified.

R. D. supervised and approved my second pre-flight of our assigned UH-1B. I was introduced to the gunship pilots, who were pre-flying their two ships, but can't for the life of me remember who they were. I had worn my brand new flak vest to the flight line and now, for the second time in my life and on this day, I strapped on a chest protector (which was stored in my pilot's seat) over the flak vest. It was about two inches thick, made of some kind of ceramic material, covered with canvas and with shoulder straps, and shielded the entire chest and neck. It weighed 6 or 8 pounds, but over time, I ceased to notice the weight. It was supposed to stop a 7.62 mm round or smaller, but not a .50 cal. or the Soviet 12.7 mm. We called them “chicken plates.” Later I would learn that the Marines called them “bullet bouncers.” (In a few years, a captain that I knew would be shot with a 12.7 mm round that came through a back door, went through the back of his armored seat, went through him, went through the chest protector, went through the windshield, and may still be moving. He recovered with no after effects, as far as I know. But that's another story.) We got in and cranked all three aircraft when everyone was mounted. Radio checks were made and R. D. even let me take off, because we were not in formation and not loaded.

Things did not get more cheerful on our way to the camp, about a 40-minute flight, I think. I did not even have a personal map yet, but R. D. never referred to his, anyway, which looked as if it had been caught in an elephant stampede.

“If I get hit,” he said, “call up the gunships on either UHF or VHF and ask them what to do. They will lead you somewhere.”

Great. I already felt enough like the new guy; I sure hoped he would stay healthy. He had me fly most of the way out there, while the gunships stayed behind us, slightly lower, always where one or both could fire rockets underneath our ship. I learned that we always fly at least 1,500 feet AGL if the clouds permit; otherwise, it's full speed and contour flying on the deck. I noticed how pretty and green and peaceful the countryside looked.

As we neared the camp, R. D. took over the controls. He led me through the pre-landing check. There was the usual: RPM 6,600; instruments in the green; no warning lights; so many pounds of fuel. But he continued:

“Lock your shoulder harness and lower your helmet visor. Force trim ‘on.’ Get on the controls with me lightly so you can take over if anything happens. If it does, start a climb and call the Crocodiles.”

What a confidence builder he was. And landing with force trim turned on? That was never done in flight school. But it made sense. If a pilot were hit and made a convulsive control movement, the stiffer cyclic would make it easier for the other pilot to recover. Before this year was over, I would rarely fly with force trim “off.”

He called the camp on Fox Mike and was asked to land to the smoke outside the wire. I could tell R. D. did not like the “outside the wire” part. He reminded our crew chief and gunner not to return fire with their “free” M-60s unless they could positively see enemy. This close to the camp, I thought? Surely none would be here.

“Crocodile 4, this is Alligator Zero Seven Five. Landing straight-in to the smoke, heading two niner zero. Starting descent.”

“Croc 4, roger, got you covered, call when ready to come out.”

I got on the controls as R. D. started what I thought was a very fast approach. I could sense that all other crewmembers had become extremely tense. Dead ahead was purple smoke from a grenade, and one soldier with his rifle held horizontally high over his head, with both hands. I remembered the signal to land in front of him. We got low, very hot, and R. D. smoothly flared to suddenly slow and put us down with no hovering or waste motion. Nothing like that in flight school, either. We were sitting in tall grass. We did not go to flight idle, but remained at full RPM - in fact, I noticed R. D. kept some collective pulled in so the ship was light on the skids, ready for immediate lift-off. He seemed very, very nervous, so I surmised I should be. On our left was the triangular-shaped Special Forces camp of Duc Co, all red dust and barbed wire and tin roofs. Between us and the camp was a deep, dry moat filled with pointed bamboo stakes sticking from the bottom. A bridge crossed the moat at the gate.

“Where are they?” R. D. fumed, although we could not have been on the ground more than 30 seconds. The ground guide had run back toward the camp after we touched down. The gun team flew random, low, but high-speed patterns, all around us, to discourage any enemy fire or draw it to themselves.

“Here they come,” offered the crew chief over the intercom.

The next scene was quite dramatic and is burned into my memory.

From the open barbed wire gate appeared six or seven Special Forces soldiers. They were in jungle fatigues and green berets and armed with rifles. Four of them carried and

struggled with a large wooden box, in the unmistakable shape of a coffin, made from lumber of ammunition boxes. These SF guys really take care of their own, I thought. They could have settled for the usual rubber body bags. The pallbearers' rifles were slung on their backs. The other soldiers, although we were right next to the camp, moved purposefully and alertly on both sides of the carriers, rifles at the ready, offering security for them and us. They were all large, muscular, good-looking men. Although the load was heavy, all were hurrying as best they could, knowing we were at risk on the ground. They could have asked any number of the 300 or so Vietnamese soldiers of the garrison to help, but they chose not to. I don't know why they did not move the bodies out there before we arrived, but I'm sure there was a reason. I was spellbound. A director for a movie could not have staged a more poignant scene. They were magnificent.

They slid the coffin aboard at right angles to the ship, and ran back to bring the other coffin. These two fallen comrades would have represented 1/6 of their "A-Team" of twelve members who lived at the camp. I don't know how they died. I wondered how many grieving wives, girlfriends, and children were represented by our cargo. Meanwhile, R. D. became more and more nervous, if possible, but he said nothing to the soldiers. They were doing their best.

"Crocodile 4, how is your fuel?" R. D. inquired.

"We're O. K.," came the instant reply. Gunships always burned more fuel than slicks in a deal like this.

The sad scene was repeated and we were ready to come out with two coffins aboard. Quick pre-takeoff check, then,

"Croc 4, ready to pull pitch. I want to come out heading one one zero." Same path we came in, and slightly downwind? Oh, well, there wasn't much wind, and he knew what he was doing.

"Roger, 'Gator Zero Seven Five, hold your position." R. D. made a hovering pedal turn while the gunships maneuvered into position to cover our ascent.

"Ready, 'Gator—pull pitch now." R. D. did and we were climbing after a short ground run through the grass. I remembered to stay lightly on the controls, without being told. We climbed at maximum power, gaining airspeed fast, making it hard for a gunner to track us. We were not heavily loaded and had burned off much of our fuel, so it was a good combat takeoff. We leveled off at 2,000 feet and R. D. seemed to relax, handing the controls to me.

"Did we get hit, chief?" he asked.

"I don't think so, but still checking."

Hit? "Did we take fire?" I inquired. R. D. and the crew chief heard just two or three rounds during climb-out, but the latter held his fire as instructed, because he saw nothing. R. D. did not call the fire because he was afraid the gunships would forget their instructions and react with rockets. He now called the camp and the gunships and told them we were shot at and gave the map location, the only time he referred to his map. I had heard absolutely nothing. We had no hits.

What would enemy soldiers be doing that close to the camp? R. D. said it was quite common; that they spied on all comings and goings and shot stuff in there at night to keep the camp awake. He said they were extremely hard to find, although they were nearby nearly always. He spoke of the enemy with great respect, almost admiration, which surprised me. The patrols outside the wire at the time were trying to find enemy troops, even as we flew the mission.

We filled out the logbook after shutting down, refueled from a truck, and did a good post-flight inspection. No bullet holes. But I was able to log “CA” time for “combat assault,” instead of “CS” or “combat support” time, because we were shot at. These were my first few hours toward my very first Air Medal. Back at operations, I struggled to complete the myriad forms required after every flight.

“Does anyone do anything with all this information?” I asked.

“Mostly they just count: bodies, bullets, rockets, sorties, and so forth,” someone said. I think he was right.

As I said, as flights went in Vietnam, this flight was nothing extraordinary, except that it was my first. Although I didn’t know the dead men, I grieved for them along with their team members. Even now, they were probably on a plane to Saigon, from where they would go home to families. Most fallen Americans began the long journey home with a short helicopter flight. There would be many, many more such flights until April, 1975. I flew my share of them. I don’t know exactly where, but the names* of the first two I carried are on The Wall in the July 1965 area.

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* While in final preparation of this book in 2002, the author was interviewed by Mr. Edward Rasen who was preparing a documentary videotape about Duc Co. After comparing notes with Mr. Rasen, the author believes he carried the remains of 2Lt Bryan E. Grogan and SP4 Robert D. Stepanov, both KIA at Duc Co on 5 July 1965. Their names are on The Wall at Panel 02 East, lines 27 and 28.