

No Tail – No Fly

Thu Douc 7 August 1967 The Blackhawks

We called ourselves the Blackhawks, but the Army called us the 187th Assault Helicopter Company in Tay Ninh Vietnam. My call sign was "Blackhawk 54", or "Crash" Coe to my pilot buddies. WO David Webster was my co-pilot and SP4 M. Martin "Magnet Ass" Jansen was the crew chief, and SP4 James Holston was the gunner on the UH-1 D model aircraft #64-13817.

Major Bill Bauman was sending his helicopters into a landing zone where there had been no artillery fire or gunship prep, while the flight was on base, the Rat Pack (our Gun Ships) was seeing troops in uniform and ask if they were ARVN.

We were to insert a combo force of US and ARVN Troops across from Phu Loi, the insertion was to take place beside a river. As typical of ARVN insertions, it was to be a cold LZ. We were told there would be no suppression by the slick guns.

As the gun ships make their fly overs prior to our landing, they started taking heavy fire from dug-in emplacements. (Later Jansen heard one of the gunship crew man say he had seen a boat with a large caliber gun set up on it.) The Rat Pack informed Maj. Bauman of the heavy fire. The ground commander in the C&C ship again stated " No suppression by any aircraft." The gun ships continued taking heavy fire and Maj. Bauman called for everyone to return fire, which was the Bauman I knew.

We were all extremely nervous and the troops were silent. We were observing radio silence, so even the radio was quiet. The formation was so tight, every pilot straining to keep his helicopter full of troops in the correct chock (position), there were only a few feet separating each helicopter in my

flight of Blackhawks. Our orders were to insert our load of troops into the right side of the landing zone as far to the front as we could get. As we got closer to the landing zone it looked like we were in for some serious trouble.

As we started our approach we could see the fight unfold in front of us, they opened up from their foxholes and tracers were coming up in a huge volume. Our gunners were shooting out the side of the aircraft and the formation was spewing 7.62 out of 16 machine-guns at a horrendous rate.

As I started to cross over the tree line into the landing zone on final, in my UH-1D, the entire world seemed to erupt as the NVA crawled out of their foxholes and started to shoot at the low flying helicopters. I was trying to be as smooth as possible, but all hell was breaking loose, and aircraft in the formation started taking hits and calling mayday, mayday, mayday chock four wounded Pilot on board, breaking off, mayday, mayday, mayday trail is going in, mayday, mayday, mayday chock two has wounded, breaking out. Six of my formation were shot up and two were still in the landing zone all shot to pieces, the grunts were taking heavy casualties and we could not suppress the small arms fire coming from the tree line.

The Rat Pack threw everything they had at the tree line. The sound of the rockets whooshing past the flight and the serious roar of the mini guns working let us know we were not in the fight alone.

When we unloaded the troops, an ARVN Radio Telephone Operator refused to get off our helicopter. Gunner Jim Holston and Marvin Jansen tried to throw him off, but he got behind the pilots center console where they could not reach him.

After we lifted off, Maj. Bauman asked Captain Presson if another insertion attempt was unwise. He replied that the troops needed the additional support. Captain Billie

Presson, all heart and balls. We had four ships left to insert the next lift.

Chalk eight, aircraft 66-926 with Aircraft Commander W01 John M. Yirak and Pilot CW2 William J. Koch were cleared for a one-time flight to Phu Loi with numerous bullet holes throughout the aircraft.

The Flight Leader, Capt. Presson, reported that there were four flyable aircraft in the PZ and that they were loaded with troops. Aircraft 66-932 with AC Captain Jerry T. Wagner and Pilot W0 Robert L. Pinckney had now joined the flight as the fourth aircraft. Blackhawk "6" was monitoring the ground commander's frequency and asked him what the situation was on the ground. He replied that the ground forces had not received fire for more than thirty minutes and that he considered it safe to bring in the next lift.

We left the PZ with our load of troops and headed for the LZ, we all were sweating heavily. Maj. Bauman let us shoot out of the right side of the helicopter. Just as I brought the helicopter to a hover, a NVA uniformed soldier stepped from the bamboo tree line just past the end of my rotor blades and shot an entire clip from his AK-47 through the windshield of my helicopter. I thought I was dead. I had been hit but did not know how bad. My co-pilot was slumped in his seat. The windshield was full of holes and most of the instrument panel was blown to shreds with electrical sparking and smoke everywhere. I pulled pitch and went right up and over the NVA soldier putting a new clip in his AK-47. The transmission was screaming like a woman in pain from all the rounds in it. We tried to call mayday, but none of the radios would work. I switch to hot mike and guard, but still nothing would transmit.

At about an altitude of about 200 feet and out over the river my aircraft was hit by a fifty cal. antiaircraft weapon. The entire tail boom came apart on my aircraft. My crew chief

could see the tail rotor not spinning, just hanging. The tail boom, wrinkled and bent starting to come off the aircraft. Over the intercom my gunner said the fuel cell was burning and his smoke grenades were going off.

The torque of the engine started the helicopter spinning and the gyroscopic procession flipped the helicopter up on its side and then over. I slammed the collective down and rolled the throttle off. We were completely out of control now and starting to spin in the other direction but not as violently. It is hard to know just how many times the helicopter flipped over in the air.

As my burning shot to shit helicopter neared the ground, I knew I had little cyclic control and only the pitch and throttle to get me on the ground. I waited and waited and waited for what seemed to be a lifetime while my crippled ship fell out of the sky. At the last possible second I tried to level the helicopter and rolled on the throttle and pulled pitch. The helicopter stopped spinning and I got it close to the rice paddy. The forward motion and the attitude of the helicopter caused one of the rotor blades to hit the ground and the helicopter beat its self to death right beside the river.

I was in the left seat and was wet from the water in the flooded rice paddy. I could not breath. In the violence of the crash I had the wind knocked out of me and I was struggling to find the harness release some where in the muddy water. I was starting to panic. I calmed my screaming mind and found and pulled the release on the harness and started to climb out of the burning helicopter. The fire was in the back and spreading so I tried to climb out the co-pilots door above me. I was so weak and beat up I could not climb out of the helicopter. My crew chief M. Martin "Magnet Ass" Jansen was standing on the side of the burning helicopter. He grabbed me by the edges of my helmet and dragged me out of the burning wreckage. His second rescue having first freed the leg of

the gunner that had been trapped in the mud under the weight of a burning helicopter. Jansen went back to the burning helicopter twice to get us all out. The gunner's seat belt mounts pulled out of the bulkhead on impact and threw him into the butterfly handles of his M-60, breaking his nose. Jansen remembers looking up at the sky while spinning out of control and seeing ammo boxes flying around thinking that they were going to hurt when they hit him.

When I hit the rice paddy, I looked around and all four of us that had left that morning from Can Tho were still alive. We were cut up from the flying plexi-glass and shrapnel, thrashed and broken from the experience, but still alive.

I pulled out my survival radio to call for a ride home, but before I could key the mike there was a 118th AHC, Thunderbird shooting an approach to us. They were in the area and they saw us tumbling out of the sky with out a tail boom. They followed us down and were happy to see four survivors. There was a chaplain on the rescue helicopter and he was shooting out of the door with his carbine, just like the rest of us. One of the Crew was a Texan and commented on the Texas flag Jansen had on his helmet. Texans bonding with each other where ever they go. It must be a sickness.

The 118th rescue ship took us to the hospital and the Doctors started pulling pieces of plexi-glass out of all of us. They kept my gunner for the night.

After the trip to the hospital, Major Bauman put me in another helicopter. I do not remember the tail number, but I am certain that it was not a Blackhawk aircraft. I had never met the crew or the Peter Pilot. I do remember very clearly the Peter Pilot telling me that he had just been released from the hospital after being shot through both legs with one bullet, a large caliber round, on a combat assault. He had some horrible scars he showed me, and it was his first time in a helicopter since the hospital in Japan. I thought it was out of place

when this stranger dropped his pants and showed me his mangled legs. Still bright pink and angry looking. It was obvious he had been through hell and back.

So many people had been hit on the ground, and ammo was being expended at a huge rate, we were sent back to the Landing Zone by Bauman to take in ammo and take out the wounded.

As I started my single ship hot approach to the landing zone looking for the wounded grunts, there was so much shooting going on, and people in desperate trouble calling on all three of my radios, my new co-pilot completely freaked out and started to fight me for the controls of the helicopter. He did not want to go into the landing zone, it was not a pretty picture with all the tracers coming up at us, and the medics calling for medevac on the radios. The crew chief came to my aid by pulling the seat release and harness, pulling the screaming out of control peter pilot away from the controls, so I kept coming hot and fast and at the last possible second flared and came to a hover right beside our load of wounded, kicked out the ammo we had on board. Loaded as fast as we could and pulled pitch and went out the way we had come in.

The trip to the hospital with the wounded and flipped out pilot only took a few minutes. I had called the hospital and advised them of the nature of the injuries and the crazy pilot.

On the hospital pad, my crew and I checked out the helicopter and made sure it was safe to fly. I installed my crew chief as peter pilot and we went back to the landing zone to haul ammo in and wounded out. We kept taking hits and one of them hit a hydraulic line. Helicopters are hard to fly when everything works perfectly, they are dangerously difficult with no hydraulics. My crew chief/peter pilot and I made it to the hospital pad with our load of wounded, but that helicopter never flew again. They dragged it off the pad with a jeep and some wheels. I never saw that aircraft again. It was a total

loss for someone.

My first crew chief Martin Jansen received a Distinguished Flying Cross, he deserved more.

I still do not know who the second crew chief was, I did not know then. He was the real hero, saved all our lives. I don't think he got anything more than a pat on the back and the satisfaction of a job well done.

I got on a Medevac helicopter at the hospital and went to Saigon, and from there took a courier from Hotel-3 back to Tay Ninh. When I got there, I was the first to return. It was a quiet evening waiting for the Blackhawks to return. They came back in the morning and performed a 360 degree overhead with smoke. All of the pilots and crew ran to the flight line to cheer them back. It brings tears to my eyes to remember how we closed ranks after a fight. The 187th Assault Helicopter Company stood down for a few days. General Senif flew in and pinned on a Silver Star for me, DFC's, for the rest of the crew. I still do not know who the other crew was or what company they were from. I owe my life to an unknown man.

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