

Change, The Only Constant

Last February my nephew, a college student in Indiana, requested my assistance with an assignment for his Communications class. He knew that I am a veteran of the Vietnam War and he needed something about my experience in that conflict and changes to war fighting technology since that war ended. My submission follows:

After arriving in Vietnam in April 1970 and during my first three months there I was a copilot in the 189th Assault Helicopter Company at Camp Holloway near Pleiku. I was learning my unit's area of operation and the methods and tactics employed. In each of those months we lost an aircraft and crew. That really got my attention and made me realize that surviving my tour was not a foregone conclusion. It wasn't that I was pessimistic but it certainly was my reality. Every morning I awoke around 6:00; by 6:30 I was busy performing a preflight inspection of the aircraft while the aircraft commander (A/C) went to Operations for a mission briefing. As we made final preparations for our day and strapped into our seats I distinctly recall taking one last look at my surroundings while wondering if I would make it back there at the end of the day.

The main thing that made the Vietnam War different from all previous wars was the helicopter. Never in history did combatants have the mobility helicopters provided. We were able to deploy troops, reinforce and resupply them and evacuate the wounded with unprecedented speed. Helicopter gunships provided close air support unlike anything previously available. Key to the success of the helicopters was our absolute air superiority above the battlefield. The only threat to helicopters came from below; it would have been a completely different ballgame if we had faced a legitimate air-to-air threat.

Another unique feature of the war was that there were no front lines, our enemy could pop up anywhere at any time. After ferocious combat they would disappear into the jungle, caves, tunnels and/or cross the border into Cambodia or Laos. They enjoyed safe harbor there, as we were not to cross the borders, even in hot pursuit. They had a resupply network along and across the borders known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. That kept them well armed; fed and reinforcing troops were usually, to some extent, nearby and available.

In May 1970 President Nixon ordered American forces to cross the border into Cambodia. The world was shocked and there were riots in the United States that led to the tragic shooting deaths of 4 students who were protesting at Kent State University. I was incredulous as for weeks we flew missions into Cambodia and brought back weapons and munitions that were intended for use against Americans. To this day I cannot understand Americans protesting that. During that time we often flew missions in support of US Army Rangers. On one not especially memorable afternoon we inserted a long range reconnaissance patrol (LRRP team) on top of a ridgeline west of Pleiku about 5 miles into Cambodia. Their mission was to provide radio relay for another LRRP team that was doing reconnaissance much deeper in Cambodia. They had neither the intention nor desire to engage enemy troops; there are only 6 men on a LRRP team. After dropping them off in 6-foot tall elephant grass near the top of the ridge we returned to our base. The LRRP team hoped that their arrival was undetected as they intended to remain in the drop area for up to a week.

A few hours later began an evening never to be forgotten. I was sitting at the bar in the Officers Club with other pilots when our Operations Officer entered wanting to know who inserted the LRRP team that afternoon. The LRRP team's arrival had been observed and since nightfall they had been engaged in a running firefight with elements of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). There was no way they could survive the night on the ridge and their command declared a tactical emergency or "Tac-E". The Ops Officer ordered us to our aircraft; we were to extract the LRRP team immediately. Within minutes we were cranking our UH-1H, Huey as a light rain fell. I had been enjoying a slight buzz from the scotch I consumed at the club but suddenly I was scared sober. We took off accompanied by a heavy fire team (3 UH-1C Huey gunships) and headed to a Command Post (CP) just on the Vietnam side of the border. After a situation briefing from the LRRP team's command we again took off for the ridge, a few miles west, where we had made the insertion earlier that day. As we arrived we observed a heavy fire team of 3 AH-1G Cobra gunships firing on the ridge in support of the LRRP team who were

still in a gun battle while on the run in the jungle in the dark. Another Huey was dispensing flares for illumination although, due to the low ceiling, the flare's parachutes had barely opened when they disappeared into the jungle.

We were in radio contact with the LRRP team and they were working toward the insertion site, as it was the only place suitable for the extraction. The ridgeline was covered with triple canopy jungle with trees 150 feet tall; the insertion/extraction point was a depression in the jungle that was large enough for a single helicopter to descend to a high hover above tall elephant grass. We circled below the overcast in light rain about a mile from the action and I observed that the Cobras were taking heavy fire during their gun/rocket runs as evidenced by the muzzle flashes on the ridge. Ordinarily when gunships made their run firing rockets and mini guns the enemy hunkered down and did not return fire until the helicopters made their break at the end of the run. The fact that NVA returned fire during the gun run indicated their large numbers and their determination as well. As I witnessed the unfolding event it became apparent that the 6 LRRPs on the ground were in deep crap and the NVA wanted to make the kill without regard to its cost to them.

After about 15 minutes of orbiting nearby the LRRP team radioed that they were near the extraction point and requested that we begin our approach for the pickup. As we terminated the approach at a 6-foot hover above the elephant grass my heart was pounding. We hovered in the darkness for what seemed an eternity and after about a minute one of our door gunners reported that 3 troops were approaching the aircraft from the left. Soon the aircraft was rocking left and right as the 3 LRRPs grasped the skids and pulled themselves aboard with the assistance of the door gunners. As the first 3 LRRPs crawled onto the cargo deck behind me they implored us to not leave their teammates, who had been providing covering fire, behind. No way in hell were we leaving anyone behind and we continued hovering in the dark with only our landing light, pointed straight down, and the flares above providing illumination. After another minute that felt like another eternity a door gunner reported that 3 more troops were approaching from our left and I thought, "I sure as hell hope these are our LRRPs." Soon we were rocking violently as the rest of the LRRP team pulled themselves up and onto the aircraft while screaming that the bad guys were in pursuit and we should "get the hell out of here NOW!" As we began our vertical ascent I observed tracer rounds whistling past us and thought to myself; "Crap! Am I going to die in the next few seconds?" Miraculously, we climbed over the treetops without taking a single hit and dove down the hillside just above the treetops; we escaped with our lives and the LRRPs. The LRRP team was ecstatic, their time had just about run out and now, they had a new clock. My crewmates were likewise elated; we had just escaped from what seemed a deathtrap. In a few minutes we dropped the LRRP team at the CP across the border and then headed back to Camp Holloway.

This story is remarkable mostly because it was so common or typical; the overwhelming majority of helicopter crews were willing to risk their lives in support of the grunts on the ground and routinely did just that. In fact, the only time a greater risk was accepted was when the objective was to recover a downed helicopter crew.

The A/C on the previously described adventure was WO-1 Dale "Stretch" Griefe; he was 19 years old and if he was in any way frightened during this harrowing event it certainly didn't show. He was one cool customer but, tragically, he died in a crash a few weeks later just days before what would have been his twentieth birthday.

After 3 months I became an A/C but must admit that nothing I experienced after that compared with what I had gone through during the first 3 months of my 1-year tour. Gradually, I realized that my chances of survival, although not guaranteed, were pretty good and my days began with the expectation that I would return at the end of the day after completing my mission.

Technology has change significantly since the Vietnam War. Late in that war the first guided bombs were dropped on targets in North Vietnam. Video from TV cameras on the nose of the bomb was transmitted back to the pilot who "flew" the falling bomb to the target. In 1972 the NVA launched an armor attack on Kontum that failed, in part, because of the introduction of wire guided anti-tank TOW missiles launched from helicopter gunships.

Since the Vietnam War night vision goggles and GPS navigation have significantly upgraded capabilities but nothing has had the impact of precision munitions or "smart bombs." In Vietnam and all previous wars only a tiny fraction of munitions found their target. Today, there is nothing special about

putting a bomb down a chimney or through a window from tens of thousands of feet above and miles away. An AH-64 Apache gunship can kill a tank with a Hellfire missile launched from behind a hill 3 clicks away in pitch-black darkness. Drones piloted from a desktop on the opposite side of the planet can literally rain hell down on an unsuspecting enemy below. It makes me wonder what's next; the only constant is change.