

Crash of UH-1D 66-16026
8-9 November 1969
by [Everett Rowles](#)

Every evening it was the same routine; around 20:00 hrs men would be brought in from the bunker-line with high fevers or injuries. Depending on the patient load, one or all of us would work until every soldier was treated. The patient load was still high due to the relentless monsoon rains, and sleep continued to be an issue for all of us in the clinic (two to three hours a day was a luxury). Since the wounds that I sustained in the sapper attack on 14 October were healed to the point that I could use my hands and my hearing was returning, I asked to be placed back on rotation pulling Medic-on-Call after clinic hours. This was the case on 8 November 1969.

I pulled back to back coverage on the 6th through the 8th, and had been up for about 48 hours straight before I finally had a chance to take a shower and go to bed. I hit the rack around 19:00 hours and went straight to sleep. I am not sure of the exact time but somewhere around 21:40 hours, the Medic-on-Call came in and woke me. I could tell by the sound of his voice that something terrible was happening, and that I was not going to like what he was about to tell me. He quickly informed me that one of the Marine Civil Action Program (CAP) Team Compounds out on the Batangan Peninsula had been attacked by the VC. Information coming into the BN's Tactical Operations Center (TOC) was sketchy at that point, but from what he was told the mortar team on LZ Minuteman was providing close in fire support to the Marines and accidentally overshot the perimeter, dropping several 81 MM mortar rounds into the interior of the compound. Flash reports coming in from LZ Minuteman indicated that it was a mass casualty situation. I had been attached to that CAP Team (142) for a few weeks and had lived in the compound. In short, I had provided extensive medical care to the residents and was a known/trusted entity, which went a long way in that area. Based on my familiarity with the compound and its residents, Dr. Verdin selected me to accompany him. In addition to providing emergency medical coverage, I was to also function as Dr. Verdin's guide and security while in the compound. I was told that a bird was inbound to pick up Dr. Verdin, the Battalion Executive Officer (XO), MAJ Roman, and our attached Forward Observer (FO), CPT LeRoy "Zeke" Zimmerman, and the HHC 1SGT, a radio operator and me, so I had better get a move on.

I jumped out of bed and put on my pants and boots. When I reached for my shirt, field jacket and bush-hat in the darkness, I found that someone had moved them. Since time was of the essence I did not have time to hunt for them so I put on a flack jacket over my T-Shirt, a helmet on my head, grabbed my weapon and aid bags, and headed to the pharmacy (this was a move that I would later regret since we were flying at several hundred feet, and it was deathly cold without a shirt or jacket). There was no information to go on except that it was a blood bath, so I grabbed an empty rucksack and filled it with drugs, IV kits, dressings, surgical instruments, and anything else that I could find to stop bleeding. On the way out the door, I grabbed a case of Normal Saline and headed to the pad. If I had known then what I learned five days later, I would have thought twice about getting on that bird.

In the short time that I had been asleep, the heavy monsoon rain had turned into a tropical storm. At this point, the winds were coming in from the east at a sustained 35 knots. Although it was a

short distance from the Aid Station to the Pad, it was a difficult trek in the wind and the rain. It was hard to hear with the wind blowing, but from the bits and pieces that I could pick up from the conversation between the XO and the FO, it looked like the mortar team at LZ Minuteman had overcompensated for the winds and a batch of bad powder when they fired the mission. The mortar team dropped between ten to fifteen 81mm mortars, with five or more falling into the Resettlement Compound - Civil Action Program (CAP) Team 142. The mortar rounds added to the damage caused by the VC attack, and left several people dead or severely wounded. Details were sketchy, but it was reported that a couple of Marines were wounded along with forty or more villagers. The bird landed about 22:10 hours, and we were airborne almost instantly. A flight to the coast normally took 20 – 25 minutes, but this flight took close to 40 minutes since we were fighting the stiff head winds coming in from the east.

The compound was next to the sea at the north end of the Batangan Peninsula. When we arrived the wind had picked up to about 40 knots, and was climbing. The rain was coming down in sheets, and visibility was limited to about two feet in any direction in the pitch blackness. Since there was little vegetation to hold the sand it was picked up and driven by the wind, which made it even harder to see (the effect was like trying to walk through a sand blaster). The one good thing to come out of the rain is that it saved the compound from burning to the ground. Dr. Verdin and I finally located the Navy Corpsman in all of the confusion and went to work. The scene was one of unmanaged chaos when we arrived. We set up a trauma center in one of the undamaged structures at the south-eastern edge of the village and directed the Marines to send the wounded to me for triage. I stayed outside the structure and managed the flow of bodies into the trauma center. There were so many casualties that the three of us were quickly overwhelmed. I triaged and performed basic first aid by flashlight outside while Dr. Verdin and the Navy Corpsman took the more seriously wounded into the makeshift trauma center and tried to stabilize them for transport. Considering what they had to work with, it was a miracle that they were able to save as many wounded as they did! Short of supplies and faced with ever increasing casualty numbers, the situation was turning ugly. It did not help that the XO had been drinking when the call came in, and in his winning manner totally ticked off the Marines and the Compound's Elders. This only served to make a highly charged situation even worse. Using my prior relationship with the Marines and Compound Elders, it was all that I could do to keep things under some semblance of control in the triage area.

As soon as they were hit, the Marines put out a call through their channels for Medevac Support. Communication delays between the Marines and Division resulted in a long lag time before the request was acted on. Due to the extremely dangerous flying conditions (at that point the winds were coming in at gusts of 30-40 knots and the rain was now coming down so hard that I could barely see my hands and had to primarily work by feel) and the massive amount of casualties, it was decided that the wounded would be evacuated by boat. We were eventually informed that contact had been made with the Navy and it was agreed that they would send in landing crafts to evacuate the wounded. The more seriously wounded were to be taken to the Hospitals in Chu Lai, and the lesser injured were to go to the Naval Hospital Ship "Hope" (which by the grace of God was positioned off shore to support the Marines in the combined Army/Marine pacification effort of the area south of Chu Lai). The evacuation by sea turned out to be a mixed blessing.

Normally the South China Sea was fairly placid with waves coming in at around one to three feet. The waves driven by this storm were breaking at around five to seven feet. When the landing crafts arrived (not sure if they were MCL-6's or a LCDP's), the crafts could not lower their ramp for some reason, so a couple of Marines, the Navy Corpsman and I lifted the wounded over the sides of the landing craft (the waves were too high for the Vietnamese to help load the wounded, so they transported them to the beach for us). The whole time we were loading the wounded into the landing crafts, we were constantly being pummeled against the sides by the waves (it was like going 12 rounds with a professional boxer where you were not able to hit back or protect yourself). I am not sure how long the operation took, but around 24:00 hours we had the last of the critically wounded evacuated and the less wounded treated. Instead of staying on the ground the XO insisted on going to LZ Minuteman to carry out the rest of his investigation into the incident, so we took off. The one good point was that with the massive tail winds, a flight that would normally have taken ten - fifteen minutes only took a few minutes.

After we landed, we were only on Minuteman for about ten to fifteen minutes. The XO and FO went to talk to the Company Commander (I am not sure which Co. was out there at that time) and the Mortar Team. Dr. Verdin and I checked in on the medics stationed there to see if there was anything that they needed. Once the XO took his report, we lifted off. That is when things really went south. The winds were coming in at around a sustained 30 knots, and it was raining so hard in sheets that you could hardly see more than a few inches in front of you in the dark. We did a vertical lift to about one hundred feet and the pilot started to reposition the bird in a westerly direction for the flight to Gator. It was at this point that we started to take fire from the Village that lay west of LZ Minuteman. Just before we lifted off from the beach, two additional helicopters joined us as an escort. Seeing the tracers coming up from the village at our bird, they proceeded to drop flairs. I am not sure what they were thinking, but this only served to blind the pilots and light us up like a Christmas tree. To give us support the bunker-line erupted into return fire, which only seemed to add to the confusion. The side of the bird that I was sitting on was turned towards the village, so the door gunner and I returned fire on the tracer's point of origin. This appeared to startle the pilot and co-pilot, who then tried to take evasive measures. To gain airspeed and reduce our silhouette, the pilot turned east and flew a few hundred feet past the main part of the compound, then banked hard and dropped towards the valley east of the LZ. I was concentrating so hard on returning fire that I was not really aware of what was going on around me. When I met with Dr. Verdin in 2008, he filled in some of the blanks for me. When we dropped to pick up air speed the pilots came down too low, and the skids got caught in the top layer of concertina wire on Minuteman's outer defense perimeter. When we started to make our ascent up through the valley, the bird rose up to about a 100 feet or so when the entangled wire made the bird become unstable and start to pitch wildly. The XO, FO, 1SGT and Dr. Verdin were strapped into the Jump Seats so they were secure, but I was sitting unsecured on the wet/sand covered floor with my feet sticking out of the door. When we had dropped down to about thirty-five feet, the bird pitched hard one more time and I was ejected out of the craft at around thirty feet. The pilot did his best but lost control, and the helicopter came down on the spot where I had just landed, pinning me from the waist up. Stumbling around in the dark, someone's cold-wet-muddy boot hit my bare backside, which had been partially exposed when my pants slid down as I was falling to earth and was ground into the mud by the helicopter. That cold boot on my backside was enough to jolt me back to consciousness and bring me around. I am not sure if the door gunner made it out alive or not. I remembered the FO saying something

about an injured leg, but I was pretty much out of it to remember things in a lot of detail. Through the din of the howling wind, I heard the XO say that he thought that he could hear the VC closing in on the crash site, and that they needed to make their way back to Minuteman. He then said that they would come back for the bodies in the morning (apparently they did a quick search around the bird with a red lensed flash light, and concluded that I was dead since I was doing my best “Wicked Witch Of The West” impersonation with just my lower legs and feet visibly sticking out from under the bird). That was my cue that I was on my own, and if I was going to get out of there alive, it was going to be up to me to take action. Hearing that, I managed to work my right arm towards my web gear and extract my K-Bar from its sheath. I dug the knife into the ground and using it and my M-16 I slowly inched my way out from under the wreck. Looking back, it was the flack jacket and helmet that saved me. The helmet caught between a clump of elephant grass and the body of the craft, spitting my head out like a squeezed grape. I feel that not being able to find my bush hat at the start of the mission had been an act of divine intervention. Until that evening I had not had a helmet on my head in weeks. Operating on an adrenalin rush I was able to temporarily ignore my injuries and got back on my feet. I caught up with the other survivors. With my glasses in pieces somewhere under the wreckage, I was blind as a bat, so with Dr. Verdin acting as my eyes and human crutch, I was able to push on until I made it back to LZ Minute Man with the others. (Years later I learned that Doc Verdin had also lost his glasses and was also injured in the crash, but never said a word about his injuries when I was leaning on him. He is the definition of a real hero.) Once we were back at the LZ, one of the gun ships picked the FO, Doc Verdin, and me up and flew us to the 91st Evac in Chu Lai. The three of us were admitted at 01:45 hours on the morning of the 9th. The wound on the FO’s leg was sutured, and he and Dr. Verdin (Doc received severe contusions across his waist from the seat belt) were retained at the hospital for observation. The FO and Dr. Verdin were then released to return to the Battalion later that morning. I went into a coma, so I was retained. The other gun ship took the XO back to LZ Gator. The 91st was a sorry excuse for a hospital. I was lucky to make it out of there alive, but that is another part of the story.

As previously stated, if I had known then what I learned five days later I would have thought twice about getting on that bird. When I returned to LZ Gator from being hospitalized, I was informed by some insiders at the command group that the XO had violated protocol on this mission. Our normal air support element had refused to fly the mission due to the impending tropical storm and his reputation for screwing up information. It was their opinion that the incident report could wait until it was safe to fly, and that it was the Navy’s responsibility to provide medical support to the Marines. Without authorization, the XO called “Blue Ghost” and convinced them that he had to get out there immediately to do damage control, so they agreed that they would support the mission. It was reported that the pilot flying our bird was not only unfamiliar with the topography in our AO, but had only been in country one week. To add insult to injury, his co-pilot had just arrived in country. Neither one of them were instrument rated to fly in bad weather or at night. This was the third time in less than two months that the XO had almost gotten me killed ignoring protocol.