

A "Deans" Slick Pilot's Story

by

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120th Aviation Company, August 1966 – February 1968

For then Captain Dave Measels, the "Best of Times in the Worst of Times" as a slick pilot in the 120th Aviation Company, the "Deans" of Army Aviation, was preceded by a few years. After flunking most of my courses at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas, I enlisted in the Army in August 1961. Several years later, I completed Infantry Officer's Candidate School at Fort Benning and applied for flight school. In 1963, the demand for aerial targets was still fairly low, so it was not until the fall of 1965 that I made it to Fort Wolters with the "Blue Hat" class of 66-6. In June 1966, I arrived in Vietnam on orders to the 1st Cavalry Division, but was diverted to the 117th Aviation Company on the beach at Dong Ba Thin. After several months of flying with the "Beach Bums" in support of the 101st Airborne Division in the Pleiku area, at one of the nightly operations mission briefings, it was announced that a volunteer was needed to go to the 120th Aviation Company "somewhere down south." Against my belief not to volunteer for anything, I said I would go. So much for the myth that only the best pilots were selected to go to the 120th!

When I arrived at Ton San Nhut in August 1966 after one of those great C-123 flights out of Pleiku, I was put aboard the Dean's ¾ ton cargo truck "shuttle bus" to the Deans slick pilots' villa on Cach Mang street in Saigon. I could hardly believe my good fortune at being delivered from a tent cot in the sand to a villa with running water, clean sheets, and a real bed. I found that missions in the 120th were indeed varied. The Deans supported the Headquarters, United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) and flew the Commander (COMUSMACV) who was during my tenure Generals William Westmoreland and Creighton Abrams. When I arrived, the slicks were all UH-1 "B" models except for one "D" model allegedly obtained solely for flying the press, but seldom used for that purpose. I found it strange that any bird and crew could be scheduled to carry General Westmoreland on the theory that if they were sabotaged, it would be tough to figure out the right one. The aircraft were also a stark contrast to those used by other generals in country. The Dean's birds were unpolished and did not have the plush seat cushions favored by most generals.



Other diverse missions included support of the Air Force by flying the beacon used by the B-52 bombers for their final course into the "box" for "Arc Light" missions. The Arc Light missions required two aircraft with one flying a tight orbit at 500 feet above ground level over a known reference point. The second bird was to assume the orbit if the first was shot down. When clouds obscured the reference point, the beacon

bird sometimes flew close enough to the box to see the bombs as they passed by the door. After the strike, the fun part was the low level passes over the box for bomb damage assessment. Those B-52s sure killed a lot of trees! Later in my tour, I took some of the eight engine B-52 pilots out to a box to give them an up close view of their work. As we cranked, I yelled "COMING HOT ON NUMBER ONE", followed by "COMING HOT ON NUMBER TWO" and by the time I got to four, they realized they were being had.

Another fun mission was the SEAL team insertions in the Rung Sat Special Zone between Saigon and Vung Tau. The Rung Sat took on a much different flavor after Captain Rogers and his Razorback gunship crew was shot down by an RPG. The wingman said they took one up the "hell hole" and the rotor blades stopped turning before it inverted into a ball of flames. I returned to the pad just afterward and Major Ralph Gonzales, the Operations Officer, took the left seat and Captain Ray Sandlin, the Razorback Platoon Leader, climbed into the back. At the crash site, I dropped Ray to the muddy marsh as low as the scrub trees would allow. After a few more low level orbits, Ralph wanted to join Ray on the ground so I dropped in again. Ralph jettisoned the door and jumped his 200 plus pounds out into the mud. It took full forward cyclic to get the ship stabilized and gain a little slow airspeed. Those on the ground were able to locate the remains of one of the crew members and we loaded all on board for the return to Saigon Heliport just before dark, but it was not until the next day before the pilots were found in the seats of that burned out bird and the other crew member was found. I still recall that was a tough and emotional flight to make.



The Deans also flew air assaults to insert ARVN soldiers into LZs around Saigon. On these, the Razorbacks flew the more traditional armed escort. Other slick missions included flying the MACV brass out to the field, flying the Saigon press corps out to get the latest hot story, support to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and many a "pigs and rice" mission. The best part of the slick missions over a 90 mile radius from Saigon was the "dead time" waiting on our passengers at the Special Forces camps where we would load up the bird for a visit to the local free fire zone. Nothing like letting the



door gunners shoot up ammo while the green beret types tossed out grenades, used their M-79 grenade launchers, and fired M-16s at targets of opportunity.

After flying enough that the Huey became an extension of my hands, I was made an instructor pilot and then the unit standardization IP. I had great fun shooting touch down autorotations to the sod around Saigon and to the runway at Long Thanh. I also recall switching the engine fire warning light with the master caution light, then turning the hydraulics off which caused the red FIRE light to come on, then we ignored the passengers as they panicked trying to get the crew's attention. Slowly but surely, the slick B models were replaced with D models, then eventually with H models. The Razorbacks kept their B models until I departed in February 1968. Man they had it tough getting out of Saigon heliport with a loaded rocket bird. The Razorback door gunners also pulled the barrels on their flex guns on short final into the heliport. I recall they lost a crew member when he fell out of the bird while removing the barrels on short final and fell onto the road between the heliport and the PX.

Earlier, I mentioned the villa in Saigon where the slick pilots lived. The Razorback villa was a short walk down the street. I recall that one night television reporter Morey Safer visited the Officer's Club bar to film for one of his TV stories and the Razorbacks were being their usual wild bunch. As Morey asked one what he did, he replied "I fly a gunship every day killing Vietnamese.... uh, I mean Viet Cong." Actually, he was right on both! I always wondered how that story went over in the States.



Eventually, I fell for Kim, the villa club bartender, and we were married in December 1967. As of this writing in October 2003, we have been married for over 35 wonderful years. We had two sons and both served as Army soldiers. We returned to Fort Wolters in February 1968 and I trained as many pilots as possible so I would not have to return to Vietnam. That worked until 1972, when we returned to Vietnam where I was an airmobile advisor to the VNAF helicopter squadrons at Pleiku Air Base. In 1973, I was assigned to Fort Riley, Kansas to command the 335th Aviation Company "Cowboys." At that point, I became dissatisfied with the challenge of Army Aviation. The Cowboys had captains as XO, operations officer, and platoon leaders and the warrant officers were all Vietnam experienced. Flying air assaults on Fort Riley was just too automatic. In Germany, I took my first battalion command as an infantry major and saw the leadership challenge was in other than aviation.



My over 31 years of military service has included command of three companies, two battalions, and the 2d Infantry Division Support Command. I look back on my time with the Deans and wonder about where today finds company commanders Fred Farner, Tom Daly, and Richard Beck; pilots Ralph Gonzales, Frank Hunt, John Jones, Vincent Olson, Ray Sandlin, Ira Greeley, Linc Shibao, Dave Johnson and many others; the myriad of other great warrant officer pilots, and the crew chiefs, door gunners, and maintenance folks who pulled it all together in the "Best of Times in the Worst of Times."

God Bless You All!