

The Day we lost Charlie

Part 1

The Warning Order

by T. Roger Messick

It was 14:55 on the afternoon of 21 December 1962, when the last aircraft of fifteen H-21 helicopters, better known as the Flying Banana taxied into position for the scheduled 15:00 departure. Fifteen helicopters lined up on the old Pleiku airstrip was quite a site, but considering a cargo helicopter company has only eighteen aircraft, fifteen H-21s ready for takeoff was not only quite a site, it was a remarkable accomplishment.

The H-21 was and always had been a difficult helicopter to maintain with an estimated eleven hours of maintenance for every hour of flight, so when the 81st Transportation Company received a warning order from MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) to begin preparation for a maximum effort troop lift requiring fifteen aircraft, it was immediately necessary to prioritize our flight schedule and reduce support missions to "essential flights only." That is, if we were to meet the fifteen aircraft requirement.

The warning order when received on or about 12 December was classified SECRET, and was to involve both the 81st and 8th Transportation Companies for a total of thirty H-21s. With this many aircraft it would be the largest troop lift conducted in Vietnam to date. The warning order stipulated the 81st as the unit responsible for coordination and logistics, and would also be responsible to lead the flight. The mission briefing date, time, and place were, "to be announced.

Since the mission was classified SECRET, only those on a need to know basis understood why our daily flight schedule was almost nonexistent while maintenance was working around the clock. Something was suspicious, but still it was a nice reprieve from flying four to six aircraft a day, seven days a week.

The 81st Transportation Company arrived in Vietnam early in October 1962, and was assigned to Pleiku in the Central Highlands because of its mountain flying experience. With the 81st operational, there were now five H-21 companies for a total of 90 aircraft.

A troop lift involving ten aircraft was considered normal, twelve was borderline for availability, but a fifteen aircraft request was well out of the ordinary.

Unfortunately, just two weeks prior, the 81st lost one of its aircraft while conducting a troop lift in the mountainous area east of Kontum. The aircraft experienced a hard landing in the LZ (landing zone), and had to be left in place while plans were developed for its recovery.

Early the following morning, a two aircraft recovery team departed Old Pleiku with the goal of either recovering the damaged H-21, or removing as many serviceable parts as possible. A Vietnamese Infantry platoon was guarding the aircraft so the LZ was considered secure. Immediately after landing our maintenance team began work to determine if recovery was possible, or was it best to cannibalize for parts. The aircraft was badly damaged, but because of pride and a deep love for our flying bananas, the decision was made to repair and fly, versus strip and destroy. After four hours of hard work, it was determined the aircraft reasonably safe for a one time flight to Qui Nhon. In retrospect this was a bad decision because the maintenance depot in Qui Nhon determined the aircraft beyond repair. As a result, they got the badly needed spare parts, not us.

Had the warning order stipulated each company provide sixteen H-21s, the 81st could not have met that requirement because there were no pilots to fly another aircraft. As it was, every available pilot would have to fly including the company commander, the executive officer, and even the operation's officer who totally disliked the H-21. The one pilot who should not have been flying was Chief Warrant Officer Charles Edward Holloway, who we knew as Charlie.

Holloway arrived in Pleiku the previous week and although he was experienced in cargo helicopters, his experience was in the H-34 Choctaw and not the H-21 Shawnee. (Army helicopters are traditionally nicknamed after Indian tribes) The only similarity between the two helicopters was that they both operate the same type engine. That is, the Wright R-1820 Cyclone. Because the flight characteristics between single rotor and tandem rotor helicopters are so dissimilar, it would be necessary for Holloway to receive transition training in the H-21 - something that should have been done before he left the States.

Unfortunately, Holloway's arrival with the 81st coexisted with the order of, "essential flights only," and therefore his transition training was limited to two hours of touch and go landings. Better than nothing, but under normal

circumstances not enough experience to be flying a combat troop lift. However, this was not considered "normal circumstances," so Holloway would fly.

Part 2

The Briefing

It was mid afternoon on 19 December when the company clerk informed me to report to the commanding officer. My position with the company was Platoon Leader of the 2nd Platoon, so it was not unusual to be summonsed to company headquarters. When I arrived, the CO was in conference with both the Executive and Operations officers but I was waved in and told to take a seat. After some friendly chit chat, I was handed the MACV Warning Order to read and it didn't take long to see why our flying was so limited. The CO, Major George W. Aldridge said the time and place for the mission briefing had been received, and he wanted me to attend the briefing and be the mission fight leader.

Early the next morning (December 20th) wearing my last set of starched fatigues, I climbed into the back of our company assigned L-19 (Bird Dog) to fly to Nha Trang. Nha Trang is a coastal city about half way between Saigon and Qui Nhon and a one hour flight from Pleiku. When the French were involved in Vietnam they used Nha Trang as their Colonial Administrative Headquarters, so driving from the airport to the 10 AM briefing, it was easy to see the French influence in what appeared to be an upscale city.

The briefing building built by the French as their colonial headquarters, was a large and impressive three story building that resembled an old fort. Outside was a beehive of activity with numerous American and Vietnamese military police in shiny helmets and armed to the teeth. Located at each corner of the building were armored vehicles with mounted 50 caliber machine guns. An impressive show of force for what I thought was a simple mission briefing, but I'd soon discover, not all that simple.

The briefing room was on the second floor and large enough to hold about sixty people. Up front there was a large screen and view graph projector, and in front of the projector were six leather upholstered arm chairs. I arrived early and got a front row seat but smart enough to use a metal folding chair thinking the arm chairs were probably not meant for me. With ten minutes to go the room was mostly full, but the arm chairs were still empty. A Lieutenant Colonel and a highly decorated Master Sergeant both in starched khakis were standing next to a briefing podium in deep discussion; it was evident the colonel was somewhat stressed by the perspiration stains under each arm pit.

With the doors closed and while we waited for the occupants of the upholstered arm chairs, the briefing officer made the following announcement. "Under no circumstances was he to be interrupted with questions during his briefing; all questions would be answered after the briefing and copies of the operational order issued."

Ten minutes later, four high ranking Vietnamese officers and two American Bird Colonels entered the room taking the six upholstered chairs. The Lt. Colonel began his briefing by announcing, "This briefing is classified Confidential." This seemed strange as the Warning Order was classified Secret.

As the briefing officer followed the format of the Army's Five Paragraph Field Order, he eventually got to paragraph three "The Execution Phase." Basically, three battalions of ARVN (Army of Vietnam) infantry were to be air lifted into three separate landing zones north of Tuy Hoa, Thirty helicopters would carry one battalion per lift. He went on to say, "because air striking the landing zones alerted the VC (Viet Cong) that troops were coming and giving them time to leave, there would be no air-strikes of the landing zones."

It took a second or two to process what I thought I had just heard and without really thinking, I was on my feet interrupting the briefing officer. Needless to say, he was not happy and asked, "Who are you?" I gave my name and rank and explained I was the designated flight leader and, "I thought not air-striking the landing zones was a bad idea." From the back of the room a loud booming voice said, "Sit down captain the decision's been made." That booming voice was General Paul D. Harkins, MACV Commander who I didn't know was in the room. Before sitting down, I said, "Sir, it's a bad decision and could get people killed!" Then I sat down.

After the briefing, I fully expected to have my heels locked together for my impromptu interruption, but to my surprise nothing was said. Before flying back to Pleiku, the flight leader of the 8th Helicopter Company and I discussed logistical details regarding the mission as we understood it.

Arriving back at Pleiku, I immediately reported to Major Aldridge and briefed him on the briefing. I mentioned he might be getting a complaint because of my interruption, but he just shook his head and smiled. I told him that during the question and answer period, I suggested that three flights of ten aircraft landing

two minutes apart would be more manageable in the landing zones. They briefly considered my suggestion, but overruled it.

Major Aldridge wanted all flight crews briefed before dinner that evening and asked if I could be ready? I replied, "I'll be ready."

At four thirty assembled in the mess hall, I began my briefing utilizing the same format as the Lt. Colonel. No one seemed overly surprised we were committed to fly fifteen aircraft and along with the 8th, thirty aircraft all together. Surprisingly, there were few questions asked but concerns were expressed about the decision to not air-strike the landing zones. I ended my briefing by saying to all pilots and crew chiefs, "if you need to have your appendix removed between now and tomorrow, do it now, so you can fly tomorrow." It didn't get the laugh I expected.

At dinner I sat with the company commander and the executive officer discussing the operation. They agreed three flights of ten aircraft with short landing intervals was more manageable, but understood MACV's reasoning that all aircraft land together.

Over the past two months, the 81st had averaged one troop lift per week and occasionally two, but all requests had come through ARVN channels out of the Vietnamese Headquarters in Kontum. However, this operation appeared different in that MACV was in charge and ARVN was just furnishing troops. Anyway, that's the way it looked to me.

The next morning (December 21st), the 1st Platoon leader Captain Don Coggins and I assigned crews to aircraft tail numbers. Our goal was to place strong pilots with less experienced pilots, and in doing so Charlie Holloway was assigned to fly with Chief Warrant Officer Dan Gressang. Dan was one of our more experienced pilots, but interestingly Dan had a phobia about seeing blood that would cause him to faint. I was going to fly with Warrant Officer Ernie Bustamente, a TDY (temporary pilot) from Korea; a solid pilot but without a lot of experience.

Part 3

The Mission

At exactly 15:00 hours, (21 December) fifteen H-21 helicopters lifted off Old Pleiku airstrip for the flight to Qui Nhon. We climbed to 2000 feet AGL (above

ground level) and flew in a loose staggered right formation. Loose is about a two and a half rotor disk separation right formation which was fine for now, but for a troop lift we would be no more than one and a half disk separation.

After we departed Pleiku there were few people left in the company area because all pilots and crew chiefs were flying. There were fifteen volunteer door gunners, additional maintenance personnel, and our medical section. The company First Sergeant had to stay back as the ranking man, but he was not happy staying behind.

We would bunk tonight with the 8th Helicopter Company, but with their limited accommodations, I suggested we all carry sleeping bags. Approximately ten minutes out, I called Qui Nhon tower requesting landing instructions for fifteen aircraft. They cleared us to land to the North but wanted confirmation of fifteen aircraft. Apparently that many H-21s in a single flight was surprising.

I asked the tower for approval to fly over the airfield and make a right base turn for landing. With the tower's approval, I instructed the flight to tighten up our formation which was at least a half mile long. On final approach we slowly reduced altitude and airspeed flying the entire length of the runway. When all aircraft touched down at the same time it made for a good show! The tower was highly complementary.

We taxied to the ramp and held a ten minute crew briefing for tomorrow's schedule. Breakfast 06:00, pre-flight 07:00, start engines 07:50, taxi for takeoff 08:10. Qui Nhon is a coastal city with good seafood restaurants, so with the unique opportunity to have a lobster dinner, drink some beer, and see old friends, I said, "See you in the morning."

We were a community of pilots who have served on and off together for years. Tonight, we'll be reacquainted with old friends of the 8th Helicopter Company.

Early the next morning (December 22nd), the ramp was full of crew members preparing for the flight to Tuy Hoa. Ernie checked our aircraft while I coordinated with the 8th's flight leader. We agreed unit integrity was important so we would be "Alpha & Bravo flights." The 81st being Alpha.

At exactly 07:50 you could hear coughing and see the exhaust flames as a ramp full of H-21s started their R-1820 Cyclone engines. Suddenly however, there was an ear piercing scream that sent chills up our backs and caused people to freeze in

place. This scream lasted maybe four or five seconds before it stopped; then only bewilderment.

What happened was a relatively new pilot with the 8th suddenly remembered he had not checked the flight controls for freedom of movement. This is done before the engine is started, but with an engine running, raising the collective pitch will cause the engine to over-speed at extremely high RPM. Thus the loud scream. Since it destroyed the engine, we're now a flight of 29 aircraft.

At 08:10, Alpha flight began taxiing for the hour and ten minute flight to Tuy Hoa. Bravo flight would be just minutes behind. The morning was crystal clear and with the sun rising out of the East China Sea, our flight along the coast was beautiful. Vietnam is a very beautiful country!

Tuy Hoa is a small fishing village located at the mouth of the Song BA River and the East China Sea. When we arrived we were surprised to find a four thousand foot paved runway approximately eight kilometers in from the coast. The mountains to the north, where in less than two hours we'd be lifting troops, appeared to be thirty kilometers away.

Alpha flight landed on the south side of the east/west runway facing east. Bravo flight landed on the north side also facing east. Troops were already on location and definitely there were three full battalions; maybe more. Fuel trucks began topping off all aircraft, so if everything went well we'd make three lifts without refueling.

The first lift was scheduled for 11:00 hours. For the first lift with full fuel loads, we planned eleven troops per aircraft, but being one aircraft short and seeing more troops than expected, we increased the load to twelve. As we reduce weight by burning off fuel, we can if necessary increase this number for lifts two and three. To make more room inside the aircraft, we removed most of the seats so the troops will sit on the floor, this gets them on and off faster.

Engine start time is set for 10:50, and with all aircraft now fueled troops began moving along side their respective aircraft. Vietnamese soldiers are smaller than American soldiers so twelve on board will keep us several hundred pounds under max takeoff weight. I was disappointed the Bird Dog (L-19) pilot did not land and

brief us on the size and shape of the landing zones, always standard procedure on prior lifts.

With troops loaded and all ground and communication checks completed, Alpha and Bravo flights lifted off exactly on schedule. At the last minute an American Adviser and a New York Times Reporter climbed aboard and took two of the four seats not removed. It was too late for changes but having two extra passengers put us at max takeoff weight.

After takeoff in a staggered right formation, we climbed at 60 knots to 2500 feet and headed north towards the mountains. I made radio contact with the L-19 pilot who was high above and who would provide us direction and distance to the landing zone. When the trail aircraft advised me the flight was formed, we increased to 80 knots the best speed for close formation flying.

As we approached the mountains, the terrain was coming up to us and we would soon be contour flying at tree top level. When contour flying it's no time to be reading a map, so the bird dog pilot plays a vital role in getting us to the LZ. He advised us we were about fifteen kilometers away and for now our course was good. At ten kilometers he suggested a slight right turn, and at five kilometers we were dead on course.

At about three kilometers I began to slow airspeed but careful not to slow so much that aircraft in the back would have to hover. At tree top level and flying slightly up hill, I couldn't see the LZ and even at our slow air speed, I was concerned we might over fly. Suddenly there it was, and damn it was plenty wide but not deep. An instant decision had to be made and I announced, "We're landing." The first three aircraft landed okay: the next two over flew the zone, but all remaining aircraft landed without difficulty because further to the right the LZ was both deep and wide.

As you flare to land, your crew chief and door gunner will open fire with 30 cal machine guns, and even knowing it's going to happen, it still scares the hell out of you! However, this time there were rounds coming back, and soon I was hearing, "We're taking heavy fire. I've got wounded on board. Let's get out of here!" Ernie and I were still unloading our troops but 1 transmitted, "**When you're unloaded get out! We'll form up in the air.**" It didn't make sense to sit empty while being shot at just to leave as a flight.

I could see aircraft taking off and although we were first to land we were slow departing because some troops without crew chief persuasion were refusing to get off. The NY Times reporter was on the floor not about to get off, so the American Adviser just left him. When we finally departed we were well behind the bulk of the flight. The two aircraft that over flew the LZ were now on final approach and I advised them not to land. As they flew over the landing zone they said all aircraft were out but the ground was littered with dead or wounded soldiers.

Gressang and Holloway had lifted off and were accelerating when a bullet hit Charlie in his right forehead. The locked seat harness kept him from falling forward into the controls but his heavy feet on the pedals caused Dan to struggle keeping the aircraft straight. The crew chief got his feet off the pedals and then removed his helmet: Charlie was unconscious but bleeding badly, and with his head slumped to the right, blood was filling the right side of the cockpit. As Dan flew, the crew chief applied a pressure bandage on Charlie's forehead to slow bleeding, but with little success.

All aircraft returned to the Tuy Hoa airstrip but one. That aircraft landed about four kilometers from the airfield because of lost oil pressure and hot engine temperature. Along with rumbling noises, the crew felt they had gone as far as they could go. A trailing aircraft landed alongside and picked up both crew and machine guns. A second aircraft had to make a run on landing because of a severed hydraulic line. The H-21 is one of the few big helicopters that can be flown without hydraulics, but it's difficult.

Other aircraft were now reporting damage from light to severe, and some said they had dead or wounded troops on board. It was pure luck an aircraft with holes in the fuel tank didn't explode with high octane fuel leaking close to the exhaust stacks. One crew chief had to hold a drive shaft hanger bearing in place after it was hit. Without a doubt, we needed to shut down and evaluate our situation.

Dr. George W. Inghram our company medical officer and his medical team were standing by when Gressang landed. Dan was shutting down the aircraft as they lifted Charlie from his seat. Then still sitting in his seat, Dan passed out cold. Holloway was immediately transferred to a HUEY helicopter and flown to the Army hospital in Nha Trang. He died in route.

Twenty-two aircraft had been hit ranging from a single bullet hole to a hundred or more. For the next lift we could only fly seventeen aircraft, but with less fuel we

could add two additional troops. Twenty minutes later and with a whole lot of apprehension we lifted off following the same routine as before. When reaching 2500 feet I again contacted the L-19 pilot for direction and distance to the second LZ. Just as before I began to slow at three kilometers, but this time the LZ was visible well in advance. On short final our crew chief and door gunner opened fire, and again it caused my butt to get tight; thankfully this time there were no rounds coming back. After discharging our troops we departed as a flight feeling a great deal of relief!

We landed at Tuy Hoa and loaded the third lift of troops plus two additional and then followed the same procedure as lifts one and two. Lift three went smoothly and was uneventful!

PART 4

Recovery - Shock - Grief

When we arrived back at Tuy Hoa, we were low on fuel so trucks immediately began refueling all flyable aircraft. When two aircraft from the same unit were fueled they would depart for either Pleiku or Qui Nhon. Maintenance was busy inspecting all aircraft to determine their airworthiness, and once released they returned to home base.

Five aircraft were not flyable without extensive repair and it would take two days to get them out of Tuy Hoa. Two had their rotor blades removed placed on flat bed trucks and driven to Qui Nhon. We never saw those aircraft again. Gressang and Holloway's aircraft had forty hits or more, but after being cleaned as best possible, it was released to Pleiku. To accurately count the hits another aircraft took was difficult but 103 was the general consensus. It was quite remarkable that no vital components were hit, but dead and wounded were inside. Even more remarkable was that only three crew members from either company had more than relatively minor injuries.

To say this was not a shock would be a gigantic understatement! On previous troop lifts we had taken only a few rounds and mostly in the tail sections. We figured those came from troops we just landed and maybe they were intentional, maybe not. However, Tuy Hoa was the real McCoy, and certainly above our wildest imagination! I believe we were lulled into a comfort zone not fully realizing we

were no longer training for war, but now in a war where you get killed. Hell yes, this was a shock!

It's only natural to grieve for friends, and for days we had a feeling of numbness for Charlie that was hard to shake. Even a week after the mission, there were few smiles and not a whole lot of laughs. Dan Gressang was especially quiet and kept pretty much to himself, but eventually he returned to his normal good nature. Being busy flying support missions and doing our job was the best medicine for getting back to normal, but in all honesty, I wondered had Charlie been with us more than a week, and had we known him better, would we have grieved harder?

Postscript

It will soon be 57 years since the events of Tuy Hoa. I have often thought about this mission, but in the last few years it seems to occupy my mind more and more. Maybe I'm writing about Tuy Hoa to answer questions in my own mind, and without a doubt, I have more questions than answers. For example, did the decision to not pre-strike the landing zone catch the VC by surprise, or did they know we were coming and decided this was the time and place to fight? As the war escalated in Vietnam, experience proved time and again that keeping combat operations secret was nearly impossible. Then the question of my split second decision to land versus circling to land. Would the VC have left the area while we circled, or would it have just given them more time to prepare? To this we'll never know, but what I do know is if they didn't leave and had more time to prepare, a bad situation could have been far worse. Finally, as flight leader, did I do my job properly? I think I can take some comfort in feeling I did it to the best of my ability; I just hope my ability was good enough!

Charles Edward Holloway, was born on 2 March 1931 and was 31 at the time of his death. His home of record was De Leon Springs, Florida. He and his wife Olive had five children. Holloway enlisted into the Army, attended flight school class 55-K, and rose to the rank of Chief Warrant Officer. Holloway was the 22nd combat death in Vietnam, but was the fourth Army Aviator to be killed by hostile fire. On 4 July 1963, in a ceremony at Old Pleiku Airstrip now the headquarters of the 52nd Aviation Battalion, Old Pleiku was officially named Camp Holloway in honor of Charles Edward Holloway.

Footnote: In late 1963 the 81st Transportation Company was the first H-21 company to transition from the H-21 Flying Banana to the Bell HU-1B (HUEY). The 81st then became the 119th Aviation Company part of the 52nd Aviation Battalion. Pilots who flew both the H-21 and the HU-1B, said the HU-1B compared to the H-21 was a huge disappointment.

Editor's notes: This is the story that results in naming Camp Holloway. Also see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camp_Holloway

An edited version of Roger's story with great pictures was published in the October 2020 issue of *Vietnam Magazine*. Here is a link to that version: <https://www.historynet.com/charlie-holloway-secret-vietnam-mission.htm>