

Chapter 34

Impersonating a Pilot

The 188th AHC was seeing a whole bunch of combat. In the air and on the ground. In fact many of our pilots were over the limit for flight hours and were technically grounded.

One morning I took off on a test flight with a mini-gun armed Huey. I had just changed out the system so it was just me and the pilot. We were headed to a free-fire zone to try out the system when we got a frantic call from base, "VC in the open!"

It is not often that the enemy shows himself so they wanted to call in artillery right away. We were to return to base ASAP and pick-up an artillery observer. My pilot became equally frantic and informed them that not only did we not have a crew chief and door-gunner but that, "Spec 5 Miller was in the co-pilot's seat!"

We headed back to the field. Coming in for landing we saw the crew chief, a door-gunner and an artillery man waiting for us but no co-pilot! He called in again and repeated, "I ONLY HAVE MILLER WITH ME!"

They answered, "You'll have to go with Miller. Everybody left here is grounded."

My pilot said, "OK, Log Miller in."

He did not care. We had flown a lot together. He knew I could handle the ship if I had to. I should also explain that anytime we got a "VC in the open" it meant NOW not later. There was no time to "shop" for my replacement. Somewhere on the official flight records of the 188th a Spec 5 is logged in as co-pilot (technically, Assistant Aircraft Commander) for a two hour combat mission!

Our three new passengers climbed on board. The door-gunner relinquished his flight helmet to the artillery Second Lieutenant so that he could talk to the pilot. Before we even took off the 2nd Luey noticed my rank and asked, "Can Spec 5s fly?"

My pilot simply answered, "This one can. Where to?" Our orders were to follow this 2nd Lieutenant's orders.

As the 2nd Lieutenant was trying to figure out where to point us, two disturbing things came out of his mouth. First he blurted out that he had only been in Nam for 3 days. Second he asked what altitude was safe from small arms fire? He directed us to fly at that altitude.

Now any idiot knows that no self-respecting gaggle of VC would dare be caught in the open with a gunship overhead in plain view. The pilot attempted to dissuade him but the artillery man held his ground, so off to 5,000 feet we went. Everyone in the helicopter except the 2nd Lieutenant knew that this mission was just blown. The door-gunner, in the dark so to speak, was so upset by our climb to altitude that he regained temporary

custody of his flight helmet and asked “What’s up sir?”

The pilot laughingly said, “Don’t you know? We’re looking for VC in the open! Now give your helmet back to the nice lieutenant.”

On one hand it was peaceful at that height and we were just following orders. On the other hand the initial report was about 200 VC in the open. We wanted those guys.

The artillery guy was still playing with his map trying to figure out where we were. The crew chief was getting very bored. Down below on the river we saw a big flock of white geese. It was a free fire zone so the crew chief popped off a few rounds at unsuspecting enemy geese, far, far below. Whatever chance we had of catching “VC in the open” was long gone anyway.

The machine gun fire startled the artillery lieutenant so much that he visibly jumped in his seat. He frantically asked, “What was that?”

The crew chief sheepishly replied, “I thought I saw something there at the bend in the river sir.” A true statement. The pilot and myself were visibly laughing.

The 2nd Luey carefully looked at his huge artillery map. These maps show the terrain topographically and have a grid system overlay. You find your target then call back to the artillery firebase, giving them the coordinates. They in turn fire one round of white phosphorus (WP round or ‘willie pete’) to mark their aiming point. Then the artillery observer calls in a correction and asks for another willie pete round or fire for effect. Corrections normally are something like left 25 up 50. The “50” referring to yards.

The artillery map was obviously not designed for use in Huey helicopters flying with their doors open at 90 mph. The maps were not only unwieldy but they flapped in the breeze like any large piece of paper would. By large I mean about 4’ by 4’, folded!

When the Second Lieutenant was satisfied with our location and his coordinates, he called them into his Major commanding the artillery battery. Since this was a free-fire zone our pilot was not too concerned about calling in artillery on the unsuspecting VC geese.

Back at the firebase the major informed us that the WP round was on its way. I do not recall the artillery jargon used but the fire base would tell you when the round left their tube and then they would tell you when it was supposed to impact. The artillery Major informed us the WP round should have impacted.

We were all looking out the left side at the bend in the river when the excited door-gunner tapped the pilot on the shoulder and pointed out to the right, about a mile away, the unmistakable white smoke burst of WP round. It was near a village! It was outside the free-fire zone! The Second Lieutenant finally saw it and excitedly recalculated his coordinates.

Calling his Major, the 2nd Lieutenant calmly said, “Up a 1000, left a 1000.” Now remember these are yards! A normal correction is about 25 or 50 at the most.

For the next 5 minutes those of us with flight helmets got to listen to a very irate Major chew out a very inexperienced Second Lieutenant over the radio. I was sorry that the door-gunner had to miss it. The Major swore at the Second Lieutenant like a drunken sailor. He called him every name in the book. Every other word was fuck or fucking. Shithead and dumbass were also popular.

Finally, when the Major calmed down a little, he asked the pilot if he was trained to read an artillery map. He was. Standard training at Ft. Rucker.

The Major then ordered his 2nd Lieutenant to give said map to the pilot. He also told his Second Lieutenant that the Warrant Officer was now in charge of this mission, period! The Major told his man that he did not want to hear another word out of him.

Actually the Major said, “I want you to shut the fuck up and give that fucking flight helmet back to someone who can use it!” I don’t know that I have ever heard any officer that angry.

This artillery mission was now in the hands of the 188th!

The pilot told me to take over and drop to the deck as he was now busy wrestling with the huge artillery map. The last thing the Second Lieutenant asked before relinquishing his helmet was, “What are you doing?”

“We’re going down on the deck to see if we can draw their fire. Now give that helmet to my door-gunner!”

I cannot imagine what was going through the head of that Lieutenant. First he blew his coordinates, then he gets publicly chewed out by his Major. Now he found himself diving to treetop level to try and get the enemy to shoot at us. If all that wasn’t bad enough there was a Spec 5 flying the helicopter and the real pilot had a face full of artillery map and could not even see out the cockpit. There are “bad hair” days and there are “wish you had never been born” days.

It is SOP for gunships to “hit the deck” to draw fire. Generally speaking the enemy will not voluntarily step out and wave at a gunship. In the retrospect of 45 additional years of breathing this seems quite insane. At that point in time however it was quite normal.

No one on board really expected the VC to show themselves. It was too unhealthy this close to a US base. All of the helicopter guys were pretty confident no one would shoot at us. But perhaps at treetop level we might actually spot them.

So for an hour I had the best time of my life. Flying at low level with my pilot’s hands

fully engaged in playing with that artillery map. I finally felt like a real pilot! It was great! The Second Lieutenant in the back was by now ashen white and almost comatose.

The Warrant Officer eventually called it off. I popped back up to 1,000 feet and headed for Dau Tieng.

As we approached for landing there was an MP(Military Police) jeep waiting for us. Well not us, the 2nd Luey. Boy was that Major mad! I'm guessing that ended the lieutenant's artillery career.

After landing the Warrant Officer gestured an OK to the MP's. The Second Lieutenant attempted to exit the helicopter but he was a basket case by now. When his feet hit the ground his legs just collapsed. The last we saw of him the MP's were dragging him to the jeep, one MP under each shoulder, his boots dragging through the dirt like broken landing gear.

This is a true story, I really could not make this kind of stuff up!