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RUMINATION ABOUT MY EXPERIENCES

For all of you military persons, remember that I am sharing this story with civilians, that is why I explain certain terms or describe things that you already know about. I had received a comment that I was treating you like you were not very bright. I have the utmost respect for all of my military friends and comrades, so just enjoy and it just might provide a little laughter.

On a morning during my tour in Vietnam I got out of my bunk feeling great. The weather had been very nice, the morning was calm and cool, not chilly and not clammy, just a nice feeling like a spring day, where you lay on the grass looking up at the sky and you are trying to see faces and animals in the outlines of the clouds. A time where the earth stands still, just for a little while. That was the feeling I had that particular morning.

I had flown to a South Korean firebase a few days before and I had traded my LRRP rations Pronounced (LURP) for some of the South Koreans LRRP rations. Their LRRP rations were hot and spicy. Oh, I forgot that not all of you, my readers, may know what LRRP rations are, and how they are made.

The LRRP ration was a freeze dried, vacuum packed individual meal ration that was packed in an 11 oz. (300 g) for those of you in Europe, waterproof aluminum foil gray-green canvas envelope. They were much better than C-Rations to me, and easier to carry.

I would usually take five or six of these packages of food with me for emergency rations. I would eat at fire bases if I was there during their mealtimes. If not, I would add water to one of the packages and put it in front of my pedals, no, it was not pedal powered, for all of you far thinkers. The chin bubble is what we call the area in front of the pedals. It is part of the Plexiglas windshield of the aircraft. The chin bubble gets very hot, even on cool days. On this particular day, I was going to be airborne for most of the day, and I would not be stopping anywhere I could bum a meal, so into the chin bubble went the LRRP ration with water, for cooking purposes this served as a great way to get my food warm and edible. A couple of hours of nice sunshine and I would have a very good reconstituted meal.

I got my chicken plate, oh yes, another explanation is due. Chicken plate is ceramic body armor that fits inside a vest and it protects the torso from small arms fire. If that is where the small arms hits. This ceramic plate is heavy and it usually rests on the hip bones. Ouch, but after a while, like two months of wearing it, there are calluses on your hipbones or you have figured another way to wear it without the constant rubbing, bouncing, shaking and in general, just annoying weight. Of course, it is better to have it than not.

Okay, back to the part that is interesting, at least to me.

I was to go to a firebase that was also an airfield that was used by C123's and C130's for re-supplying all of our ground forces. There I was to pick up the Battery commander for one of our

artillery units. He was to be flown to Phuc Vinh for a meeting on future operations in the northern part of the III Corp area.

I got ready to go and finally cranked up my helicopter and hovered out of the revetment and took off. The sky was exceptionally clear at Phuc Vinh that morning, and as I said, my mind was clear and my spirits were about as high as they could go, at least in that area of operations. I climbed to my cruising altitude, which was higher than most pilots flew on routine missions, because the air was so nice and I could see Nui Ba Ra and Nui Ba Din to the North and the Northwest. They are two mountains that we used for identification and for general navigation on long flights.

After having flown for about forty minutes, I saw a Chinook (CH-47) ahead of me. He was above me and as I listened to the FM radio for fire missions and the areas of fire, this Chinook was mentioned because they would be dropping tear gas canisters into designated areas.

Since I was ahead of time because the weather was so good and I did not have a northwesterly headwind, I was ahead of time for my pick-up. I decided to watch this operation because it was to take place within a few minutes. The back door was open and I could see the canisters in the Chinook that were to be dropped. I scooted up closer and got right behind the Chinook and noticed that the crew members were wearing gas masks and they were waving at me so I waved back.

All of a sudden I thought I had swallowed a grenade of tear gas. Next, my eyes were full of water and I was going blind. Before losing sight entirely I turned to the left to a heading about forty-five degrees away from the direction of the Chinook. I straightened the helicopter to a level attitude and by then I was totally blinded. I could only hold the helicopter in what I assumed was a straight and level attitude, and I was hoping that I would regain my breath and sight before crashing into the earth in a wreck of metal that would shed its sleek design and become a mass of parts and pieces flying all over the place, with me going for a ride that I was not ready to do.

After about a minute of this blind flying, really, it seemed like ten minutes, I could open my eyes enough to make sure I was not going to crash into anything or anyone. After about ten more minutes, I was breathing better and seeing again. I realized that what I had done was really stupid and the crew members were trying to wave me off, to keep something like this from happening.

The rest of the day was fine, I picked up the Battery commander and delivered him to headquarters and continued my forays into the wild blue wonder, with no more crazy acts on that day.

I finally got to eat my LRRP rations.

As a post script to this tale, which, by the way, is totally true, after returning from Vietnam, I was stationed in Wertheim, Germany. The 351st Aviation Company was my unit and we were all Vietnam veterans. One of the pilots, who had flown Chinooks, this Warrant Officer was telling this story at the officers' bar, about the time they had to drop tear gas canisters from their helicopter and this joker, flying an OH-6A, came up behind them after they had just started the release of their canisters. His crew waved the guy off and that was the last they saw of him.

After being embarrassed and feeling quite stupid all over again, I told him that that joker must have been me. We laughed until we had tear rolling down our faces and I said that I think I just got gassed again, because of the tears, and we started all over again. To this day, when I think of all of the dumb things I did and survived them all, I am honestly amazed.