



23 May 1969, Republic of South Vietnam
(22 May CONUS based upon the International Date Line)

50 years ago today I was a young Army Aviator/UH-1C gunship pilot, slightly over 5 months into my first tour in Vietnam. As I got up that morning I did not go to the mess hall and then out to the flight-line to preflight my aircraft. Instead, I rolled out of a hammock strung in a bunker that served as the TOC for A/2/12th Inf of the 25th Inf Div, and opened a C ration for breakfast. You might wonder why I was doing this and the answer is quite simple. I was assigned to the 116th Assault Helicopter Company (Hornets) and after serving my first 3 months in one of the lift platoons I was reassigned to the gunship platoon (Stingers) at my request. At that time the Army had no separate Aviation Branch for commissioned officers and each of us maintained a basic branch, which for me was Infantry. Since the Hornets habitually supported the Infantry units with air assault operations, which included flying gun cover during the operation, we had a policy that the Stinger platoon leader would be an Infantry qualified officer. Additionally it was policy, unwritten I am sure, that he would go out and spend some time attached to one of

our supported Infantry companies. At the time I was not the platoon leader but through normal rotation I was expected to fill that position later in my tour.

A week or so earlier I contacted the A Company CO (1LT Troy ???), and made arrangements to join him in the field for a week. Afterwards I went in to the Hornets CO, MAJ John Tragesser, in order to obtain his approval. He consented and, as was his style, he said “show them your tough, stay out there two weeks”, so orders were duly cut attaching me to A Company for two weeks and I joined them in the field at their laager site, a company set of sandbagged bunkers arranged in a circular pattern surrounding an area with the mortars, the TOC, aid station and feeding area. This was all enclosed with concertina wire, Claymore mines, flares and the other standard perimeter defense items.

Our daily routine was to form up and either air assault to a somewhat distant area to conduct ground operations, or more often we would form up and conduct ground operations in the local area. These consisted of searching for Viet Cong positions, indications of VC military operations during the past few days and general observation of the local villages, roads and infrastructure. As a rule we would also send one platoon out at dusk to conduct night ambush operations along suspected VC routes (this was my least favorite type of operation). Fortunately, this was the local dry season.

During the first week I accompanied the CO on all of the daily ops, which occurred with a minimum of enemy action. On one patrol a command detonated mine was fired, but it was set up parallel to our route of march and no one was injured. We immediately turned to our flank and assaulted into the wood line, but other than the blast area found no other indication of the enemy.

On another day, after having conducted our patrols we returned to the laager site and shortly thereafter were called out to support a combat engineer unit that was taking harassing fire from a tree line while they conducted engineer operations. As we approached the tree line we took fire, so we took cover behind the wall of a cemetery and Troy called in 81mm mortar fire on the tree line. We then began approaching the tree line and again took fire and repeated the process, this time calling in 4.2 inch mortars, with following iterations working up through 105mm howitzers, 155mm howitzers and finally an 8 inch howitzer. On our final approach to the tree line we received no fire and swept through the area with no further contact. An interesting aspect was that during our repeated periods of taking cover behind the low cemetery wall a small contingent of Vietnamese boys showed up on bicycles with insulated cans tied to the back filled with cold beer, sodas and ice pops. They first came up and “souvenir’red “ (e.g. gave) a soda to the CO and then proceeded up and down the line of troops selling their wares and carefully collecting the empty bottles (those that have been there understand this).

One evening during that week a Stinger gunship made a low pass over the laager site and dispatched a cardboard box attached to flare parachute and addressed to me, nicknamed “Roach” for my loathing of the huge cockroaches that were endemic to the area. The box was insulated with Styrofoam and contained a chilled bottle of Rufino Chianti. I offered some to Troy but, knowing better, he declined. I took one swig of it and being totally

dehydrated could barely get it down and then regretted it, although I did truly appreciate the thoughtfulness of my fellow Stingers.

The eighth day, the first day of my “show them your tough” week, started out normally and we went out on a local area patrol, moving in a staggered column of two’s with Troy, myself and the RTO in the center. At about 0930 we were moving through a series of dry rice paddies a little way from a local village in the vicinity of Dau Tiem. About half way through one of the paddies I scanned to the right and rear and observed what looked like a pile of rusty 50 cal/12.5 mm ammo. As I started to call out to Troy I noticed a cloud of black smoke and dirt where he was and then saw him fall forward. The next think I knew I was lying on my back looking up at the sky and wondering what the hell had happened, never having heard a sound. Very rapidly the medics were tending to us and the unit took up a hasty defensive perimeter. Luckily there were no VC in the area engaging us, and the medics could work quickly while the RTO called for a Dust Off. Apparently Troy had tripped a “booby trap” (an IED in today’s parlance) and thankfully it was a small one, probably a ChiCom grenade.

While we were both incapacitated neither of us were seriously wounded but were peppered with shell fragments mostly in our legs, and I had one that had hit and fractured my right collarbone, again, no serious damage. As I lay there looking up at the sky with the medics working on my wounds I didn’t really feel any pain, but I did have a sharp stinging/burning sensation in my right foot, much like when a fire cracker would go off in my hand as a kid. I also had a clear picture in my mind of a blown booby-trap that we had come across a few days earlier, along with the remains of a boot and some rotting flesh. It occurred to me then that it would be pretty hard to work the right pedal of a helicopter if I didn’t have a foot, but I was unable to sit up and judge for myself. I asked the medic who replied that it was bloody, but intact. That was a sure relief.

In short order the Dust Off bird arrived and we were loaded in on stretchers for the short flight back to the 12th Evac Hospital, which was adjacent to the Hornets’ area on the 25th Div base camp at Cu Chi. During the flight back I noticed that it was getting a little bit difficult to breath, but I attributed that to rush of air coming into the cabin (maybe they were flying out of trim trying to cool us down). When we landed at the 12th Evac helipad it was just like MASH, but with a Huey instead of an H-13. The orderlies came running out and took the stretchers into the triage area and set them on sawhorses. Seeing that neither of us had incurred serious damage, such as a missing limb or a head wound, the medics immediately began cutting off our field dressings and evaluating and treating the wounds while the attending surgeon stood back and looked on (in my mind I clearly remember him leaning against a low wall with somewhat long hair, wearing an OD Tee shirt and smoking a cigarette, but perhaps that is a false impression).

While the medics were at work there was an admin specialist standing at the head of the stretcher asking us our name rank and serial number, unit of assignment, etc. (just imagine Radar O’ Rielly). It was at that point that I realized that my difficulty in breathing was getting worse and I made that known as best I could. The surgeon immediately began barking orders and the medics cut off my jungle fatigue jacket and T-

ee shirt and low and behold a shell fragment had penetrated between two of my ribs and lodged itself in my left lung. There I was with the proverbial “sucking chest wound”, which we are all taught how to treat in basic training, and nobody, including myself, even knew I had it (go figure). The surgeon then swabbed me down with betadine, took a scalpel and made an incision above the entry wound and proceeded to insert a pointed edge plastic tube into me. Now that HURT, but they sealed the entry wound and hooked me up to a suction machine. I then began to breath life in instead of breathing it out. There was much more to follow that and it would be another 4 months before I climbed back into a cockpit again, this time at Ft Bragg, NC with the 6th Special Forces Grp.

Anyway, that’s my “day in history” 50 years ago, and as the saying goes, ”that’s my story and I’m stick’in to it”. Its been a great 18,263 days since then, but hey, who’s counting. Thanks for listening.