

“My Flight, Into the Twilight Zone”

By
Jim Eskildsen

October 3rd, 2005



“Introduction”

I will start by saying, that the story I am about to tell is a detailed account of an incredible experience that I lived to tell about, while serving as an Army helicopter pilot in Vietnam in 1968.

The irony is, I have never told the “detailed” account to anyone before, not even to my closest friends or even my three children; who are all, I am proud to say, currently serving our country. I have one son in the Marines, his fraternal twin brother in the Air Force and their sister currently at the Air Force Academy. It is mostly for them that I decided to write this story. I have to write it, because I don’t think I could tell it face to face to anyone. Not even to my children, not at the level of detail that I am about to reveal to you.

It was an awesomely powerful, emotional experience for me. Just making the decision to reveal it after 37 years has been an emotional struggle for me. Because to write it in the detail that I am about to, involves reliving the experience, in almost the same intensity as it happened, almost 37 years ago.

Earlier this spring when my Air Force Academy daughter was visiting on spring break, she was reading the book, “Gulliver’s Travels”. It was an English reading assignment. The purpose was to learn how the choice of words that the author used, evoked certain feelings in the mind of the reader. Nothing personal, but I thought “Gulliver’s Travels” seemed kind of boring as an example. I wondered if I could do better.

Ever since then, I have been nagged, in the back of my mind, with the idea; no, strongly compelled, to use this incredible experience of my past, to see if I could find the words to some how, describe it in a way that could evoke the emotions, the feelings, the incredible power of that experience, to my children. It is a lesson of life that should be passed on from a father to his children. But it is also a lesson for more than just them. It is a lesson and a message that I want to spread to more than just them. I am asking all who receive this to pass it on to others currently serving in the military, their families and loved ones, anyone you think that could use this message in their lives right now.

This story is an intimate and detailed account of a mission that I was on, as an Army helicopter pilot in Vietnam. I was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for what I did. As a pilot, this is the highest award you want to get. Those brave soldiers, who get any of the three medals above it, might not be alive when they get it.

It is a high intensity tale of great risk and of great courage. It is a tale of a real life miracle. It is a tale that some will say, “I should be a fantasy action adventure writer for Hollywood” and I could not blame them.

But I swear to you, everything I am about to tell you is the absolute truth! I will confess that after 37 years, the memories are starting to fade. I don't think I remember the names of my crew correctly, I remember faces. The right ones, I hope. I hope I have not confused them with the faces of other crew members that I flew with, the year I was "in country". I apologize in advance, just in case. It does not diminish their contribution to this event.

I do, still, clearly remember their words during this mission.

I am not sure what the radio call sign of the ground troops was. It has become lost, in the hundreds of call signs, of the ground troops I supported during the year I was there. Some of the details of names, coordinates, radio frequencies, etc. needed to tell my story, have come from my "artistic license". I will be stating distances in miles or yards instead of "clicks" because most people can visualize that better. Except for minor detail things like this, I will tell the story as honestly and as best as I remember it.

So before we begin, I ask that you pick a time and a quiet place, so that you can completely read what follows without interruption, without having to stop and come back to it. Your mission is to completely read it, in one sitting and I expect you to complete your mission.

So sit back, relax if you can, and get ready for a tale that you will struggle to believe, a tale that will, challenge and defy what you believe is possible, and what is impossible in this world we live in. Be prepared for a journey; a journey directly into the heart of the "Twilight Zone".

Chapter One “Prelude”

It had been a long, hot, stagnant, boring day. The kind of day you just wish you could escape from and find some cool place, a cool place that did not seem to exist. Our operational flight area was capped by a big temperature inversion layer, holding the heat in. You felt like you were being baked in a gigantic oven. Between the fires that the local farmers set to clear more farm land, and the fires started by our own artillery in the dry brush jungle, the smoke and haze made it look like a bad smog day in LA. You were lucky if you had three miles visibility. You could taste and smell the smoldering jungle. Your eyes burned from it. Even climbing to 3000 feet AGL (above ground level), our normal cruising altitude to effectively be out of range of small arms fire, there was no escape from the sweltering heat and smoke. It was like sitting around a campfire and being overdressed, and no matter where you sit, the smoke follows you. You just can't seem to get away from it.

The date was October 5th, 1968. The place, South Vietnam. I was an Army WO1 (warrant officer), the lowest ranking officer there is. More importantly, I was a helicopter pilot. I was almost halfway through my one year tour. And at the ripe old age of just barely a month past my 20th birthday, I was an experienced aircraft commander, having already logged over 600 hours of combat missions, flying Huey (UH-1) helicopters.

My crew and I had been flying “Ash and Trash” Missions all day long. “Ash and Trash” missions were odds and ends of short range, re-supply missions. We had been up since 4:30 AM to quickly dress, grab breakfast and get our gear to the helicopter. We did our preflight with a flashlight. Our take off was scheduled for the first hint of light in the eastern sky. I had a stack of 16 different mission sheets for the day, each with their own instructions, call signs, radio frequencies and coordinates. We would have to push hard, to get them all completed before dark at the end of the day.

We rarely flew night missions because of the much higher risk. You, of the younger generation, need to know that in 1968, aircrew did not have night vision goggles available. There were only these big heavy things for tanks and guard towers around large permanent base camps. A few snipers had some small ones, but nothing with a field of view suitable to try and fly with. Also, we did not have GPS. In fact, we had no electronic navigational aids at all, except for a few older helicopters that had an AM radio, and only if you were in the most southerly end of our operational area, you could pick up “Armed Forces Radio” out of Saigon; you could get a bearing to go to Saigon! Not much of a navigational aid. It was of much better use, just to have something in English on the radio to listen too.

How did we navigate then, you might ask? Well by “Dead Reckoning”, old time navigation. The way Lindbergh flew solo across the Atlantic. The way Amelia was lost in the Pacific. It has always made me feel a little strange to say “Dead

Reckoning”. I think it got that name because if you reckon wrong, you could be dead. For those non-pilots out there, “Dead Reckoning” is looking on a map to see where you are and where you want to go. You plot a heading and estimate the time it will take you to get there. You fly time and heading, and when the time runs out; you start looking around and hope you are somewhere close to where you wanted to be. Even scarier, we did not have the luxury to accurately plot the heading and distance. We had no information about winds, so no way to factor in wind drift corrections, or know an accurate ground speed. Quite frankly, we just looked at our maps and we “guessed”. We estimated a heading and counted grid squares. Or, we used our thumb and finger to measure a diagonal course. We counted on being lucky. So with visual reference to features on the ground, **our only way** of keeping track of our position, night time, was no time to be out flying around. Unless you really, really had to.

We had just taken off from Lai Khe. Just a few minutes out. We had completed our 16th and final re-supply mission of the day. We had not even stopped for lunch, my pilot and I, taking turns eating “C” rations from a case we kept under the back seat, while the other one flew. Most of our refueling sessions of the day, were done hot, with the engine and blades turning at ground idle speed to save time. The other pilot and I taking turns at the controls, so we each had a chance to go take a piss under the tail boom of the helicopter. We had only shut down a couple times that day, while waiting for supplies to show up to be loaded. We were tired and beat from the heat. The hot sun was just setting in the West. The smoke and haze of the long day, diffusing the sun into this blazing gigantic orange ball. Quite scenic, actually. I was making my normal check-in radio call to flight operations on the company UHF frequency.

“Bulldog Ops this is Bulldog 33, just off Lai Khe, enroute Phu Loi. Number 16, last mission complete.”

Bulldog was our company radio call sign and my personal call sign was Bulldog 33. Phu Loi was our home base location. Also say it, three, three, not thirty three.

“Bulldog 33, this is Ops, we have another mission for you.”

(In an irate voice.) “This is Bulldog 33, are you joking? We’ve been out all day. The sun’s going down. Can’t “night standby” take this one?”

We always had one ship and crew on “night standby”. Just in case something “came up”.

“Negative Bulldog 33. We have an **“Emergency Re-Supply Mission”** and you’re closest.”

In an instant, my attitude switched from the disgruntled, tired, over worked pilot, to deadly serious. Because I knew what those words meant. Only the most desperate of situations warranted and received the title of **“Emergency Re-**

Supply". This was no joke. All four of us, myself, my pilot, my crew chief and my door gunner; all of us knew from experience, that:

This would be no walk in the park.

We would soon be heading into danger, into harm's way.

We would soon be facing an almost certain risk of coming under hostile enemy fire.

We also already knew what the cargo would be. A maximum weight load that we could just barely get off the ground with. A load of ammunition and water. Both desperately needed by some ground unit.

Someone in trouble, somewhere, out there, in an endless jungle, that was rapidly descending into darkness.

"Bulldog Ops, this is Bulldog 33. Disregard my last transmission. What have you got?"

"Bulldog 33, return to Lai Khe and meet the Lieutenant at the Red Ball Pad."

The "Red Ball Pad" was a specific landing location at a base camp for transient helicopters to land at, for short periods of time, for loading and unloading people and cargo.

"This is Bulldog 33, returning to Lai Khe."

Chapter 2 "The Mission"

Upon landing at the Red Ball Pad at Lai Khe, I rolled the throttle off to ground idle and a Lieutenant, came up to my side of the helicopter and stood on the foot rest, that was on the tip of the skid that you use to climb into the pilot's seat. I leaned my head out the window, pulled my headset ear cuff off my ear so I could hear him, then keyed the intercom switch so the rest of the crew could hear through my microphone.

Twilight was quickly approaching, the sun now completely below the horizon. We listened to hear his words. Words that I still remember clearly, even though they were spoken, 37 years ago:

"We have a high risk mission, if you're willing to take it. We have a battalion out. About 13 miles west. They've been in a sporadic, heavy battle with a large V. C. force all afternoon. Most of our men are newbie's, in-country only a few weeks. This was supposed to be a safe area training mission. Their last contact with "Charlie" was 20 minutes ago. They have shared their remaining ammo and each man that can still fight **only has three rounds left!** We know the risk and this is not an order. You can turn it down and no one will think the less of you".

Wow,what are you supposed to say to that?

I immediately said: "We are wasting time. It is getting dark fast. If we don't go soon, it may be too dark to find them".

There was a great sense of urgency here. To be honest, I was more worried and concerned about the impending darkness than I was of "Charlie". I knew I would be unable to use my landing lights. To me, the risk of doing this in the dark was immensely greater than the risk of being shot at by "Charlie". You will find out why as the story progresses.

I decided that time was critical. We would go with the fuel we had. We were in good shape. We had almost 2 hours of fuel left. The Lieutenant waved to some men and trucks over on the road. They promptly came over and quickly, without a word spoken, started loading the ammo (in steel rectangular cans) and water (in these special long orange plastic tubes. A tough flexible plastic that could withstand being dropped through tree tops from 75 feet in the air).

I got the coordinates, radio frequency and call sign of our destination from the Lieutenant. Call sign, Badger 23 on FM 45.34, coordinates 9625, 6259. I found them on the map. Thirteen and a half miles almost due west, just like the Lieutenant said.

The loading was quickly completed. The Lieutenant climbed in with us. My pilot (Fred Peters, another warrant officer) was at the controls and with me handling the radio work;

we pulled pitch (added power) and headed straight west into the fading remnants of the day. Only a thin arc of retreating light on the horizon appeared in front of us. And to the East, behind us, the horizon was already black in full night, chasing us to our destination. We were flying at 80 knots (92 mph). We did not waste time climbing to our normal 3000 feet AGL altitude. We went to 1000 feet AGL only. We would arrive on scene in just under ten minutes.

During the next 10 minutes, while we are on our way to deliver the desperately needed ammo and water, many of you need to be educated about a few things, usually only known about by pilots. One is the dangers of night flying. All pilots are taught, from the earliest days of their training, about the danger and risk of flying at night. There is a significant risk of getting spatial disorientation or “Vertigo”. Because you are flying in three dimensions, instead of being in contact with the ground, the fluid in your inner ears can play tricks on you; make you think you’re moving in a direction that you are not. It is a hard sensation to overcome. Without a clear visual reference of the horizon, or the right instruments; more than a few have died. You are trained to ignore these sensations you are feeling and “trust your instruments”. The instruments do not lie to you. Your “seat of the pants” sensations will. This is hammered into your brain by every instructor you have.

Night Vision (not the goggles): Most people rarely experience true night vision. They never get far enough away from man made light at night. You can actually see reasonably well at night once your eyes adjust. True night vision takes about a half hour to fully develop and you must be completely away from any man made light. During the day, we only use a small percentage of the receptors in the back of our eye balls. The ones directly behind the lens are mostly for daylight and colors. There are many more receptors for darkness but they only pick up shades of grey. That’s why we don’t see colors at night. They are also off centerline in your eyes. There is actually a hole in the center of your “night vision” making it difficult to judge depth perception. Once your night vision has adjusted in, you can preserve it by red light or red lens goggles. It does not wreck your night vision. This is why all instrument panel lights on aircraft, are red colored, in case you ever wondered. Once your eyes have adjusted to night vision, bright white light will wreck it. As already mentioned, a downside with night vision is that it is very difficult to judge depth perception. Your pupils are wide open. Any knowledgeable photographer knows, when you open the aperture, you lose depth of field. You can see stuff, but it is hard to gauge how far away it is. It is even harder to judge your closure rate to the ground. Many have died at night, crashing into the ground at a high descent rate because they never saw it coming, or could not tell how fast they were descending. This is why they put very bright lights on airplanes and helicopters for landing at night, in case you ever wondered.

We also need to speak a little about the terrain we are approaching. The embattled battalion, we were racing to re-supply, was in an area we called “scrub brush jungle”. It was not as tall as the “triple canopy” jungle, in the mountains, farther

to the North. It was shorter, only 50 to 75 foot tall trees. However, it was equally as dense. Except for craters, blasted into the jungle by artillery or bombs, there were almost no natural clearings. Most of the missions we flew over this area necessitated hovering over the friendly position and dropping supplies down through the jungle canopy. Maybe, if you were lucky, you would catch a brief glimpse of a G.I. face looking up at you, as the massive downwash of air from the big Huey blades whipped the tree tops into frenzy.

Speaking of those big Huey blades, to use the words Huey helicopter and stealth together is a big oxymoron. A 1,400 shaft horse power turbine engine, spinning those big wide chord Huey main rotor blades, makes a sound you can hear from miles away. Long before you can spot a Huey in the sky as a tiny black speck, you hear it coming, pulsing, throbbing, and beating the air into submission, getting louder and louder, until you can start to feel the pulsing, thumping “whop, whop, whop”, and it just keeps getting louder and louder. It is a sound that brought hope and joy to our guys on the ground. We were their “Angels of Mercy”, their “ride” into and more importantly, their “ride” out of hell. I think they worshipped the ground we walked on. To the pilots and crew that flew them, this high decibel environment could make you deaf. Many of us came home with partial permanent hearing loss in some higher frequency ranges. If we did not wear really good ear plugs under the noise shielding ear cups in our helmet, we could go completely deaf. It was because we spent so many hours in this “loud” place. Those riding in the back, without a headset, could talk and hear each other, only if they yelled in each others ears. With our earplugs and helmets on, we pilots up front, could usually not hear someone trying to yell something to us. We had to have them relay it through the crew chief or door gunner, who had to lift the ear cup of his headset up to hear, then relay the message to us over the intercom. The reason I am telling you this is so you understand that, because of all this hearing “protection”, and the thundering noise from the Huey helicopter, we could only hear bullets coming our way if they actually hit the helicopter or only missed us by a few feet; five, maybe ten feet at the most. Anything farther away, although dangerously close, would not be heard and therefore, we could be totally unaware that we were being shot at.

Not only our own troops, but “Charlie” knew we were coming as well. There was no way to hide it.

Just one more thing, then back to the story. Helicopters are inherently unstable. To hover one has been compared to, trying to balance a BB on top of a bowling ball. If you get the chance to watch a good pilot hovering, look at his hands and feet especially, the right hand holding the cyclic stick. Even though the helicopter is apparently motionless over the ground, you will see the pilot making small, sometimes almost imperceptible movements of the controls. He is correcting for the instability of the helicopter. It takes more skill to hover and fly a helicopter than it does to fly an airplane. Some people can’t do it, no matter how hard they try. One more important thing, notice the pilot’s eyes. Where is he looking? His

gaze, his eyes, will be focused on some fixed visual reference nearby, usually in front. You do feel and sense the motion of the helicopter, “through the seat of your pants” and after a lot of hours and experience, (we used to call it, “growing roots out of your ass, into the helicopter seat”), you can sense a slight movement of the helicopter and make a control correction before most people even notice. But this only works if you have that fixed visual reference nearby, something to see, something to focus on, so you can maintain your spatial orientation. It is considered humanly impossible, to maintain control of a helicopter in a hover, without a fixed visual reference.

So now that you know about these things, you may start to understand the scope of the challenge and the risk ahead.

It is now twilight. I am told that at this latitude, twilight is significantly shorter than what we experience in the U.S.

Twilight, that time just a little before the full darkness of the night. You can still see a little, but colors are quickly fading into shades of gray. You squint and stare to try and see. We are still inbound at 1000 feet AGL. Below me, the tops of the trees are like a sea of black. Because of the smoke and haze, there is no clearly discernable horizon. There is a fuzzy band area that transitions from the blackness of the ground to something a little less black for the sky. The sky, well that was kind of fuzzy as well. There was no moon. Only a few of the brightest stars and planets were visible in the hazy sky above. I was flying over an almost solid sea of dark grays and black, with this very dark gray dome of a lamp shade over my head. I can see the general area we are looking for. There was a north-south running river with a smaller tributary running almost due east-west. Because the air was stagnant, the surface of the water was smooth like a mirror. In the last waning light, I can just barely distinguish the textural difference between the tree tops and the rivers. My destination was due northeast from the corner of the rivers, about two miles.

I dialed in the radio frequency for the ground troops, and then stepped on the intercom floor button.

“I’ll take it now, Fred.”

Fred responded with “you’ve got it”.

I responded back with, “I’ve got it”.

We always did this verbal, check and response routine when transferring who had control of the helicopter. We needed to make sure at least one of us was always on the controls. Remember the instability lecture?

Control of the helicopter, now in my hands, success of the mission, now in my hands. I gave my instructions to the crew.

My crew chief was Specialist John Wilson, a farm boy from the mid-west. My door gunner was Corporal Samuel (Samson) Jacobs. He was nicknamed "Samson" because of his huge muscular arms. He had been a star high school football player. He was African-American. Both of them had been drafted. I think Fred Peters, my pilot, had been drafted as well. I had joined voluntarily. I figured I would probably be drafted. If I was going to have to go to Vietnam, I wanted to go as a pilot. I wanted to fly jets, but with only a high school diploma, life as an Army helicopter pilot would be my destiny.

"OK guys, we are going in dark. Fred, turn off all the navigation lights and the rotating beacon. Dim the instrument panel lights way down, till we can just barely see them. We won't be using the landing lights on this one. We don't want to be an easy target for "Charlie", do we? Wilson, Samson, don't return fire unless we are taking hits. I don't want to reveal our position if we don't have too."

As you now know from your lesson about night vision, there was a very high risk of attempting to make an approach to a hover, in the near dark, over the tree tops, without using the landing lights. But the risk of being shot down by "Charlie" was high. "Charlie" was still in town. Turning on the landing lights to be able to see the tree tops, while flying low and slow over them, well that would be "just asking" to get your ass blasted out of the sky. Even the red light from the instrument panel, could light up our faces and make us detectable to "Charlie". The darkness was our only "cover". I would have to take the very dangerous risk of doing this on "human eyeball night vision" alone.

I selected the FM radio to transmit and keyed the mike switch. "Badger 23, Badger 23, this is Bulldog 33, inbound your location, request smoke".

Because of the almost continuous thick jungle canopy, it would have been impossible to spot them on the ground any other way. Using smoke was standard procedure.

(In a whispering voice, because they were trying to avoid being detected by "Charlie".)
"Bulldog 33, this is Badger 23, glad you're here, heard you inbound, popping green smoke."

We always did a smoke color confirmation with the guys on the ground. "Charlie" had been know to listen in on our frequencies, on captured radios, and would throw their own smoke, to try and get the helicopter pilot to land in the wrong location.

"Roger, understand green smoke, looking".

Normally this would be an easy thing. During daylight, this bright green smoke would have come wafting up through the jungle canopy to tell us the location of the LZ, or in this case, the spot to hover over the trees. But remember your lesson

on “night vision” and colors fading to grey? Now with the sun down and the air cooling a little; the extra moisture in the air near the tops of the trees, the extra moisture from the transpiration of the tree leaves during the day; had started to condense into a thin foggy sporadic cloud layer, just above the tree tops. It was nearly impossible to tell; what was smoke and what was fog?

I strained my eyes to try and pick out the green smoke, but only saw gray. I asked my crew, can anybody see it? They could not. I finally thought I saw a foggy patch that I thought looked a little green. I started a descent towards the blackness of the tree tops below. There was just barely enough of a hint of daylight left, just barely enough to make out the tops of the trees. The helicopter shuddered, as I brought it to a hover about 3 feet above the tree tops. A quick glance at the power gauge, 99%!!!!

The heavy load of ammo and water was almost too heavy. I was so heavily loaded that I barely had enough power to maintain hover. We had gotten off the ground OK back at Lai Khe, but you don’t get much of a ground cushion over tree tops, not like you do over solid ground. The downwash just passes through the leaves.

I called on the radio, “Badger 23, this is Bulldog 33, am I over your position?”

“Negative Bulldog, negative, you are not over us! I say again, not over us.”

Holy crap, I was in the wrong place, I could be right over “Charlie’s” head instead.

“Can you give me a reference, where am I in relation to you”

“Negative Bulldog, negative, your sound is too loud and it bounces funny down here in the trees, we can’t tell the direction, we can’t be sure, sorry Bulldog.”

I keyed the intercom to my crew and said “I don’t think we should stay here. Not daring to pull more pitch, I ever so slowly nudged the helicopter forward to gain air speed.

At about 15 knots, a helicopter goes through what they call translational lift. You get extra lift because the air flow changes how it flows through the rotor blades). When you are very heavily loaded, you have to move horizontally first to get air speed before you would be able to climb. However, when you start moving forward, you start to slide off your “air cushion”. If you don’t have the power to pull more pitch, then you start descending until the helicopter shudders through translational lift and starts to climb. Many times, I have literally bounced and skipped a big overloaded Huey down the runway, to get it into the air. In this case, the bottom of the Huey and the skids, scraped though the tops of the trees.

I shuddered through translational lift and climbed back up and circled the area, I called back in on the radio.

“Badger 23, this is Bulldog, do you have yellow smoke?”

“Standby Bulldog” (a short pause) “Affirmative Bulldog, we have yellow smoke”.

“Pop it”.

I thought the yellow might be easier to pick out in the rapidly increasing darkness below.

Looking, looking, there was no strong visual on any thing yellow. I made a guess and, once again, descended towards the jungle below. It was now a little darker. On short final I realized, I was coming in a little too hot. I started pulling pitch, too much!!!! I started losing rotor RPM!!!! I had to bump the pitch back down. My butt hole puckered up. For a moment, I thought we were going to crash into the tree tops. Then, slowly, in the blackness, we shuddered to a stop in a small foggy depression in the tops of the trees. In fact, the skids and the belly of the Huey were down in those tree tops and the rotor blades were doing some small branch trimming around us. If it had not been for this small local area, that gave us a few extra feet to stop our descent; you would not be reading this story right now. I had just enough power, to gently lift us out of the tree tops. I made the radio call.

“Badger 23, Badger 23, am I over your position?”

“Negative Bulldog, negative, you are not over our position.”

Damn it, am I ever going to find these guys? Again I gently nudged the Huey forward, dragging the belly through the tree tops to get translational lift and climb back up to circle the area again.

“Badger 23, this is Bulldog 33, lets try another smoke, what have you got?”

“Bulldog 33, we have a red smoke, I say again, red smoke.”

Red was normally reserved for marking “Charlie’s” position, but maybe I could see it.

“Pop it”

“Roger Bulldog, popping red smoke.” (There was a short pause) “Bulldog, this is our last smoke!!!!”

Holy crap, not to put the pressure on or anything. I had already failed to find these guys twice. It was getting darker and darker by the second. This was my last chance!!!!

I circled over head, straining my eyes, staring, desperately trying against the odds, to see something, something red. Then finally, a foggy looking patch that looked just a little red. I headed down, lower, lower, being more careful and delicate with my approach this time. The helicopter safely shuddered to a stop just above the tree tops. Before I could key the mike to ask the radio crackled on.

(An excited voice, now yelling over the radio.) “Bulldog, Bulldog, you are over our position, you are over our position.”

It’s kind of hard to put into words what it felt like to hear those words. To finally have found them, after two failed attempts. One of which, almost cost us our lives. I will just say that it felt pretty damn good. But I could not focus on that feeling. The mission was still not completed.

Another good piece of luck had appeared. With each minute, no, with each second, the sky was getting darker and darker. Now, I could only, just barely, think I could maybe see the horizon; more accurately, that fuzzy hazy excuse for a horizon. How could I possibly maintain a steady hover, without that “fixed visual reference” you learned about?

And there, close in front of me was the stubby remains of a long dead, tree. A tree that had been taller than those around it. Remnants of its broken branches had been bleached white by the sun. In the almost complete blackness, they provided an image, a ghostly image to be sure, but it was a “fixed” ghostly image. Something I could fix my gaze on, so I could maintain my hover position.

Wilson, my crew chief, was now leaning his head out the side of the helicopter, trying to spot the guys on the ground. In the darkness, there was no way to see them directly, especially through the thick jungle canopy below us. The guys on the ground were now using a standard Army issue, angle head flashlight, with the “dark red” lens, to mark their exact location.

I need to take a minute to talk about this flashlight. Standard two “D” cells, but they had not invented alkaline “Energizer Bunny” batteries yet, so these were old style carbon zinc batteries (not as strong). The bulb was just an old style tungsten wire filament in a vacuum bulb. No halogen bulbs yet. Also remember that these guys are trying real hard not to reveal their position, to “Charlie”. Shining a bright white light up into the trees, would have reflected off the bottom side of the leaves and in the otherwise complete darkness, it would have been like a beacon, a bright search light revealing their position, and our position, to “Charlie”. So they had the “dark red” lens cover installed to minimize the risk.

I have to tell you about the “dark red” lens cover. The purpose of the “dark red” lens cover was to filter and block about 98% of the light that comes out of the flashlight, and with a red color to protect night vision. Its purpose is to provide just barely enough red light, at night, so that you can read a map about a foot in

front of your face, and only enough light to read a map a foot in front of your face. I can still remember back in basic, when we were getting our “training” about that flashlight. I put the “dark red” lens up to my eye like a monocle, and I could not see through it at all. I looked directly at the sun with it, and barely saw a red dot. The lens was so dark that you could safely look at an eclipse with it. It was like an arc welder’s protective dark lenses. The light you get when it’s installed on the flashlight? Well, let’s just say that a small night light, like you might use in a young child’s room or in the bathroom of your house, well, that could easily be 100 times brighter than this flashlight with the “dark red” lens. But if the guys on the ground, aimed it directly at you, so you had absolute, direct line of sight; and if it was completely dark, and if this was the only light around, and if you had good eyes, then maybe, you might just barely make out a dim red dot, if you weren’t too far away.

So somewhere, about 75 feet below us, under an almost solid canopy cover of leaves, was this dim little dot of red light. Wilson finally started getting intermittent glimpses of it as the tree tops were getting whipped around by the massive downwash of the Huey rotor blades. As I fixed my gaze onto the ghostly white remnants of the long dead tree, my “fixed visual reference”; Wilson gave me verbal commands over the intercom to adjust my hover position, to maneuver us directly over the beleaguered men below. There was no opening at all in the tree tops below us. The men below us were in a small clearing, but the tops of the trees around the clearing, completely covered it. With Wilson as my eyes, I was finally in position.

“Badger 23, this is Bulldog 33. We are in position and ready to drop supplies. Advise when clear.” (Dropping ammo cans on someone’s head from 75 feet would kill them). There was a short pause. “Bulldog 33, this is Badger 23, you are clear to drop, I say again, clear to drop.”

Wilson, Samson, the Lieutenant, all started tossing the heavy load of ammo and water out both sides of the helicopter. Over the intercom, I told my crew to also off load all the smoke grenades we had on board. The men below would need them in the morning. I then called Badger 23 to let him know we were sending down smoke grenades as well.

I patiently held position with my ghostly white friend in front of me. I could feel the Huey rock a little from side to side and start to lift up as the heavy load was removed from the floor of my helicopter and sent crashing through the tree tops below. I was now, thankfully, able to reduce the power setting from maximum.

Suddenly, out in front of me, I saw bright white orange stroboscopic flashes, from three different locations; muzzle flashes. I had not heard any bullets go by. I remarked over the intercom. “Did you see that? I wonder if it’s our guys. I better call them.” Before I could transmit, the radio crackled on.

(An excited voice.) “Bulldog, Bulldog, are you receiving fire, are you receiving fire?”

“Well I was just going to ask if it was you.”

“It’s not us, it’s not us, we have not fired!”

“Well then I guess it’s the bad guys, I saw three locations, south, south/southeast and southeast of your position. I estimate about 100 yards out!”

“Thanks Bulldog, thanks.”

My decision to take the risk, and come in dark, without using the landing lights had been the right one. “Charlie” had just sent a hail of bullets, heading my way. But in the darkness, they could only aim at the sound. “Charlie missed”. The disturbing fact was that he was only 100 yards away, the length of a football field! I should also point out, that despite just being shot at, I still calmly held my hover position because my crew and the Lieutenant were still pitching supplies out of the back of the helicopter. Neither Wilson, nor Samson was manning their M-60 machine guns!

Finally the intercom crackled on with Wilson saying. “That’s it sir, we’re empty.”

I quickly pressed the transmit button. “Badger 23, this is Bulldog 33, we’re empty, heading out. Good luck Badger.”

“Thanks Bulldog, Thanks.”

I pulled pitch and climbed into the night sky, mission completed. I headed back to Lai Khe to drop off the Lieutenant so we could finally head back to home base for the night.

Wow! We had been so incredibly lucky! This had been the toughest mission I had ever done.

We landed at the Red Ball Pad and shut down the helicopter to check it over. Everything looked OK. My crew and I, and the Lieutenant, were standing around chatting about our recent adventure. I found out that, although I had not heard the bullets go by, the Lieutenant had. Remember, he did not have ear plugs, a headset and a helmet on. He had heard the bullets whiz by, close by. Then my heart skipped a beat when he said:

“Yes, I heard the bullets go by. They sounded awful close to me. Did you see the RPG rounds go by?”

(With a little shock in my voice.) “No, I did not!”

Samson: “I saw them sir. They missed us by about 3 feet. They came from the side; I guess you were looking out the front.”

Me: “Well I guess we were luckier than I first thought.”

We started shaking hands with each other, admitting to each other how lucky we felt. We congratulated each other on our success. Each of us, inside, to ourselves, was feeling very proud of what we accomplished, but not saying it out loud. Nobody was bragging, we were just glad to still be alive.

Me: "Well gentlemen, it has been a long day; I'm ready to go home." They agreed.

I was just climbing up into my seat, when a jeep pulled up on the road about 20 yards away, with a different Lieutenant. Our Lieutenant walked over to the jeep to converse. Then he started slowly walking back towards me. I wondered what was up. I climbed back out of the Huey and met him halfway. He had a strange look on his face. I listened to hear his words. Words that I still remember clearly, even though they were spoken, 37 years ago:

"The guys on the ground called in. They have two men critically wounded. They don't think they will make it through the night. The medics think that if they can get some whole blood and surgical instruments, that they might be able to keep them alive until the morning. (His voice started to tremble) I....I....God I don't feel right about asking this, hell I was just out there with you, I know what it was like, but....but.... I have been instructed to ask..... Will.....will..... You try? Will....will you take it?"

I paused for a moment, and said: "Let's find out".

We walked back to the helicopter. I relayed what the Lieutenant had told me, to my crew. There were very somber looks on all their faces. Then I said:

"Men, I am the aircraft commander and I could decide to take this mission. I could "order it" and that would be it. But this is one mission I won't, I can't, order you to do. I would not feel right about it. You know the situation out there. You know the risk, as well as I do. The odds are against us, but I'd like to give it a try."

With no pause, no second thoughts, I quickly heard three voices: "Let's go!"; "I'm in!"; "What are we waiting for?"

I don't think there are words that can fully describe the power of that moment. Here we were. Five, normally sane men; all of us, instantly willing to risk our lives, for two others.

Two men we did not know, two faces never seen. We knew neither their religion nor the color of their skin. We knew only that they were two "comrades in arms" in desperate need. Two "comrades in arms" mortally wounded, in pain, dying in the dark, hot, stagnant jungle.

Well, with an obvious "Yes" to his question, our Lieutenant waved to the other Lieutenant, who instantly sped off in his jeep to get the package ready.

I know I told you at first that I wanted you to read this all the way straight through, in one sitting. But maybe you should take a little break right now. I think you're going to need it. The mission we had just flown, had been the most dangerous and most risky mission I had yet flown, in over 600 hours of flying in Vietnam. It was a miracle that I pulled it off. Something I never told my crew back then. I knew in my own mind that the odds of even finding "Badger 23" again were huge, absolutely huge. Quite frankly, I did not think that we would find them again. But I was absolutely going to try. I will also tell you that the mission I had just completed, that "most dangerous and risky mission I had yet flown".

Well, it didn't hold first place for very long. The danger and risk of that just completed mission, would pale to insignificance compared to what lay ahead. So, if you want, take a little break and come right back.

Chapter Three
 “The Next Mission”

My crew and I, with the same Lieutenant that had gone with us the first time, climbed into our Huey. I instructed Fred to start the engine and hover over to the side of the Red Ball Pad to top off with fuel (There were refueling bladders there). I wanted full fuel this time. We could be out there looking, for a long time. Just as Wilson had finished refueling us, the jeep with the other Lieutenant reappeared, with a cardboard box about 2 feet by 2 feet by 2 feet (a cube). It had been heavily wrapped in green army duct tape. Inside were four pints of whole blood, packed in padding and ice, and the surgical instruments the medics needed. It also came with its own, pre-tied heavy green army rope about 100 feet long. The same stuff the Special Forces guys would use to rappel down from a hovering helicopter. Same as before, I had Fred fly the Huey, while I did the radio work. After getting clearance from the tower, I called Lai Khe Artie (Artie being short for artillery).

To avoid being blasted out of the sky by our own artillery, we always called a “control center” providing them with our current location and destination. They would plot our path on a big map board and inform us if there was any artillery that could affect us. I had done this during the first mission as well. I am just now telling you about it. Also you should know, the entire crew hears everything over the radio the same as I do. We all “listen in” for situational awareness.

“Lai Khe Artie, this is Bulldog 33, Lai Khe to 9625, 6259, over.”

“Standby Bulldog 33.....Bulldog 33, be advised that we are currently shooting harassment and interdiction fire, in a full circle, as close as 300 to 400 yards around that location. Travel in that area highly unadvised, I say again, highly unadvised.”

I thought for a moment.

“Lai Khe Artie, this is Bulldog 33. I have urgent medical supplies for that location. Can you leave me an opening?”

(In the kind of voice you might use if an insane person, just talked to you.) “Bulldog 33, standby”.

Anybody who has had the opportunity to be within 300-400 yards of a 155 millimeter HE (high explosive) artillery round when it hits the ground and detonates will immediately realize the insanity of what I was planning to do. “Harassment and Interdiction fire” meant that they were shooting random time and location shots. The time between shots could vary from two shots almost simultaneously to up to 8-10 seconds apart. The location around the “circle” could vary from two rounds, almost on top of each other, to the complete other side of the circle. The idea of course, to keep “Charlie” guessing on the direction and

distance from which he was being attacked. If we were lucky, maybe there would be a few less “Charlie’s” around to attack the guys on the ground.

“Bulldog 33, this is Lai Khe Artie, request approved. We will leave the north side open; I say again, the north side open. Stay south of the crossroads, I say again, stay south of the crossroads to avoid outgoing trajectory”

“This is Bulldog 33, understand north opening and south of the cross roads. Thanks for the help” (The cross roads, a known ground check point.)

(In the voice that you might use, if you knew it would be the last time you spoke to that person.) “Good luck Bulldog.”

As Fred pulled pitch, we once again headed west. Into the now completely full dark, moonless, hazy night sky, we could see and hear and feel the concussions of the muzzle blasts from the 155 mm battery just off to our right side, near the perimeter of the base camp. Brilliant orange white flashes from the muzzle positions of the cannons that were pointing the way. We were literally following the shells blasting out of the barrels, to their destination. Well, the biggest problem I thought I was going to have, finding the general area where our beleaguered battalion was, well, that had already been solved for me. Their location would be right smack in the middle of impacting, high explosive, artillery rounds.

As we once again take that, just under ten minute flight, out to “Badger 23”. It is time for your next lesson. We are going to learn about 155 millimeter (6.1 inch diameter) HE (high explosive) artillery rounds, as used in 1968. The shells were most likely M101 shells. They weighed almost 100 pounds each, most of which was steel. They held about 15 pounds of TNT or Composition “B” (a mix of TNT and RDX). They left the barrel at 2,800 fps (feet per second), or 1,909 miles per hour, or Mach 2.58!!!! They had a maximum range of 25,715 yards or about 14.6 miles. Because of the heavy thick steel casing that contains the pressure of the explosion until the case ruptures, the force of the concussion wave that emanates from the blast at the speed of sound is equivalent to detonating about 200 pounds of dynamite sitting on the surface of the ground!!!! When the shells impact, they will leave a crater 6-8 feet deep and 20 feet across. Most people could not see out of the crater, if you were standing in the bottom of it. Most small cars would disappear into the hole if you put one in it. And what of all the dirt and rocks and trees that used to inhabit that crater? Well, they have all been ejected, many hundreds of feet into the air by the violent explosion, and are re-deposited 200, 300, up to 400 yards away, sometimes even farther. Big heavy stuff falls closer while the small lighter weight stuff goes farther away. Also, when the case fragments, it sends over a thousand “wasps” (shrapnel pieces) flying through the air at Mach 1+. “Base plates”, a part of the shell that does not fragment, are about 5.5 inches in diameter and are 2 inches thick. They have been found as far as a mile away, having made a supersonic flight to get there. During the day time, at a

safer distance than I was about to be, I have seen entire trees tumbling end over end, up into the air in the midst of a big, dirt and smoke cloud.

We are approaching our destination, about 1000 feet AGL. As I watched the 10,000,000 (that's right 10 million) candle power flashes from the random impacting artillery rounds. I started to form a picture in my mind of their locations. The flashes made a horseshoe looking shape with an opening to the North. I did the usual, I've got it, you've got it, routine with Fred, as I took over control of the helicopter. I flew to the west to be beyond the trajectory path of the artillery coming out of Lai Khe. I then circled around to position myself north of the opening. I gave the same instructions to Fred about turning off all the lights, but this time, I also had him completely turn off the instrument lights as well. It was so dark out, that even the dimmest setting of the instrument lights would be enough to light up our faces, making us a target for "Charlie".

Some of you, my better students, have already done the math and are saying: "Wait a minute, didn't you tell me that the artillery was 300 yards away from the guys on the ground. And the debris from the impacting artillery shells could go 400 yards or farther from the explosion? Yes I did. I would be flying well within the debris field of the explosions. You might also remember the lecture about night flying and vertigo and how you have to trust your instruments. But I just told you, I turned the instrument lights completely off. How could I see them? I could not. I would have no idea what my heading was or what my altitude was. I would not be able to tell what my airspeed was. I would have no "artificial horizon" instrument to tell me if I was keeping the helicopter level, if I could not see some fixed visual reference on the ground. I would be flying by the "seat of my pants" with nothing more than my eye balls and my courage. Do you remember what the guys on the ground had to signal me with? That angle head flashlight with the "dark red" lens, and remember, they are under an almost solid jungle canopy of tree leaves! Would you care to try and estimate the odds against me?

I made the radio call.

"Badger 23, Badger 23, this is Bulldog 33, inbound your location, request light signal."

"Rodger Bulldog, we are starting signal now."

I dropped pitch to descend lower so I could be underneath the trajectories of artillery shells that were impacting on the west side of the "horseshoe". My plan was to come in low and slow through the north opening. Once inside I would circle slowly around in the middle to east side, of the impacting artillery rounds at about 300 to 600 feet AGL (with no way to know), and try to spot that dim little red dot, through an almost solid canopy of trees. If I was in the exact middle, the artillery rounds would be passing over at 900 feet AGL, theoretically.

I was getting buffeted by the shock waves of the nearby explosions, while still “outside” the horse shoe. As I entered the mouth of the dragon and got closer to the impacting artillery shells, mule kicks would be a better description.

We need to talk a little about the accuracy of artillery in 1968. It was pretty good, but first, the guys on the ground did not have GPS so the coordinates they gave for their position, were an estimate, a guess, especially when you’re in the jungle. Second, they had most likely, adjusted the position of the impacting rounds themselves, by counting the seconds between the flash (speed of light) and the boom (speed of sound) and/or the size of the pieces of debris that was falling on them through the tree tops above. Have you ever counted seconds between lightning and thunder to estimate how far away it was? Thirdly, this was not the age of precision guided weapons. A second shell fired from the same cannon with the same settings would not hit in the same crater. It could easily be 25 yards or more away from the first one. What this all means is: Remember that 300 yard number the guy at “Lai Khe Artie” told me, about how close the shells were impacting; well don’t count on it. It could be closer. As much as 50 to 75 yards closer!!!!

Try to remember some airline flight you were on that had the worst turbulence you ever experienced. The kind of turbulence, that if you did not have your seat belt on, you would bang your head on the ceiling, hard, very hard. Have you ever been driving down a rain slick road, at night, in the middle of a really bad storm and not seen, then hit a really big pot hole in the road? So big that, it sends you careening towards the side of the road, so violently, that you have to jerk the steering wheel to stay on the road; and you just know it is going to cost you big money at the alignment shop? Have you ever taken a ride on one of those “hurricane hunter” planes? Well, if you have, then you have some idea of the ride that I was now getting. I guessed an airspeed to fly, I guessed an altitude, that I hoped would keep me under the trajectories of the artillery shells arcing down over my head. I was in a three dimensional “arena of chaos”. The shells were falling in at something close to a 45 degree angle, because they were just under maximum range from Lai Khe. My natural night vision was already fried from the brilliant bright flashes from the explosions. To my eyes, the only difference, between the black of the tree tops below and the black sky above, was the absolute minimum that your eyes can even tell, that there is a difference. However, for a fraction of a second, those brilliant bright flashes did, “light up” the area. I started a slow circle in an area that I thought was the center to the east side of the impacting explosions. Remember, these shells were random in location and in time to confuse “Charlie”. Well, it was confusing for me as well. But because I was in the air, I had a little bit of a “big picture” view. I just had to try and remember the approximate locations over a period of time. I peered down into the center, or what I thought was the center of this random, intermittent, series of blinding white flashes and mule kick shock waves. I was trying desperately, to see that nothing dim little red spot, through a nearly impenetrable canopy of tree leaves. After several minutes of boating around, getting my butt kicked from all directions, I gave up looking, and started an approach down to the approximate center of the “flash pattern” burned into my mind, like some kind of natural, inertial navigation system. I had not been able to find the red

dot. I was just going to hope, that I got lucky; very lucky, just like the last time, when we brought the ammo and water. With the help from flashes from the sides or behind me, flashes, outside of my peripheral vision, I slowly continued my approach to a safe hover about 3 feet over the tree tops. I called on the radio.

“Badger 23, Badger 23, this is Bulldog 33, are we over your position, I say again, are we over your position?”

“Negative Bulldog, negative, you are not over our position.”

Didn't we already do this?

I again pulled pitch to climb back up and circle in the “arena of chaos”. Looking, looking, looking, then I thought I saw a red blink, I say blink because if I had blinked my eyes at that moment, I would have missed it. It was not much, but I went for it. Once again I started a dangerous approach, into the blackness below. Once again, I somehow managed to safely bring the big Huey to a shuddering stop over the tree tops. Once again, I made the radio call.

“Badger 23, Badger 23, this is Bulldog 33, are we over your position, I say again, are we over your position?”

“Negative Bulldog, negative, you are not over our position.”

Didn't we already do this?

Once again, I pulled pitch to climb back up and circle in the “arena of chaos”. Looking, looking, looking, not finding what I wanted to see.

Let's talk about the “arena of chaos” for a little while. I have given you all the hints, but have you connected the dots? Have you ever been outside at night, or in a dark restaurant or bar and somebody takes a flash photo, right in front of your face? You're blinded right? Everyone in the photo groans, you have this residual fading burnt image of the flash in your eyes, then almost total blackness as your pupils slam closed. Then for several seconds, you are almost completely blinded and ever so slowly, your pupils dilate and you gradually start to be able to barely see things again. Well remember, every two to eight seconds and a few hundred yards away, I was getting “flashed” with 10 million candle power flashes, every two to eight seconds, I was getting hammered by massive mule kick shock waves, so powerful that my shoulders were getting slammed into the sides of the armor plate seat and I had bruises the next morning. In the darkness all around me, rocks, dirt, and tree pieces were falling down from above me. You could hear “whacks and thumps” as pieces of debris from the explosion, hit the top of the Huey, having fallen through the spinning rotor blades. We are talking rocks and tree pieces big enough to have taken us out of the sky, had they hit a critical component of the main rotors, tail rotor or control system. Every two to eight

seconds from a few hundred yards away, thousands of pieces of shrapnel were sent flying through the air.

Have you ever been out in a car, in a hail storm? Hearing a wave of pelting taps as the hail stones hit and bounced off the sheet metal of the car? Well, now you know what it sounds like, getting pelted with spent shrapnel fragments. I even heard and felt some bounce off of my helmet, having come sideways through the open window beside me. Wilson found shrapnel fragments inside the helicopter, the next day.

We could easily hear (even with ear plugs and helmet), the artillery shells going over our heads, some times very close, sometimes very, very close. If you have ever heard it in real life, close up, it is a sound you will never forget. A buffeting rocket kind of noise, a rapid (whoosh, whoosh, whoosh) as it rockets by.

I have given you the comparison to the force of the explosions, to 200 lbs of dynamite! That sounds like a lot, but for a lot of you, you have no reference point. Let me give you one. Most of you have been to a fireworks show, or sports event, where they shot off, what I call aerial flash bangs. You know, the ones that make the big white flash that lights up everything around you, then a couple seconds later, the big ka-boom. You feel the concussion wave. The babies and little kids start crying and the car alarms start beeping. I have been told by an expert in this field, that those “fireworks” flash bang charges are comparable to the “flash bang” stun grenades used by law enforcement swat teams and the military. My “expert” did a sound pressure calculation, with decibels, between the “flash bang” explosive charge and the 155 mm HE artillery round. The intensity of the concussion wave, the sound pressure wave, that I was getting hit with, came from a blast **3,000 times more powerful** than the fireworks explosion that you know about, that you have felt!

And here I am, flying around smack dab in the middle of all of it. Without instruments, in a pitch black night punctuated by brilliant blinding flashes, getting mule kicked, flying on pure instinct alone, with nothing to help me, no one to help me, except God. So when I write, “arena of chaos”, I want you to see the blinding flashes, I want you to hear the ka-boom, I want you to feel the huge concussion wave, I want you to hear the debris, whacking and thumping on top of the Huey, I want you to hear the pelting “hail storm” of shrapnel, every 2 to 8 seconds.

Finally, again, I thought I saw a glimpse of red and headed down towards the blackness of the tree tops, guessing at the location. I shuddered to a hover over the blackness below. The radio crackled on.

“Bulldog, Bulldog, hold position, I say again, hold position, you’re close, you’re close, move 25 yards west, repeat, move 25 yards west.”

Finally!!! Great elation for a moment then back to business.

“Badger 23, this is Bulldog 33, good to see you again, you guys picked a hell of a hiding place. We have a package for you. I am moving west; call when I am in position, over.”

“Will do, Bulldog, thanks, you are coming into position now.”

On the intercom, Wilson says: “I see the light, I see the light. Keep it coming, stop, move forward, forward, stop. Hold it steady here Mr. E.”

I need to explain “Mr. E”. Warrant Officers are addressed as Mister and with a last name like Eskildsen, well, it was my farm boy crew chief that started it, because he had trouble pronouncing it, and the next thing you know, all the enlisted crew and the other officers and pilots, all called me Mr. E. It had been this way for a while. I allowed it, but make no mistake; it was anything but a label of disrespect. Quite the opposite, as a matter of fact.

The other thing, “Hold it steady here Mr. E”!!!! Well that was going to be easier said than done. Not by a long shot. I was hovering at the intersection of Central and Main in the “arena of chaos”, in downtown hell. Remember what you learned about hovering a helicopter? The fixed visual reference? I had none. Only when the flash from an explosion was behind me or on the side, then, only for a moment, I could see my old friend the ghost tree, there in front of me, a brief reference, but then quickly gone. And if a shell exploded in front of me, in my field of vision, well then I was completely blinded, nothing but complete and total blackness. I hovered there, completely by instinct, by the seat of my pants, the complete opposite of what I had been trained to do; and in that blackness, I waited for the inevitable mule kick concussion wave to hit me while I was still completely blinded, I had to instinctively make a control correction, a guess, then I waited for the next flash, to see if my friend the ghost tree was still in place, or would I hear the sound, and feel the helicopter, crashing into the trees, a few feet below. And also remember there are still the “whacks and bumps” of debris hitting the top of the Huey! And the occasional “hail storm” of shrapnel!

So all I have to do is “Hold it steady” while the Lieutenant, Wilson and Samson, delicately lower the life saving package of supplies, by rope, through the tops of the trees, to the troops below. Piece of cake, right? It is hard to imagine anything more impossible, but you will, before this story is over.

I wiggled my butt to get it settled in the seat and fixed my gaze out in front, at my friend the ghost tree, or where I last saw it. Wilson was sitting on the floor of the Huey, just in front of the row of bench seats that go left to right across the helicopter, with his legs dangling over the side, the rope in his hands and down over the skid below his feet. Samson was holding on to Wilson’s belt with two hands, sitting on the floor behind him. The Lieutenant was standing up behind them, feeding the rope over. They were all crowded together within three feet of the edge. Samson had one of his legs, wedged into

the gun mount somehow. None of them were wearing a safety harness, “We did not have any”. I called on the radio:

“Badger 23, standby, package coming down now.”

What follows is the intercom communication between Wilson looking over the side and me looking out the front, trying to maintain a steady hover.

“OK Mr. E, hold steady, we’re lowering now.”

(Flash, Ka-Boom, Mule Kick)

“You’re drifting, go left, go left, stop, go back, stop, hold”

(Flash, Ka-Boom, Mule Kick)

“You’re drifting, go right, go right, go right, stop, go forward, go forward, stop.”

(Flash, Ka-Boom, Mule Kick)

“You’re drifting, go back, go back, stop, go right, stop.

This isn’t working Mr. E. Every time a shock wave hits, we drift off position and the package keeps swinging around on the end of the rope.”

“I know, I’m doing the best I can, next time we get in position, try dropping the package faster, maybe we can get it in there between explosions.”

“OK Mr. E.”

“Move back a little stop, there,”

(Flash, Ka-Boom, Mule Kick)

After a moment I heard, not through the intercom, but being yelled: “Damn it, it’s stuck!!!!”

On the intercom:

“What happened?”

“It’s stuck in the top of the trees, I can’t get it lose”

“Well try again.”

As I desperately struggled to maintain position and hover, Wilson, Samson and the Lieutenant were all pulling and yanking on the rope, in a desperate tug of war. I could feel the big Huey, rocking and tipping to the side as they pulled with all their might. And as this was going on, throw in about 3 more (**Flash, Ka-Boom, Mule Kick**)'s.

In a dejected voice:

"It's no use Mr. E, we can't budge it, I'm sorry"

"Don't blame yourself Wilson. I couldn't hold the ship steady, it's my fault."

And as I clicked the transmit button, my heart heavy, I was feeling like I had just condemned two men to death, myself:

"Badger 23, this is Bulldog 33, the package is stuck in the trees, we can't get it loose, I'm sorry, I hope you guys can climb the tree or cut it down. There's nothing more we can do. Good luck Badger."

"Thanks Bulldog, thanks for trying."

I told Wilson to throw the rope overboard as I pulled pitch and headed north for the opening in the "arena of chaos", or at least what I guessed was north.

Such a total feeling of failure, guilt, sadness, I wished we had gotten another chance to deliver the package.

Be careful what you wish for; be very careful, sometimes you get your wish!

Chapter Four
"The Miracle of the Rope"

My thoughts of failure were interrupted when the radio crackled on:

"Bulldog, Bulldog, do you have the package, do you have the package, over!"

I felt very confused.

"Badger 23, say again, we threw the rope out when we left, the package is in the tree tops, over."

"Negative Bulldog, the package went with you, I say again, the package went with you."

I am now very, very confused when over the intercom I hear Wilson's voice:

"I see the rope!!!! It some how got wrapped around the back of the skid at the ground handling wheel lug. It wrapped over itself one time and there is only about a half inch of the end of the rope that is keeping it from falling!!!!!"

Holy Shit!!!

Dangling below me, in the blackness, was our precious cargo of life giving blood, on a 100 foot rope!!!

Some how when Wilson threw the rope out, 5 to 6 feet aft of where he threw the rope out, in the massive downwash of the rotor blades, the end of the rope came back up and just once and just barely, wrapped itself around the very back end of the skid and we had yanked it back out of the clutches of the tree tops!!!!

If someone reading this can explain that one to me, I sure would appreciate it.

I called on the radio:

"Badger 23, this is Bulldog 33, it appears we do have the package, the rope got caught on our skid and right now, it is dangling under the helicopter, standby."

"Roger Bulldog, standing by."

I quickly pulled some more pitch, hell, was the package even still on the end of the rope, and if it was; was it still intact. My mind was racing, trying to figure out what to do, could I make the 10 minute flight back to Lai Khe with the package literally hanging on by a thread? My heart skipped a beat when I heard Wilson's voice on the intercom.

"I'm going out to get it!!!"

And before I could stop him, he was out the door, standing on the skid, working his way aft, around the obstacle of the gun mount. Samson was on his stomach on the floor of the Huey, his torso hanging out over the edge and his hands in Wilson's belt. The Lieutenant was sitting on the floor holding Samson's legs, he, himself, dangerously close to the edge. None of them strapped in, or in a safety harness!!! I had put the Huey into a smooth gentle turn, orbiting just north of the opening in the artillery shell impact pattern. We were farther away now, but still slightly feeling a bump from the closer ones. I was flying as smoothly as I possibly could. After what seemed like an eternity, I heard Samson over the intercom:

"He's got the rope, He's got the rope."

I waited impatiently while they pulled the rope up, and up and up, that 100 feet of rope. Finally:

"We've got it!!! It's good, it's intact!!!!"

Another one of those really great feeling moments, but again, I could allow myself to feel it, for just a moment. The mission was still not completed.

Chapter Five
"The Journey Back to Hell"

I pulled the transmit switch:

"Badger 23, this is Bulldog 33, we have retrieved the package intact, I say again, intact, we're on our way back in."

Fred came over the intercom:

"Are you sure you want to try this again?"

I paused for a moment and replied:

"Well, we have been given a second chance, a second chance, in a way that I am trying hard not to think about. I got us in and out of there once, I can do it again."

Fred replied:

"OK"

But you could hear a tone of intense worry in his voice.

What was I thinking? The fact that we were still alive was a miracle!!! On the previous attempt, I had been completely unable, despite my best efforts, to keep the helicopter in a steady enough hover, for the guys to lower the package. We got our butts kicked all over the place. But haunting me was, the rope, the way we got a second chance to deliver the goods. I felt compelled to try, despite the overwhelming risk; no, in utter defiance of the risk!!!

In a part of my own brain, I could hear myself say. "This is insane", but I was going to do it!!!!

I dropped pitch, took a big gulp, and headed south, once again, descending to go below the artillery, once again, flying into danger, back into the "arena of chaos", back into hell!!!!!!

Once again, I started a slow circle in an area that I thought was the center, to the east side, of the impacting explosions. Once again, I peered down into the center, or what I thought was the center, of this random, intermittent series of blinding white flashes and mule kick shock waves. Once again, I was trying desperately, to see that nothing dim little red spot, through a nearly impenetrable canopy of tree leaves. Once again, getting my butt kicked from all directions. I got a call:

"Bulldog 33, this is Badger 23, over."

“This is Bulldog 33 over.”

“Bulldog 33, standby, for Badger 26, over.”

“Standing by.”

“Badger 26” would be the top officer commanding the battalion on the ground.

After a short pause:

“Bulldog 33, this is Badger 26, over.”

“This is Bulldog, go ahead sir.”

“Bulldog 33, we have an alternate LZ, we think it’s better, there is a small hole in the canopy. But it is at least 50 to 75 yards closer to the artillery. Please advise.”

What a choice! Before, during the previous unsuccessful attempt to lower the life giving blood, by rope; we were as close as 250 yards from the nearest rounds impacting to the south. There was a 50 yard error in the accuracy of the rounds, as I had suspected. With some error in that 50 to 75 yard figure, he just said? I could in reality, be trying to hover the helicopter, as close as 150 yards from the explosions!!!! The flashes would be brighter, much brighter. The concussion waves would be more powerful, much more powerful. Later I will tell you exactly how much more powerful. I had not been able to maintain steady hover control of the helicopter when the blasts were 250 yards away. There was no reason to believe, that I had even the slightest chance of success at 150 yards. But they did say there was an actual, real life, hole in the tops of the trees. I decided to take the chance!!!!

“Badger 26, this is Bulldog 33, nothing personal, but I didn’t like the last place you picked for me, that much. Let’s go for it.”

“This is Badger 26, moving to new location, standby.”

I had been circling around, as usual, in the middle of the “arena of chaos” and noticed that I was getting a little too high, I must have been slowly climbing, and with no altimeter, to check it, I did not notice. I could tell, because I had climbed high enough to see that north-south river I mentioned earlier. Just as I pushed the pitch down a little to descend:

Whoosh, Whoosh, Whoosh, Whoosh!!!!

An artillery shell, very, very, close.

“Damn that was close!!!!”

After a short pause, I heard Samson’s voice on the intercom. He sounded as if he had just seen a ghost:

“I saw it.”

“What?”

“I saw it go by, it came down in front of me, and went under the helicopter, the back end of it was glowing red, it couldn’t have missed us by more then 3 feet. If I had leaned out the door, I think I could have touched it!!!!”

If we take him at his word, and there is no reason not to, at a 45 degree angle, the “armed”, point detonation fused, artillery shell, its base plate still glowing red from the hot gases that had propelled it out of the cannon barrel back at Lai Khe, had passed through the spinning rotor blades!!!! Yes, that close!!!!

I quickly dropped some more pitch to descend faster. The radio crackled on:

“Bulldog 33, this is Badger 26, in position, starting signal, over.”

“This is Bulldog, roger that, looking.”

Circling, circling, once again, I was trying desperately, to see that nothing dim little red spot, through a nearly impenetrable canopy of tree leaves. Looking, looking, then finally a blink of what I thought, maybe, might be it. I started my descent. I slowly continued my approach to a safe hover about 3 feet over the tree tops. I called on the radio.

“Badger 23, Badger 23, this is Bulldog 33, are we over your position, I say again, are we over your position?”

I don’t have to tell you the answer, do I? You already know the answer, don’t you? It’s an answer you have heard already, too many times already.

“Negative Bulldog, negative, you are not over our position.”

Didn’t we already do this?

I again pulled pitch to climb back up and circle in the “arena of chaos”. Looking, looking, looking, then again, a maybe red blink. Once again I started a dangerous approach, into the blackness below. Once again, I somehow managed to safely bring the big Huey to a shuddering stop over the tree tops. Once again, I made the radio call.

“Badger 23, Badger 23, this is Bulldog 33, are we over your position, I say again, are we over your position?”

“Negative Bulldog, negative, you are not over our position.”

Didn't we already do this?

Once again, I pulled pitch to climb back up and circle in the “arena of chaos”. As I started to move forward, a shell impacted to my side, and in the momentary flash of light, I saw, directly in front of us, an entire tree!!! It had been blown up into the air from a previous explosion. The trunk was at least 2 feet in diameter. The root end was under my feet, with the top leaning back and away from us. The rotor blades were cutting a swath through the upper, smaller branches, leaving a blurry wake of leaves!!!! The flash of light faded and in complete blinding blackness, I heard and felt the top of the tree, brush under the belly of the Huey, as it fell away underneath us. There were also some very loud “whacks and bumps” during this event.

Me: “Holy shit!!! Did you see that?”

Fred: “Yes, and I wish I hadn't.”

Me: “I know what you mean. I had been pissed off at this darkness, making it hard to do this, but maybe the darkness is a good thing, so we can't see what we are really flying around in.”

How prophetic that statement. I wonder if I could have made myself do it, in the daylight, if I was really able to see, what was falling all around me.

We shuddered through translational lift and turned and climbed back into the middle of the “arena of chaos”, or at least what I thought was the middle.

Do you all realize, that we only got to “see” with our eyes, every 2 to 8 seconds, almost frozen scenes, similar to flash still photographs. I was in the middle of a surrealistic nightmare.

Imagine you are driving a car at 60 MPH down a rain slick road, in the worst thunderstorm possible. On each side of you with only a foot or two to spare, are shear drop offs and no guard rails. A bolt of lightning hits the road directly in front of you. You are completely blinded, nothing but solid blackness in front of you, then concurrent with a deafening boom, you hit a huge pot hole in the road, instantly sending you careening towards the drop off. At the precise moment that you hit the pot hole, you must instinctively and immediately make just the right corrective action, to null out the jolt, to avoid going over the edge and dying. You have to do this with absolutely no visual reference at all. You must guess. Only the correct and exact reaction to the jolt will save your life. You are constantly being pummeled by rocks and debris. Do you think you could do it?

I had been doing the equivalent, in the air, for a while now.

By now, in the stagnant air of the night, there was so much dirt, dust and smoke from the exploding artillery shells, that during the momentary flashes, it was like flying around in a brown fog. With each breath my nostrils flared from the smell of dirt mixed in with this stinky chemical smell from the chemical reaction of the detonating TNT in the shells. My eyes were stinging from it.

Circling, circling, looking, looking, not seeing, and not finding that little nothing red dot. Becoming frustrated, minute after minute ticking by, I was rapidly becoming very concerned about the viability of continuing to try to do this.

Wow! Can you imagine that! I admit that I am sometimes a little slow catching on to things, but this must be a Guinness Book record.

It felt like we had been in the air well over two hours since our last refueling. I had the instrument lights off. No way to see the gauge. So many “close calls”, no, let’s be honest, “near death experiences”. We were going to run out of luck if we couldn’t deliver the goods soon.

In a moment of frustration I barked at my crew:

“Come on guys, help me out here, help me find it!”

I got various, “I’m trying” comments back then I quickly responded with:

“I’m sorry; I know you are, it’s just, we can’t keep doing this forever.”

My heart was torn in anguish. I so desperately wanted to help the men on the ground. But I could not keep risking the lives of my crew like this.

“Please, please God, let me find them.”

Looking, looking, nothing. In agony, I was just about to call Badger 26 and call off the attempt.

Chapter Six
"The Next Miracle"

Then suddenly in the blackness below, a brilliant red beam, bright, like a miniature search light. I must have finally gotten directly in line with the light through the promised small hole in the tree tops.

I went to the light, like a "coon hound" onto a scent trail. Dropping pitch, I yelled over the intercom:

"I see it!!! I see it!!! I'm going in!!!"

It went away briefly, then, it came back just as bright. I yelled on the intercom to Fred:

"There it is, there it is, right in front of us, do you see it, do you see it?"

Fred: "I can't see it, but I'm glad you can."

What? Is he blind, it's right in front of us! I felt puzzled.

I lost the light, but continued down to the spot I last saw it. Getting close to the trees now, pulling pitch and shuddering to a stop. Then I saw the light again!!! We were right over top of them!!!!

"Bulldog, Bulldog, you are over our position, I say again, over our position!!!!"

Take all the best and happy experiences of your life and put them together as one, and it could not compare to the feeling I was feeling, but only allowable for a moment. The mission was not yet over. Getting here was only half the problem. I had not mentioned this yet, but, not only were the guys on the ground, thinking of a change, a new LZ with an opening, something to make this a success instead of another failure; my crew and the Lieutenant had come up with a plan of their own.

Because of the problem of the rope hanging over the skid and therefore, swinging the package around when we got mule kicked by the concussion waves; Wilson figured that if he stood upright on the skid of the Huey, and leaned out, at about a 45 degree angle, with Samson holding him, then he could hold the rope in his hands, and maybe control the swinging. I butted in and told him, there was no way I could let him do that. They explained that they had rigged up a make shift safety harness using the seat belts from the bench seats. Samson was going to sit on the end seat, buckled in with a seat belt. The end of the makeshift harness was attached to the Huey, but it would be Samson's strong arms that would keep Wilson from falling and field testing the homemade harness. The Lieutenant would be standing close behind them, feeding the rope over Wilson's shoulder. A

human rescue hoist, if you will. They had done all this on their own, without consulting me. I agreed to let them try it.

Wilson was sitting on the floor of the Huey and leaning out, over the side. He was giving me commands over the intercom to position himself directly over the opening; I followed his commands until I heard:

“That’s good Mr. E, hold it there. I see the opening; it’s about 3 feet across.”

Well let’s do some math. A 2 foot square box, the diagonal would be 2.83 feet, so yes, that box was just barely going to fit down through the hole, only if perfectly centered, and only if I kept the helicopter perfectly stationary while the life saving blood was being lowered by my human rescue hoist.

Holding the helicopter stationary, keeping the rope centered in a 3 foot diameter circle while being mule kicked in complete blackness and blindness, that’s all I had to do. Piece of cake, right?

I am now going to tell you exactly how much more powerful the concussion waves from the explosions, could be. For example: I had already felt the power of an explosion, say 300 yards away. Now I could be as close as 150 yards away. Half the distance. The force is not twice as strong. It is an exponential or squared mathematical relationship.

The brightness of the flash and the force of the blast that we would be slammed with, would be 4 times greater then what we had felt so far!!!!

If right now, while reading this, you are not trembling in your seat, muttering “Holy shit” under your breath, then I have failed as a writer.

Me: “OK guys, let’s do it, let’s make it happen this time, this is our “last chance”, I am not coming back here again. We have to do it this time, we have to. Wilson, get it down as quick as you can, I don’t know how long, or even if, I can hold it here.”

“OK Mr. E.”

Optimism seems to run rampant with fools. I wiggled my butt into the seat and stared into the blackness in front of me, flying on pure instinct. My friend the ghost tree was back at the previous LZ. Now, I no longer had, even a momentary fixed visual reference.

A quick glance back over my shoulder, during a flash of light, off to the side, I could see Wilson, now standing on the skid and leaning out into the darkness, the package of life

giving blood, just leaving his hands and heading down. I quickly returned my gaze to the front. I had completely given myself over to flying the helicopter by instinct alone.

Now my only conscious thought, which I kept repeating over and over in my mind, like a Tibetan monk chanting his mantra:

“Keep the rope steady, keep the rope steady, keep the rope steady.....”

Then directly in front of me, one right after the other, two huge gigantic brilliant white flashes. Two shells detonating about 150 yards away. I remember thinking. Oh Shit! This is going to be bad, and then something strange happened. Something, strange and unusual.

Have you ever been asleep in the morning, sleeping in late, and you were in the middle of a really good dream, then off in the distance there was some minor sound. It woke you up a little, but only a little. Like maybe 10%. You know the sound is in the “outside” world, but the dream is good, so you ignore the sound, but you can still hear it. Your brain stays 90% in dream land? Well it felt kind of like that. Even the sound of the Huey seemed distant, muted, different. The brightness of the flashes seemed to last an unusually long time. I attributed it to the fact that there were two, one after the other. But then another unexpected thing happened. When they finally did fade, I could still see! It was like all of a sudden, a bright full moon had come out. I figured that they must have started shooting some aerial flares, as well as the high explosive rounds. How timely. When I most needed it, some light from above. But in the back of my mind, something funny about the light, it did not quite look like what I knew light from aerial flares looked like. I was puzzled, but too busy to dwell on the thought. I was thankful to be able to see the treetops. Finally a fixed visual reference to help me maintain hover. I waited for the shock waves from the two explosions, and waited, and waited then finally I felt the first one, but to my surprise, it did not seem too hard. I easily corrected for it. It was like riding over a gentle ocean swell. Then I waited for the next one, and waited. And again, like riding over a gentle ocean swell. I felt confused, but guessed they must have been a lot farther away than I first thought. I looked back over my shoulder at “the human rescue hoist”. With the light from the flare, I could see them, like conjoined triplets, fused together like a statue, hauntingly reminiscent of the famous statue of the Marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima. But it looked like they weren’t moving; I hope the package is not stuck again. I turned my gaze to Fred in the other pilot seat. Imagine the most scared look you could possibly see on someone’s face. The look you might have, just before you let out a blood curdling Fay Ray scream. That’s what he looked like, petrified like a statue, not moving. I scolded myself for “looking around” and snapped my attention back out in front to maintain hover. A flash, off to the side, then after what seemed like a long time the shock wave, but again gentle like it was far away.

“Keep the rope steady, keep the rope steady, keep the rope, damn, what’s taking them so long? It feels like I’ve been hovering here for over 10 minutes, I wish they would hurry up; damn what’s taking them so long.

I was snapped out of this surrealistic dream state when after what seemed like an eternity, the radio crackled on:

“Bulldog, Bulldog, we have the package, we have the package.”

For a moment, I did not believe it. Why should my luck change now!!!! But when I heard Wilson, Samson and the Lieutenant yelling and cheering in the back (not on the intercom) I believed it. Finally after an eternity in hell, we had done it.

Try to imagine how I felt at that moment, how we all felt. Then whatever you can imagine, multiply it by one thousand. Just one small problem, we were still hovering over Central and Main, in downtown hell. We needed to get the hell, out of hell.

Me: “Wilson, throw the rope out, way out”

Wilson: “The rope is out sir.”

Me: “Confirm that the rope is out and clear.”

No way was I going to do this all again, the rope had better not be wrapped around the skid again.

Wilson: “Confirmed sir, the rope is clear!!!”

Me: “Then let’s get the hell out of here.”

I heard 3 assorted agreements with that decision.

Me: “Badger 26, this is Bulldog 33, the rope is clear, departing your area.”

“Rodger Bulldog, thanks, safe journey home.”

I pedal turned the Huey to head north towards the opening in the artillery shells. How did I know which way was north? I just did. Picking up speed, faster, faster, finally, through the opening and climbing, climbing away. Away from the “arena of chaos”, away from the danger, away to safety.

Chapter Seven
“Confession and Confusion Time”

My first concern was fuel. I reached up and turned on the instrument lights. The initial flash of red seemed almost blinding for a moment. I quickly scanned the temperatures and pressures, all good, and then my eyes locked and froze onto the fuel gauge. We still had plenty. I looked at the clock. I was stunned. It had been only 20 minutes since we first entered the “arena of chaos”. It had seemed like 2 hours plus. I was feeling puzzled by this when I heard Fred come over the intercom. These are his exact words, just as they were spoken 37 years ago:

“Well, I have no idea, how you did, what you just did. If I’d have been flying, we would be dead six times. Every time you made an approach down, I was praying my ass off that you could see the tops of the trees. I never did. I never saw the red light, I couldn’t see anything. You’ve been doing some pretty fancy flying for awhile now. Why don’t you let me take over?”

Me: “Oh, good idea, you’ve got it.”

Fred: “I’ve got it.”

I released control of the helicopter to Fred. And as I did, I stared in utter disbelief, at my hands. Just like Fred, I had no idea how I did, what I just did. My brain was racing. Did I really just do that? I was completely, totally stunned. And as I stared at my hands, they started shaking, uncontrollably shaking. I stepped on the intercom floor switch and remarked:

“Wow! When I let go of the controls, my hands started shaking.”

These were the last words I was able to speak for the next 3-5 minutes. As I stared at my shaking hands, my entire body started to shake and twitch violently. Tears flooded my eyes. I was jerking, as if I was having convulsions. All of the feelings and emotions that I had suppressed and ignored during the intensity of the last 20 minutes flooded over me like a tidal wave. I had zero conscious control over my muscles. I was watching all this as a spectator. For a moment, this was slightly entertaining, until I found out I could not make it stop! Then it got a little scary. I struggled to regain conscious control of my body. Momentarily getting control, only to lose it again in another wave of shaking and tears. Only after several minutes and multiple episodes, and only with every ounce of will power that I could summon; I got a grip on myself.

Fred was flying the Huey OK, but he was staring out the windshield with that “deer in the headlights” look.

With trembling hands, I fumbled to change the radio frequency to call Lai Khe Artie:

With a tremor in my voice:

“Lai Khe Artie, this is Bulldog 33, you can close the circle back up, we’re out. We are down range and circling south of the impact area, heading back to Lai Khe, over.”

“This is Lai Khe Artie, good to hear from you, glad you made it, the only thing we have going out, you already know about, stay south of the cross roads and you’re clear, over.”

“Roger, south of the cross roads, Bulldog, out.”

I stared again at my trembling hands. Still in total disbelief that I had just done what I had done. I literally pinched myself, very hard on my left forearm (Ouch!), just to make sure I was awake.

I went on the intercom:

“Holy shit!!! Can you believe we just did that? I don’t know how I did it!!! Holy shit!!!! I couldn’t believe it when that tree went under us, man I about crapped in my pants!!!!”

Fred: “About crapped in your pants??? I feel a warm spot in mine, I hope is only sweat!!!!”

Samson: “Shit, you guys didn’t have to watch that artillery shell go by, talk about crapping in your pants!!!!”

Me: “Wilson, what about you? You got left out. You missed seeing the good stuff.”

“That’s OK Mr. E, I’m kind of glad I won’t have to remember seeing what you guys saw. I saw plenty enough as it was.”

That sobered us all up pretty quick.

Me: “I still can’t believe it; did we really just do that?”

Someone said: “Yes”.

It was dead silence, on the intercom, the rest of the way back to Lai Khe.

We landed back at the Red Ball Pad and shut down the engine, anxious to check over “the bird” for damage. We pulled a little pitch to make some more drag and slow the blades a little sooner than normal. As soon as they stopped, Wilson and I were all around and then up on top, shining the flash light around, paying particular attention to the tail rotor blades, main rotor blades and their respective critical components and control linkages. Every thing looked fine, except we did notice three big dents in the sheet aluminum, bigger than your fist, made by rocks that had passed through the spinning rotor blades, rocks big enough; that had they hit right on the leading edge of the rotor

blades, or a critical control component, well, then you would not be reading this story right now. These were the aftermath of the loud whacks we had been hearing. There were numerous other smaller dents, and skid marks of things that passed through the spinning rotor blades and went “bump in the night”. The helicopter was amazingly unscathed!!!! Not a single shrapnel hole anywhere!! (But we found many small dents from them, in the morning light). Wilson and I were still “up top” scratching our heads about this when we saw a convoy of jeeps heading our way, from back in the trees of the base camp. I looked at Wilson and said:

“If it’s another mission? I’m telling them no!”

We climbed down off the Huey to see what was going on. Out of the convoy of jeeps came Lieutenants, Captains, Majors, Lt. Colonels, and a full bird Colonel. Then like a receiving line at some important political social, they lined up in ascending order of their rank. They started first with the ground Lieutenant who had ridden with us on this incredible mission, then Samson, Wilson, Fred, working their way to me, the Aircraft Commander. There were snappy salutes, incredibly warm, strong, sincere hand shakes, overwhelming congratulations and accolades. To my left, with each person “coming down the line”, Fred like a broken record:

“You’re thanking the wrong guy. (He pointed to me). The guy you want is over there, he’s the one that was doing the flying, I was just along for the ride.”

I tried to be humble with responses like:

“Just doing our job sir,” or “That’s what the “Bulldogs” are here for sir.”

But I only got back things like:

“You’ve done way more then your job tonight, way more.” or “Well we’re glad you were here tonight “Bulldog”, mighty glad.”

The full bird Colonel even apologized for the General who was at a conference down at Zion, so he could not come out in person, but sends his congratulations.

Holy shit! This had made it all the way up the chain of command of the entire 1st Infantry Division (The Big Red One). Not bad for a lowly WO1 warrant officer.

People milled around for a little while; then the “visitors” headed back to their respective jeeps and left. Leaving just the five of us that had shared this unbelievable experience. Like before, after we had delivered the ammo and water; some startling revelations came out, some very, very startling revelations!!!

Like before, the Lieutenant, without the ear plugs and helmet, had heard things “whistling by” during most of the 20 minutes we had been in the area. Most likely the “wasps” the supersonic shrapnel pieces from the explosions.

I also discovered to my great surprise:

Samson: "That first time we were down with the rope, we almost lost the Lieutenant 3 times."

Me: "What?"

Samson: "Well there were 3 times when we got hit hard by the shock waves, extra hard, and the Lieutenant got knocked off his feet and was sliding out the door and I had to let go of Wilson with one of my hands and grab the Lieutenant on the way by."

Me: "Why didn't you tell me?"

Samson: Well we talked about it and decided not to tell you, because we didn't want you, to stop trying."

Wilson: "That's right Mr. E, I was sliding out a couple times myself and Samson stopped me in time."

Remember, at this point in the adventure, none of them were in safety harnesses or even strapped in. No wonder they came up with a different plan for the second attempt. Holy shit, can you believe these guys really did this.

Me: "Your right, I would have stopped trying, if I had known. By the way, what took you guys so long to get the package down that last time? Hell, you had me hovering there for over ten minutes!!!"

Chapter Eight
 "The Paradox"

Wilson: "Ten minutes Mr. E? It was only about 10 seconds, you told us to hurry up, I've got rope burns on my hand from letting it slide so fast."

I started feeling very confused and puzzled, this couldn't be right. I swear it seemed like 10 minutes.

Me: "Well OK." "Boy those artillery guys sure timed it right with those flares, to help me see."

"What are you talking about Mr. E, there weren't any flares. Maybe you've had too much adrenalin for one night.

I managed to blurt out:

"Maybe I have."

I quickly turned away from the group, tears filling my eyes. I was overwhelmed with a paradox. If there were no flares, then how did I see? If it was really only 10 seconds, then how? My mind flashed back to the strange surrealistic dream, the trance like feeling I experienced. My crew appearing as statues, not moving, and how easily, I rode out the shock waves and how, everything.....around me.....appeared as if.....it.....was happening.....in.....slow.....m
o t i o n!!!!!!

I was slowly walking away from the group, in a state of shock, when I heard Wilson say behind me, to the others:

"Boy! Remember when we were just starting to lower the package, it was just going down through the hole, and those two shells hit real close to us, I thought I was going to get knocked off the skid, and I was praying, the homemade safety harness was going to work, but Mr. E held her steady, he held her steady."

The shells had been very, very close, just as I first thought! What was that strange trance like dream? What happened to me???????

My knees buckled and I almost fell. I managed to grab the open pilot's door to keep from falling. I heard someone say:

"Are you OK?"

I managed to blurt out:

“Just tripped over my own feet”

Leaning onto the Huey for support, I stumbled around to the front of the ship, to put it between my crew and me so they could not see me. Tears were flooding my eyes, I was barely able to stand, and I could not breathe. And I was afraid, very afraid, more scared than I have ever been in my life, before or since. Something had happened to me, something I couldn't understand. Something I could not explain. Something I thought was completely, utterly, impossible!

I finally gasped a breath and started breathing again. I slowly worked my way around the front of the Huey to the left side pilot's door, my side, where the aircraft commander sits. I climbed into my seat to sit down. The tears had stopped. I just sat there quietly, in awe of what had happened. Stunned. My crew and the Lieutenant were still chatting in the background. After a little while someone noticed me sitting in the seat and said:

“Are you ready to head home Mr. E?”

I managed to say “Yes, let's go home”.

I deftly put on my armor plate chest piece, helmet and gloves and buckled in. We said our goodbyes to the Lieutenant. Without me having to say a thing, Fred went ahead and started the engine and took the controls to fly us home, back to our base camp at Phu Loi. I called the tower for clearance:

“Lai Khe Tower, this is Bulldog 33, Red Ball Pad for take off, over.”

“Bulldog 33, this is Lai Khe Tower, cleared for take off pilots discretion, and congratulations, safe journey home.”

“Thanks, Bulldog 33, out.”

Next call: “Lai Khe Artie, this is Bulldog 33, Lai Khe to Phu Loi, over.”

“Bulldog 33, Lai Khe Artie, the only thing we have, you already know about. Congratulations and you're clear to Phu Loi, over.”

“Roger, clear to Phu Loi.”

“Lai Khe Artie, this is Bulldog, did you guys shoot any flares while I was out there?”

“Standby Bulldog.”

After a short pause: “Negative Bulldog, negative. We only shot HE (high explosive). If there were flares out there, they did not come from us, over”

“Thanks, Bulldog out”

I heard Wilson on the intercom say”

“Told you Mr. E.”

Chapter Nine “The Journey Home”

As Fred pulled pitch, we once again headed west, then turned south toward Phu Loi. We could once again, see and hear and feel the concussions of the muzzle blasts from the 155 mm battery just off to our right side, near the perimeter of the base camp. Still pumping out shells, creating a donut of destruction around our guys on the ground, to protect them from “Charlie”.

It was a 20 minute flight. Normally there would be chit chat going on over the intercom, to pass the time on an otherwise boring flight. It could have been about something that had happened during the day’s mission(s), or how “short” (time before going home to the states, back to the “real world”) somebody was, or about something we had heard happened back “in the world”. But on this 20 minute flight, not a word, nothing, absolutely nothing. The intercom was dead silent. The incredible magnitude of what had happened, what we had done, what we had survived had overcome all of us and we were all speechless.

I spent these 20 minutes having aftershocks, of the shaking, trembling, crying episodes, just like I experienced after releasing the controls to Fred, after completing the mission when we flew out of, the “arena of chaos”. But they were thankfully, not as violent. I was grateful for the loud noise of the Huey, so the crew could not hear my sobbing. I had turned my head to look out the side window so Fred could not see my tear stained face in the red glow of the instrument lights. I watched through teary eyes as a full moon rose on the eastern horizon, big and orange from the haze, quite scenic actually.

I would struggle to regain control, saying to myself:

“Come on, get control, you can’t let the crew see you like this, you’re the aircraft commander.”

I could gain control for a short time, only to be overwhelmed again in a flood of emotions.

My mind was locked in a paradox, struggling to understand what had happened, how did I do what I did, I could not have, it was impossible, but I did it, didn’t I? I pinched my left forearm very hard, Ouch! Well that’s supposed to mean that I’m awake. Did I really do that? But how, it’s not possible..... I was not finding any answers to my questions.

We were approaching Phu Loi. It was time to call the tower. I somehow managed to put my aircraft commander suit back on and pushed the floor intercom switch:

“I’m sorry to break the silence. I guess we have all been thinking real hard about what happened back there. Trying to figure out, how it is, that we are still alive. If you’re like

me, you're having trouble with it. All I can say is that, we did something special back there, and I don't know how we did it. Let's just be glad we got the package to those guys and are still alive to tell about it. I hope with all my heart, that we never, ever, have to try and do anything like that again.

It has been... (My voice broke and tears came to my eyes, again)...my greatest honor to have had you with me on this mission. I hope we all make it through our tour so we can tell our children about it someday."

For a moment there was silence, then:

Wilson: "Thanks Mr. E, I wanted to say something, but couldn't find the words. But that's what I was thinking."

Samson: "Me too Mr. E, thanks for helping with the words."

Fred: "Well, I had a little speech, but I like yours better, that's what I was feeling too. Thanks."

I called Phu Loi Tower for landing clearance. Fred brought the ship to a hover at pad 3, our designated spot along the side of the runway, in front of our parking revetments and then he parked the Huey into its "L" shaped wall.

Chapter Ten
"Back at Base"

We shut down, filled out the log book, and secured the Huey for the night. I instructed Wilson to give it a good going over the next day, in daylight, to make sure there was no damage that we missed.

We gathered our gear and were walking in off the ramp area, past the maintenance area, towards our "hutches". Wilson said:

"Mr. E, do you have a minute?"

"Sure."

We paused beside the hanger as Fred and Samson continued on. Wilson said:

"Mr. E, how did you do it? I don't understand, I.....I.....I'm not sure how to say it."

I put my hand on his shoulder. I could feel his body trembling under my hand and said:

"Just spit it out"

"When we were hovering over their position, the last time, and those two rounds hit real close, I just knew I was going to get knocked off the skids, but.....but."

Me: "Go ahead keep going."

"The helicopter just rocked under my feet and..... and..... the rope never moved, it didn't move more than a couple inches from the exact center of the hole, the whole time, I don't understand, Mr. E, how is that possible. I don't understand, how did you do it?"

I took a deep breath and said:

"Well John, I'm a damn good pilot, but I'm not that good. I'm going to be honest with you. I have no idea, how I did it. The only thing I can figure is that, something or somebody, higher up, was helping us. Try not to worry about it. Let's just be glad we got the blood and surgical instruments to those guys and hope they make it through the night."

It seemed to be what he needed to hear. He stopped trembling, said "Thanks Mr. E"; we shook hands and carried our gear back to our respective hutches.

I am going to tell you now, that after that moment, none of the four of us ever talked about it in detail again. I should be more correct, I never spoke with any of the three of them about it again. Yes we flew together, off and on. As aircraft

commander, I flew with all the pilots and enlisted crews in our flight platoon and sometimes other platoons in our company to “fill in” if needed. I think that my “speech” before we landed and my talk with Wilson, somehow allowed each of us to accept it without understanding it.

Can all of you reading this, understand that this was such an incredible, impossible, unbelievable event, that none of us, even wanted to try and remember it, to re-live it! The four of us that shared this intense adventure; well, we never talked about it again, did not even bring the subject up. To be sure, the story was told that night, but not by me and only the “highlights”.

I dropped off my gear; Armor plate vest, helmet, 45 caliber pistol with 3 full clips, an M-16 with seven, 20 round clips and a pistol belt with a survival knife, canteen, and a pouch with two hand grenades in it.

Some of the other pilots used to tease me about lugging all this stuff back and forth to the helicopter, until I shut them up by saying:

“Well, if we ever go down out in the jungle, in “Charlie’s turf”, then you guys will be kissing my ass that I brought all this stuff. They didn’t tease me any more after that.

A couple of the other pilots, sitting around the “common” area in the middle of the hutch, knew something had happened by the look on my face. When they asked, I only replied:

“I’m going to the “O” club (officers club).”

They knew something was “up”. I rarely drank alcohol, I didn’t want to be drunk, just in case something happened in the middle of the night.

I entered the club, went to the bar and ordered two stiff rum and Cokes. Took them to a table and sat down and slowly started sipping them. Fred was already there, talking to a couple of other pilots at the bar. I saw Fred point at me and start to tell “the story”. A story that started with, “you’re not going to believe this, but.....” After a moment, the two that were hearing the story, well, their eyes got real wide, like “Orphan Annie” eyes, and their jaws dropped, and they would look over at me, with a strange look on their face. The kind of look you might see on someone’s face, if they had just seen somebody walk across water. I never knew exactly what Fred said, I was too far away to hear, and I mean too far away “in my mind”. After a little while the two, having heard the tale, would then slowly walk over to me, where I was sitting at the table, and with a strange look on their face, shake my hand and congratulate me. Then they turned and walked away, somehow instinctively knowing that I wanted to be alone with my thoughts.

As I continued sipping my drink; I continued to watch this surrealistic scene play out in front of me; again and again. Fred telling the story to one, or two other pilots at a time.

And each and every time, there would be the “Orphan Annie” eyes, the jaw dropping, and the strange look. Sometimes a pilot or two would come in the door, stop, look around, point at me and come to congratulate me, having heard the tale from someone else. And on each and every one of their faces, a look of awe, a look of respect, a look of disbelief.

As the alcohol, on an empty stomach, started to have the desired effect to slow down my brain that was struggling to believe what had happened, I pinched myself, very hard on my left forearm. Ouch! I was awake, it wasn't a dream, it was real!!!!

I finished my drinks, and with a slight drunken swagger, left the “O” club and went to Flight Ops, to see what they had scheduled for me for tomorrow. After the congratulations, I looked on the schedule roster. Another early riser. I would be leaving my alarm clock set at 4:30 AM. I had a “Bloodhound” mission to fly. At least it would be a shorter day, only 4-5 hours air time. I would be able to get in a nap tomorrow afternoon!!!

A “Bloodhound” mission was flying 2-4 hours, low level, 2-3 feet above the tree tops out over remote jungle areas. The “Bloodhound” was this big green box that came with its own Lieutenant. You tied the ends of some 4 inch diameter flex hose to the front of the skids, one out each side. This “box” would pick up the scent of smoke from someone smoking a cigarette or a smoldering campfire on one side, and the scent of sweating bodies or a latrine on the other side. There were several ports on the box labeled “SHOOT HERE”. We were all under orders, even if it meant sacrificing our life to do so, that if we ever went down, we had to make sure the “classified components” on the other side of the “SHOOT HERE” spots were destroyed. We had a gunship team over head keeping track of us. No GPS, remember? You would fly this crop dusting kind of pattern, guided by the gunships. The Lieutenant would watch the meters on the box and when they jumped, he would call “Hot Spot” on the intercom, then whichever pilot was not flying, would transmit up to the gunship team, “Hot Spot”. They would mark it on their map, and later that day or night, the artillery boys would send a little love that way. Flying low level, we were also the “bait” to see if we could draw “Charlie's” fire and reveal his position. Just another normal, average day, as a helicopter pilot, in Vietnam.

I made it to my bunk and collapsed, still in my clothes, my boots still on. I seemed to vaguely remember someone tugging on my feet, taking my boots off as the alcohol did its job and I fell asleep.

Ring, Ring, Ring, Ring, the alarm going off, I pulled myself out of bed, turned the alarm off and turned on a desk lamp. I sat on the bed, wondering, actually wishing, if the night before had been a dream. I looked at my left forearm. Three bruises. I decided not to pinch myself again. My shoulders were sore and bruised, from banging on the side of the armor plate seat. I was already dressed; I put my boots on, and did the standard morning routine. Looking in a mirror to shave with my electric shaver, I noticed a one inch long

horizontal scratch on my left cheek. I remember something hitting my face the night before, shrapnel. I hauled my personal armory out to a different ship and enlisted crew, a different pilot.

We flew an uneventful "Bloodhound" mission. Returning to base, I went to Flight Ops to turn in my mission sheet. I learned that the two seriously wounded men, for whom we had risked so much the night before, had made it through the night because of the life giving blood we had miraculously delivered. Another one of our company "slicks" had extracted them earlier in the morning, along with others less seriously wounded. It took them three trips. With gunship cover, they were able to get down to ground level in the donut of destruction from the artillery shelling. They could not land, there were overlapping craters and stumps. But they were able to hover low enough over the rim of a crater to get the wounded men inside the Huey and back to Lai Khe to the doctors. The men on the ground marking their position with the smoke grenades we had dropped to them the night before.

Anybody who had not "found me" the night before, searched me out to congratulate me. Groups of two or three enlisted men, far across the compound, one would see me and point and they would all come running over, double time, in the hot afternoon sun, snapping to attention with a crisp salute, a congratulations Mr. E, then a sincere and strong hand shake. By that night, every officer, and enlisted man in the company, to a man, had sought me out to congratulate me. And after that, business as usual. I already told you, Fred, Wilson, Samson and I did not talk about it, even among ourselves. Once the congratulations were over, no one else in the company brought it up either.

You must understand that this was highly unusual. All of us pilots and crew, we all had close calls, we all had near misses, and we all had high intensity moments and near death experiences. It was just normal helicopter flying in Vietnam. Well these experiences would usually be openly talked about, boasting rights, something to be bragged about, stories to share, to help our fellow pilots maybe avoid the same problem. But this story was not. This is truly one of those, "don't try this at home" stories. Nobody was willing to brag about this one. It was too frightening to even think about!!!!

So I put it away, in the back of my mind, somewhat like a repressed memory, but I could remember it, if I wanted to. I just consciously choose to avoid remembering it, for most of the following 37 years.

So there you have it. That's my story and I'm sticking with it.

Chapter Eleven
“In Retrospect, 37 Years Later”

So many thoughts flood my mind, now that I have “spilled the beans”. After all this time, 37 years, deciding to go public with the story, I hope my kids are not on the phone with each other, deciding what mental institution to put me in. Honestly, this is one of the reasons I have never told the detailed story before. How could I expect anybody to believe me? How can I expect you, to believe me now? Hell, I was there, this really happened to me, and after 37 years, I am still having a hard time believing it myself!!!!

I wonder what Dr. Phil, would have to say about this?

I already know what any helicopter pilot would say:

“It’s impossible.” And I agree.

How could I see in the darkness, how did I see that little nothing red light (that no one else could see), through an almost solid canopy of jungle tree leaves, How did I hold a steady hover during massive shock waves, and what was that strange “ethereal white light”? How did I do this? Was the hand of God on my shoulder?

I have some partial answers, but most will only bring more questions.

How could I see?

Well, back in those days, I had been blessed with “above average” eyesight, I could clearly see and read the line below the 20/20 line, 20/15 to be exact. Also, when I took the eye exam to qualify for pilot training, it was during the “night vision” test. They had me sit in a darkened room for 20 minutes; then they had me looking in a box, with random little red lights that would blink around my field of vision, then lower in intensity, and blink around again, with me responding to location. This continued, until I said I could no longer see them. (Is it just me, or did any of you, just feel some Deja Vu?) I still remember the doctor coming in and looking at the “results” and chewing out the enlisted guy for botching the test. He re-ran the test himself and had to apologize to the guy.

He told me: “I’m sorry about that, you scored so unusually high on the test; I didn’t believe the numbers at first. You have exceptional night vision acuity; it will serve you well, where you are going, after your training.”

So a part of the answer is: I really could see better than Fred or the crew, especially in the dark. I could distinguish the extremely slight and subtle differences in blackness that they could not. I can’t imagine how tough it must have been for Fred, just being along for the ride, not being able to see anything. He really was scared shitless!

I had “superhuman eyeballs.”

The second part of the answer is: Pilot skill.

I knew I was the best pilot in the company at the time, because I flew with everybody else. I didn't brag about it, but I was. You don't believe me? Then listen to what the platoon sergeant of our enlisted crew told me, three months later when; I left “A” company to move over to “B” company to fly gunships for the remaining three months of my tour:

“Mr. E, all the enlisted men asked me to come talk to you, and tell you this.

At night when we are sitting around the hutch, well, we talk about you pilots, how your flying was that day, who made good landings and who pranged it, stuff like that. Well last night, we took a vote on who the best pilot in the platoon was, and you won, unanimously. It's just that, well, when we go out with you in the morning, well, we just know, that we will be coming back that night, to sit around the hutch and talk about you guys again. It's just the way we all feel Mr. E. We're going to miss you when you go. Please don't say anything to the other pilots, some of their ego's couldn't handle it.”

I laughed and said: “I know the ones you mean, don't worry, your secret is safe with me.” Tell the men, that I am sincerely honored.” We shook hands and parted.

Wow! A Medal of Honor from the President couldn't top that one!!!! I had just been paid the greatest of honors from those I commanded. Wow!!!

So I was the best pilot in the platoon. With my “super eyes” and my exceptional piloting skills, I was very likely; the only pilot in the company that even had the remotest of a chance to pull this one off, and that brings us to **Destiny**.

It will get iffy from here on out. The only answers to follow, involve Divine intervention, the use of some mystical “Force”, or bending the rules in the Matrix.

I believe with all my heart, with everything that I am, that it was my destiny to be there, at that time and place, to be the one at the controls during this mission, to be the physical instrument of the hand of God, to get the life giving blood to those men on the ground, because it was not their “day to die”.

I believe there is a purpose, there is a reason we are here on this planet. It was no random chance event, that I was assigned to “Ash and Trash” missions that day. God had given me the eyes to do it, the physical ability to do it, and the courage to do it. Everything prior in my life, had shaped me and guided me to this pivotal point in time. To my destiny.

Only a month or two before that, I was offered the chance to be the pilot for the Commanding General of the 1st Division. He would sign my efficiency report. A good career move, I was told. But I almost immediately turned it down. My reason:

“Well, that sounds like a good offer, but, I believe the reason I am here as a helicopter pilot, is to do whatever I can to help those guys out in the rice paddies and the jungle. They’re the ones that have it tough over here. I’ll stick with what I’m doing.”

And I delivered in “spades” on this particular mission.

I believe that this life we live is a test. We come into it as a newborn, already having made an arrangement with God, on who our parents will be, and we agreed on an outline, or curriculum for the kind of life we will have. I don’t mean everyday little things, but the big stuff, the turning points in our lives. We come into this life with no conscious memory of this arrangement. Our conscious mind just a blank slate, and we come with free will. (Something which any parent with teenagers is painfully aware of.) And along the path of life, we get tested by God. Do we follow the path of good, or do we let ourselves get seduced by the “dark side”. Do we sit on the couch and turn into a blimp, eating junk food and watching TV all the time; or do we get off our ass and go out and do something in the “real world”. God gave us free will, to waste our life, or do something with it. The choice is yours. I chose to do something with mine.

I, we, the five of us, me, Fred, Wilson, Samson, the Lieutenant, we all freely and willingly chose to risk our lives to try and save two others, two others that we didn’t even know. And our test? The incredible risk, the incredible challenge, the incredible odds against success. I mean, really, do you think any of us, on that last time we entered the “arena of chaos” were oblivious to the incredibly huge risk we were taking? How great the challenge? What were the odds, hundreds to one, thousands to one, a million to one? I think, we all passed the test.

Another thing, on this mission, I had an unshakable sense of confidence in my own ability to do what I was doing. It came from my heart and my soul. I somehow, so strongly felt it, that it overrode my conscious thoughts and compelled me. It was why I never gave up; I never surrendered to my fears. Without this strength of conviction, I would have failed.

Let’s talk about Death: You must admit, even if you only half believe my story, that I certainly have a unique perspective on the subject. We should have been dead a hundred times over on this mission, but we lived to tell the tale. It was certainly not “our day to die”. I believe the day you die is the day you made a contract with God for your departure from the planet. I have heard stories about people that have had near death experiences. Or even been declared dead by a doctor, only to awake in the morgue with a tag around their toe! In many cases, they all seem to have a similar tale, about leaving their physical body, and going to a bright ethereal light (sound familiar), and then seeing their whole life pass before them. You are graded, just like in school; then, realizing that there was

some, unfinished business, something in that curriculum with God, something left undone, they came back.

Einstein said: "The world is a dangerous place to live, not because of the evil people in it, but because of those who would do nothing about it."

Think about that for a little while.

I am so proud of my three children, who have been brave enough to stand up to the challenge, and if necessary, risk their life in the never ending battle against tyranny and the evil people in the world. I am so proud of all of our young men and women, all volunteers, currently serving in our military. Willing to risk their lives for the same reason. I am so proud of the love and support that they receive from their families and loved ones, especially when that soldier is away from home, overseas, in a war zone. It is that love and support that allows them to do what they must do, to protect us, those of us, here at home.

I will also say this: To die as a soldier in the fight against tyranny and evil, or in a selfless act of courage, trying to help someone in desperate need, well, that's about the highest points you can score, when you walk through the gates of heaven. I know this is not much in the way of consolation for the loved ones left behind. But it is that person's arrangement, previously made with God. And for those they leave behind, then that is their test from God, learning to live with the hole in their lives, the giant empty hole, that person left behind in our lives.

Please don't say they died before their time. This was their time.

Please don't say they died for no reason, that their life was wasted. Those that die in this way, would disagree with you. Trust me, I know what I am talking about, I was almost one of them.

Well, that leaves us with that last little tidbit of impossibility. My "Twilight Zone" time warp episode.

Not even to my crew, those who shared this incredible experience with me; did I ever reveal the strange, trance like, dreamland episode that I experienced. When everything seemed like slow motion around me. Or more accurately stated, I seemed somehow, highly accelerated in perceptual awareness and I was, somehow, able to respond with lightning speed to the sensations I was feeling around me. Super human powers?

I was so overwhelmed with this at the time. I had no way to explain it other than:

"We must have had help from something or somebody higher up."

I absolutely still believe this to be true.

I will tell you now. At 150 yards, and at the speed of sound, the shock waves took **less than half a second** to reach me after the flash! To me, it seemed like an eternity!

But now, I want you to use your imagination, for a little while.

Einstein said: "Imagination is more important than knowledge." What if time is not a constant? What if we used, that 80% of our brain that scientists tell us we don't use? We have all heard stories about a small 100 lb. lady or an older man with a cane, who sees some kid trapped under some heavy debris and then runs over and lifts a 400-500 lb. chunk of something off the kid to free them. Nobody told them how heavy it was. "They just lifted it off". No one told them it was impossible. Super human powers.

I have heard stories about Kung Fu masters that are so fast, that everybody else around them, appears like they are moving in slow motion (sound familiar). Remember the old Kung Fu TV show. "When you can take the pebble from my hand, it will be time for you to leave." Remember "Bruce Lee"? Look at the stuff "Jackie Chan" does, no wires, no computer generated graphics. Haven't we already been given a small glimpse of what may be possible? What may be possible for any of us?

Years ago, before anyone still living today, a science fiction writer named Jules Verne thrilled the world with impossible science fiction tales of a submarine that could stay under water indefinitely, with an unlimited power source. Men went in a capsule to the moon. Unbelievable fiction at that time. But now in our time, matters of fact and history.

What if today's science fiction is the reality of tomorrow?

I have seen hauntingly familiar parallels of my experience of 37 years ago in today's science fiction. Primarily in the popular movies about "Star Wars". Is it so impossible to believe? I hope not, because my kids might be calling Sunny Valley hospital for the terminally mentally challenged right now.

Regardless of what you believe or can allow yourself to believe it did happen, it was real. My proof that it happened is the scanned original typed document (below) that I got with my award of the Distinguished Flying Cross. This was what was read aloud in front of my fellow officers and the enlisted members of my company. (On a "stand down" day when a general decided that the division should have a weekend off. So except for a few flight crews on some essential missions, everybody was there.) I was standing with pride at my best attention, in the hot sun in front of the maintenance hanger, sweat rolling down my eyebrow and stinging my eye.

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
HEADQUARTERS 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION
APO San Francisco 96345

GENERAL ORDERS
NUMBER 13586

28 December 1968

AWARD OF THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS

1. TO 320. The following AWARD is announced.

ESKILDSEN, JIM M3159105 () WARRANT OFFICER WO1 United States Army
Company A 1st Aviation Battalion

Awarded: Distinguished Flying Cross
Date of action: 5 October 1968
Theater: Republic of Vietnam
Reason: For heroism while participating in aerial flight evidenced by voluntary action above and beyond the call of duty in the Republic of Vietnam: On this date, Warrant Officer Eskildsen was serving as commander of a utility helicopter during a mission to resupply a battalion engaged in heavy fighting west of Lai Khe. When he arrived over the embattled forces with ammunition resupplies, Warrant Officer Eskildsen discovered that the surrounding jungle was too thick for him to land his aircraft. Although the helicopter was subjected to intense small arms and rocket-propelled grenade fire, he completely disregarded his personal safety while maneuvering the craft into a hovering position at a dangerously low altitude. As soon as the munitions had been dropped to the friendly forces, Warrant Officer Eskildsen immediately flew back to his base to obtain resupplies of blood for the wounded. He then skillfully hovered over the battalion position a second time while the vital blood supplies were lowered by a rope. When the rope became tangled in the craft's skid and the trees below, Warrant Officer Eskildsen circled the area until the strand was freed. Although darkness had set in, the remainder of the blood was quickly lowered. His extraordinary ability as an aviator and courageous determination throughout the hazardous mission were instrumental in saving several American lives, and significantly contributed to the successful outcome of the hostile encounter. Warrant Officer Eskildsen's actions are in keeping with the finest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, the 1st Infantry Division, and the United States Army.
Authority: By direction of the President, under the provisions of the Act of Congress, approved 2 July 1926.

FOR THE COMMANDER:

OFFICIAL:

JAMES M. DAVIS JR
Lieutenant Colonel, GS
Acting Chief of Staff

Larry L. Warren
LARRY L. WARREN
Captain, AGC
Assistant Adjutant General

DISTRIBUTION:

20 - Central Files
10 - AVDB-AGPA (A&D)
1 - AVDB-AGPR
1 - CG USARV ATTN: AVHAG-PD
2 - Div PIO
5 - 1st Avn Bn

SPECIAL DISTRIBUTION:

1 - TAGO ATTN: AGPF-F Wash DC 20315

Not bad for one page, but kind of loses something in the translation.

Wait!!! We can't forget this, there was supposed to be a message. I am going to give two.

One:

Those who fear death, also fear life.

You do not die until it is "your time to die". There is a reason we are here. There is a purpose for our lives. Don't be a couch potato, watching TV all the time. Get out and embrace life, grab on tight with both hands and do something with your life, make it special, you should arrive at the grave, sliding in sideways, yelling, "Holy Shit, what a ride!" I am going to add one more quote to the story.

"Life is a daring adventure or nothing" Helen Keller (1880-1968)

Two:

All of you, every one of us, has the ability, latent inside you, to do things, things you would believe to be impossible. Like what I did!!!! You only need to believe in yourself and try.

Remember this:

“You are only limited by what you believe to be impossible.”

I know this to be true, because:

A long time ago, in an Asian country far, far away, for a few moments in the black skies over Vietnam, I became a Jedi Knight and used “The Force”, and did the impossible!!!

“May the Force Be With You, Always.

Mr. E

Most of all, I want to thank my three children; it is for them that I wrote this. I have been very blessed, to have had them be a part of my life.

I want to thank my very long time friend Alan Chuculate, for his forever friendship and encouragement to write this.

I want to thank my friend Hugh McSpadden; for his encouragement and as my proof reader. He is also the “explosives” expert I referred to. He likes to brag about his 50+ years plus experience in the business, by holding up his hands and wiggling all his fingers and thumbs to prove that he still has them.

I want to thank my friend and former co-worker, John Wooten. A thirty year Army, retired top sergeant and EOD (explosive ordnance disposal) expert, for info about the artillery rounds.