

Too Much Fuel

by Ben Brown

I may be the only pilot ever that had too much fuel.

I was with the 159th ASHB at Phu Bai in 1970 & 1971. Not long after I made AC, I was scheduled for battalion standby one day. I had done that several times as a Peter Pilot, but this was the first time as an aircraft commander. In all the times I had been on standby, all we ever did was drink really bad coffee and read anything we could find laying around. I started taking a paperback with me after the first time drawing this duty.

One thing the operations officer always told us was just get a half tank of fuel when you go down to battalion. I heard him every time and only forgot it once. This time.

We stopped to hot refuel off the taxiway on the east side of the active at Phu Bai, and I just tuned out I guess while that routine stuff was going on outside. Before I realized what had happened I was topped off instead of half full. I didn't think it was a big deal since all we ever did was taxi down to battalion and taxi back at 1700 or whatever it was.

Well luckily, we had been there about an hour when someone came in and told us to go recover a downed aircraft and gave us coordinates. We started the bird up and I got out my map, hoping we were going clear to the DMZ so I could burn off some fuel. No such luck.

To the west of Camp Eagle the ground started rising towards the mountains. There was a long, deep ravine running to the west not long after you got into the steeper terrain. I had seen it many times on the way to Firebase Birmingham and Bastogne. The coordinates I was given said this downed aircraft was right near there. The ground above the ravine was fairly flat and I didn't think this was going to be a big deal even if I was a little heavy.

We got close and I was searching ahead for something on the ground but I couldn't see anything. I called on the FM frequency I had been given and whoever was on the other end said he could see me above him. I still couldn't see an aircraft out there and said so, and the guy on the ground said "Look in the ravine".

Yup, there was a Cobra sitting right down in the bottom of that ravine, several hundred feet lower than the flatter ground above. I immediately knew I was in deep kimchi because there was almost no chance I was going to be able to take advantage of any wind there might be down in that gorge. This was going to be straight Chinook lifting power and the only thing I could hope for was that the Cobra did not have much gas or any armament on it to make up for the extra weight in fuel I was bringing to the party. That was not to happen.

I had to get down in the gorge to the west and fly back east to the Cobra. It was so close to the abrupt end of the gorge that I was going to have to go back west to get enough airspeed to get back out again. On a perfect day I would have been low on fuel myself and the Cobra would have been at the end of theirs and all out of bullets, too. I could nearly have picked it up and hovered out of ground effect to the top of the ravine and transitioned to flight into the wind from there. Wasn't happening.

We hooked up to the Snake and when I lifted it to a hover the rpms were bleeding like crazy. I ran it up as far as it would go and we were good to stand still, but leaving was iffy. Obviously the Cobra had just come off of Camp Eagle, full of fuel and fully armed. Had we been anywhere except at the bottom of this nasty, spooky gorge, I would have begged off and flown around for a half hour to get rid of that extra fuel. But I wouldn't have wanted to stay down there and I didn't expect anyone else to think that was a good idea either, so I decided to see if I was as good as I thought I was and we turned to the west and left.

I never took off with that low an rpm showing on the gauges before, and learned never to do it again. It just scared the hell out of me, but I didn't over-torque the engines and we somehow got going fast enough to feel that good old shudder that let you know you were going to make it after all.

We took a long, high route back to Phu Bai and burned enough fuel to come in and set the Cobra down like nothing had ever happened.....