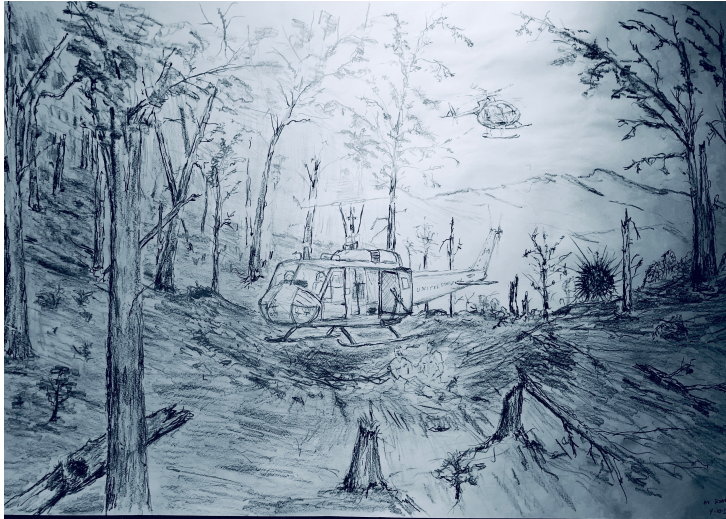


August 3, 2021 Shelton WA

Recon Team Extraction Under Fire



Recon Patrol Extraction under fire. Author's drawing

It's 2138 hours, August 3, 2021 and all is quiet except for a pair of Apache pilots shooting night approaches into a little airport nearby. Fort Lewis is close enough to be a constant reminder of my 27 year career as an Army helicopter pilot. After graduating from Army Flight School with class 67-11 in August of 1967, I was more than a little surprised to not be dispatched immediately to Vietnam, instead reporting to Fort Knox and A Troop, 7/1st Air Cav. The Blackhawks were training for deployment to Vietnam, disembarking from Long Beach, California in January of 1968 aboard the US Navy Ship UPSHURE. Except for picking up a merchant seaman north of Hawaii who had a ruptured

appendix, and the USS Pueblo incident, our 28-day trip turned out to be leisurely. As a Warrant Officer, I had it very good compared to the E-6's and below. Boredom set in early on so I took over putting the daily ship's newspaper out. It was called the UPSHURE UNICORN. As the Editor, I was able to rescue 3 EM from their below-decks purgatory. They did most of the work on the newspaper and were able to spend much of their time up in 'Officer Country' where the air didn't reek of vomit and they could look out and see the ocean. All three had college degrees.

We 'stormed' the beach at Vung Tau in January/February and joined our advance party at Dion just north of Saigon. I was one of 10 pilots who were sent to experienced aviation units for in-country training. A short helicopter ride brought us to Sherwood Forest, home of the 173d Assault Helicopter Company, the Robinhoods. Instead of returning to the Apache's, we were infused into a sister Air Cav unit, B Troop, 7/17th located at Camp Enari just south of Pleiku in the Central Highlands. What an unexpected surprise- cool evenings and not too hot during the day. The down-side- we'd be flying in mountainous terrain; no 10-ship rice paddy LZs, and no place to safely autorotate in if shot down.

By April of 1968 I made aircraft commander flying in the lift section. I had just passed my 22nd birthday in March. My first big test of flying skills came shortly afterwards.

After flying an early mission we returned to Dak To to hot-refuel when we got a call from our CO, Major Longhefer inquiring if I was able to take a mission. "I'll be up in 5 minutes" I shot back. The brief told us we'd be extracting a recon patrol who had been in contact with NVA troops, off the south side of a mountain. Approaching the area we could see two of our LOH's hovering above the trees and our CO orbiting high above. The steep side of the mountain was thickly covered with tall trees. The 10-man recon team had been put in to do a B-52 ARC-

LIGHT BDA, bomb damage assessment on an underground enemy complex. The team made contact with NVA troops and suffered one KIA, their RTO who was killed by a mortar round.

The only place they could be pulled out was in a bomb crater. The crater was formed when a bomb with a delay fuse buried itself in the mountainside before exploding. The blast formed the crater but did not open up much of the overhead forest canopy. I found out years later from one of our Scout pilots that he had been asked to see if they could make it into the cave formed by the explosion. They told Longhofer it was too tight to get in. Hearing that I was inbound they were sure a bigger Huey wasn't going to do it either. Not knowing this, I charged in getting guidance from the OH-6 to the opening leading down to the crater. It wasn't until I was right at the entrance to the hover hole that I could see the crater and troops. It was going to be tight, real tight. We hovered forward, then down, then forward some more. Both my crew chief and door gunner were hanging out and looking back as the nose passed over a couple of tall stumps that the tailboom had to sit between. In some more and down a little put the nose of the Huey a few feet off the crater wall. The tail rotor was now sitting a few feet from the stumps. The cabin floor was almost 6 feet above the bottom of the crater. We couldn't go any lower. The LOH drivers said the tall trees swallowed us and they couldn't see us unless they hovered directly behind me. There was no sky visible overhead.

We began loading the first 5 guys as they were boosted up to the skid and into the helicopter. I had to hold a dead steady hover as people piled in. Suddenly the scout pilots told me mortar rounds were landing upslope from us. My only reference was the young RTO's body laying face-up in the red dirt 2 feet below my boots. His radio lay next to him and it had dozens shrapnel holes in it as did his body. For a second I thought about his parents and hoped they would be spared the details of their son's death. That scene still haunts me to this day.

Mortar rounds marched closer to us as we finished loading and began backing up and out to exit the cave of trees. Just before clearing the entrance, a mortar landed close enough to see the flash through the trees just ahead of us. It was a peddle turn and wild dive down the mountainside to escape incoming fire. We had to make one more trip in to recover the remaining soldiers. 15 minutes later we had dropped off the first load and headed back up to the crater. As we were getting into our hover mortar rounds exploded up-slope from us and were getting closer. With the last men in a mortar round landed down-slope behind the helicopter. They had us bracketed. I was getting a lot of 'advise' from the LOH pilots and C&C ship to expedite my departure. I marked this date on my Short-Timer's calendar. I had 8 more months to go. There would be more marks on my calendar before I made it back home.

Without guidance from my crew chief and door gunner, we couldn't have pulled off this extraction. It's the tightest place I've ever put a helicopter.

CW4 Michael Jones USAR RET
B Troop 7/17th Air Cav 1968-1969