

Who do you have?

By [David Hertle](#)

Although this encounter happened nearly thirty years ago, it remains a current event in my life, as does much that happened during most of my two tours as a rotary-winged aviator serving in VietNam.

In about 1986 I noticed that one of the women in the building where I had my office was wearing a POW-MIA bracelet. I had never asked this question before nor since of anyone, but simply asked her "Who do you have?"

She looked down at the bracelet and told me "Alan W. Gunn".

I looked right back at her and said "It's Alan Wendell Gunn, knew him, been in his house, met his folks, would you like a picture!" I then proceeded to tell her about my friend Alan, a young Army helicopter pilot who became MIA when his aircraft went missing on a night mission, only to be finally located many years later.

The next day I brought her a photograph taken at primary helicopter flight training, Ft. Wolters. Alan was in the day room on a Sunday, wearing his flight suit, but bare-footed. His name tag was visible on the flight suit. I also gave the lady some documentation about the recovered helicopter and that no remains were found at the crash site. By itself, this little story may not have much interest, but the memory of Alan remains with me after all these years, and when my time comes, I will go look for him.

Alan Gunn and I were both WOCs (warrant officer candidates) in class 67-17. We had already began a friendship when we were two of the 3 WOCs assigned to our first military IP. This instructor told us about his tour in Viet Nam flying a mission called DustOff. Hearing his stories excited me and later I shared with Alan that becoming a DustOff pilot was what I wanted to do. His response was immediate - "All we have to do is write a letter to the Warrant Officer Assignment Branch" I asked how we did that and he replied that he would get us an address.

Within the week he had an address at the Pentagon. I wrote my letter and didn't give it much more thought, until orders were being received at Ft. Rucker upon graduation. Ten members of class 67-17 were headed to Ft. Sam Houston for three weeks of training to be Medical Service Corp.(MSC) aviators. There I learned that Alan's father was a field grade MSC officer. I did visit him at his home on base and meet his parents.

That three week class allowed each of us to spend the holidays with our families and we hoped we would be assigned to the same unit when we reached RVN early in 1968.

Upon entering country, I was assigned to the 498th Medical Co. (Air Amb) and learned later that Alan was assigned to one of the many Air Ambulance detachments. The 498th was like an

aviation company, four platoons, 6 Hueys each platoon. A detachment also had 6 aircraft, so I thought of it like a platoon.

I soon became immersed as a newbie in the 4th platoon at Lane AHP (AnSon, RVN) and became DustOff 45. Most of our work in the 498th was in the field and before I could even get settled, I was off to LZ English to support the 1st Cav division. We went into the tent housing the Cav Medivac unit and while getting introduced a hand came out from under a blanket and it was Art Jacobs. Art was another from our class, the 10 that had gone to Ft. Sam. Art had already seen some action so I was all ears.

By the end of January, I found myself in Duc Pho supporting the Americal Division and with the Tet Offensive, my own initial experience way beyond just the routine I heard first heard about back at the unit..

After 3 or 4 weeks at Duc Pho, I was rotated back to the company for a short break. That is when I began to hear about Alan being missing. The details were that they departed Ban me Thout on a night mission in bad weather. His AC has asked for radar assistance from the Air Force to get out to the LZ, meaning they were flying on instruments at altitude. They never completed their mission and whereabouts were unknown.

The intensity of our DustOff missions help me get through some of the shock of this loss. I flew with and learned from some great ACs, and then it was my turn. I spent very little time at Lane, but was often loaned out to other detachments. I spent a lot of time in both I and II corps, flying dustoff one week out of Quang Tri into the DMZ, helping Cav Medivac while they were at Camp Evans taking patients out to the hospital ship, the Sanctuary. I spent some time supporting the 54th Med. Detachment at Chu Lai and heard about their CO, Major Patrick Brady.

The stories I heard then about Major Brady reminded me of some of the terrific ACs I knew from the 498th. When I heard later that Major Brady was honored with the CMH, it was no surprise, as I had met members of his unit that remained inspired by him. I flew with the same inspiration I received from others in my unit. Both our CO and Opns officer were 2nd tour DustOff aviators. They both had the scars on their bodies from missions they had survived their first tours.

And then I had some time at Ban me Thout and I thought of Alan a lot while I was there. But I wasn't really ready to just go home. But I also knew our mission was tough and demanding. Too often a return to the unit was to find yet another member of our platoon had been shot up and had been hospitalized, none returning that I recall. Of the original 10 from flight school, only 7 seven came home. Besides Alan, there was also Chris Lucci, also of the 498th and Jim Doran, 1st Cav medivac.

One of the fellows I flew with was from Visalia CA. Freddie Fowler had been a bull rider and his grip on the cyclic stick made me think of how a bull rider might have done it. Freddie had extended 6 months in our unit and at his farewell party he made this profound statement - "The

rest of my life will be anti-climatic after these past eighteen months.!" Those words would become a prophecy fulfilled in me also.

I loved watching the CH-47s coming in and out of Lane. I had a classmate who flew for the 178th ASHC as a Box Car. We had a chance encounter once while sharing a POL stop. I really didn't want to go home and risk a second tour at the end of my 3 year obligation. What sounded right to me, was to stay. But I asked for CH-47 transition training and had my orders to go TDY from RVN to Ft. Rucker and right back.

I was wonderfully surprised to find myself back at Lane, now flying with the 196th ASHC and this time I was Flipper 45. Flying Hooks was a huge change from flying DustOff, but I found ways to keep it interesting. Once while up at An Khe, I offered to give an urgently wounded a ride back from the LZ for treatment. Dustoff was delayed and the ground medic was going with the patient. I called tower and asked for clearance to land at the Dust Off pad. I had been there many times before, but never with a hook. It was probably the first time and the last time tower ever cleared a Hook into that site. The rotor wash hit hard that day, but the patient was quickly in the hands of a doctor.

My very last mission was flying an external 105 with the gun crew onboard out to a Special Forces camp. Again, I am back at Ban Me Thout and thinking of my old friend Alan. We had just turned final shooting an approach to the airfield when one of the engines failed. The book says to punch off the external load and do a running landing. We did just that. However, I asked the Flight Engineer to wait until we flared high and to pull the D-Ring at the hook just as the 105 got to the ground. It was the only chance we had to finish the mission properly. The flight engineer knew the manual release was a fail-safe method and quickly agreed. He called off the altitude as the gun approached the field and I flared to match his numbers. He punched the load as the 105 first touched down, dragging it some and we finished the rolling landing. The ramp went down, the gun crew ran back and gave us the thumbs up. We saved the 105 for their use. So, rolling take-off on one engine, back to Ban me Thout, running landing and time to shut down and get a message to Maintenance.

This was mid-December 1969 and that is when I first heard a rumor about WOs getting an early out if they extended their tours. The first thing I did upon returning to the unit was ask to speak to the old man. Will Radford, on his second tour as a Flipper, and I went into his office. I simply asked, "Sir, we have heard a rumor, is it true?" He responded, "Yes, it is true, what do you want to do?" My mind raced over all the options once again but within 5 seconds, I said "Sir, I want to go home!" My CO said my flying duties were over as I had met the requirements of at least 18 months in country and that as soon as he could get the orders cut I would be headed home.

On 24 Dec 1969 I got my last pay check at Ft. Lewis WA. Later that afternoon, I was on a Western Airlines flight to SFO, then a greyhound bus ride to Modesto Ca, then I hitch-hiked to Oakdale, my birth place. The couple that gave me my ride dropped me off at the hospital where my Mom usually worked nights. When I found out she had taken off for Christmas Eve, the two mile hike to the house with the duffel bag on my shoulder was a cake walk. I got home as the

sun was coming up. After a younger sister discovered me sitting on the couch and waking up the entire house, my Mom came up and just asked one question "Do you have to go back?" "No Mom, I am through.

As I left the 498th Med. Co, They presented me with a plaque stating 819 hours, 1541 sorties, 2099 patients. As I sat in the back from my flight that day out of the unit, I asked in prayer "Lord, what was that all about?" It was hitting me that the most intense year of my life was coming to an end and I wanted to sort it out. Later, I would learn of a DFC earned that year and in reflection - **The best year of my life.**

My friend Alan was an only child. His parents had to have been heart-broken. Their family line ended right there. I came home, had a full life, a great career and now watch as grand-children are beginning their adult adventures. In many ways, what happened to Alan is a huge contrast to what happened to me. In some ways I have had to work hard for both of us. When the movie "Saving Private Ryan came out and I heard those words "Earn This!" it all made a little more sense.

Our government has never reported a disposition for Alan and he remains missing, and for decades I wondered if he could still be alive. On May 28 of 2016 Alan would have turned 68. But I have no doubt where Alan is to be found. And when my day comes and I find myself reunited with others in Heaven, I am looking for Alan. For there I will find him.