

Wingman Down

By [James "Bud" Harton](#)

The whole day had been a bust. We ended up sitting on strip alert at Tay Ninh in case a Special Forces unit needed us.

Both crews from our two UH-1C helicopter gunships were totally exhausted from laying around in the hot tropical sun and waiting for something to happen. We watched aircraft land and take off and winced every time a nearby 155 howitzer battery fired and we were more than ready to go home. We finally received a release late in the afternoon from the Tactical Operations Center and started putting all of our gear on for the return flight to Lai Khe.

Chief Warrant Officer Bruce Peters, my aircraft commander and the Fire Team Leader of the two Crossbow gunships and I had been together for over a year. Bruce had extended his tour to cut down his remaining service obligation and I had extended because I didn't want to serve time back in the States. Actually, I enjoyed my job as a crew chief and was in no hurry to go home and be treated like a kid again.

Specialist Bill Stroud, my gunner, untied the rotor blades as I gave a whirling overhead motion to our wingman. The pilots, CWO John Adams and Mr. Cole gave a whoop and started getting ready to fly.

I plugged the rocket pods into the electrical system and removed the rifle rod from the barrels of the mini-gun on my side. I quickly threw on my 'chicken plate' and flak vest and strapped on the shoulder holster with my Belgian Hi-Power 9 mm pistol as the blades started to turn and the Lycoming engine began its whine. I closed Mr. Peters door and locked it after sliding his armor seat plate forward. After climbing in on my side of the cabin, I strapped in and hooked up my APH-5 flight helmet and then hung the M-60 machine gun from bungee cord from the ceiling. The belt of 7.62 mm ammo was already loaded into the feed tray of the gun. It was safe until I inserted the barrel after takeoff. I didn't really expect anything to happen and probably wouldn't arm my weapon for the trip home.

I keyed the overhead radio console and listened in while Mr. Peters cleared us for take off. I leaned back against the bulk head and put my feet up on the ammo box in front of me and relaxed for the 45 minute trip back to Lai Khe.

All of us hated this kind of mission. They sometimes got real exciting but all too often it was just a long, hot boring day. I was still in a dazed stupor from inactivity as we cleared the perimeter and came up to altitude. Altitude for us was about a 100 feet while our wingman lagged behind a quarter mile and slightly higher. Mr. Peters called Mr. Adams and told him we were going to climb to 1,000 feet and look for some cool air. I reached down and grabbed the barrel to my doorgun and inserted it into the receiver. If we were at 1,000 feet we were within ground fire range. The benefit of flying down low was that the

dinks usually didn't have time to see or hear us before we were overhead. At 1,000 feet they would have plenty of time to fire on us.

Mr. Peters tuned into Armed Forces Viet Nam Radio on the ADF so we could listen in to the Saigon disc jockey and some stateside music. The cool air coming in the open cabin door at 90 knots airspeed quickly cooled us off and helped shrug off the stupor. Time quickly passed and Mr. Peters contacted Lai Khe tower for landing instructions.

"Lai Khe tower, Crossbow 33, a light fire team for landing, tens miles north."

"Crossbow 33, Lai Khe tower, cleared for straight in, landing runway 23. Winds are negligible from the west, altimeter is two niner niner six, no other traffic reported, call two miles final."

"Crossbow 33, call two miles final, landing runway 23."

Mr. Peters reached down and changed his radio from UHF over to VHF so he could talk to Mr. Adams in the trail ship.

"Crossbow 37, 33, did you monitor Lai Khe?"

Mr. Peters looked down at the console to see if he was on the right frequency. I sat up and turned to the left rear of the aircraft to see what 37 was doing. I couldn't see him on my side. Bill was doing the same on his side as I turned back. He leaned all the way out and then turned back to me and shrugged his shoulders. He couldn't see him either.

"Crossbow 37, Crossbow 33 on Victor, over."

Mr. Peters was trying again. I keyed my intercom button and said, "Nothing behind us, either side, Sir, No other aircraft in sight."

Mr. Peters, with a circling motion of his hand, indicated to the pilot to make a turn to the left. As we came about, I scanned forward. There was no other aircraft in sight.

"No joy, Sir. Nothing in sight."

The pilot dropped the nose as we increased our speed and both Bill and I automatically hung our weapons and got the ammo belts ready to feed. I grabbed a smoke grenade and got ready to drop it as a marker. I spotted the smoke first.

"Sir, smoke coming up, 11 o'clock about two miles."

We were really moving quick as Mr. Peters tried on the radio again with no response.

"SIR! Rotor blade in the trees, 10 o'clock and 500 meters."

I could see an entire blade laying across the top of the fifty foot trees. I knew right away that our wingman was down as we closed on the smoke.

"Sir, aircraft crashed and burning right at the smoke!"

We rolled over the top of the crash site and could see a burning gunship at the base of the triple canopy foliage. The aircraft had torn a long hole in the trees but had landed upright on it's skids. I couldn't see any movement as we broke over the top of the crash. Mr. Peters flipped his radio selector over to UHF and came up on the Company frequency.

"Mayday, Mayday, Mayday, Robin Hood Control this is Crossbow 33."

"Crossbow 33, Robin Hood Control! Go ahead with your Mayday!"

"Robin Hood Control, my wingman has crashed 10 klicks north of Lima Kilo in the trees. The aircraft is burning and there is no sign of survivors. Scramble a Light Fire Team and get some slicks up here. I have 30 minutes fuel remaining."

I spotted an open area about a kilometer south of the crash site. It looked big enough for us to get into without hovering. Gunships were always overloaded and needed to make a standard approach rather than hovering down.

"Sir, possible LZ just to the south, an open area. You can get in there and drop Bill and I off."

Mr. Peters looked to the south and turned back to look at me. He asked a silent question with his eyes and I keyed my mike again,

"We'll walk in, Pete, we can make it."

Mr. Peters nodded and came back up on the radio.

"Robin Hood Control, Crossbow 33. I'm going to drop my crew off just to the south of crash site. Say status of the primary alert fire team."

"Crossbow 33, Robin Hood, crossbow 36 is off and enroute, a slick is lifting now. Recommend you come up Guard and ask for help."

Mr. Peters told the pilot to make a left downwind approach and set up for the open area. I saw him turn to the "GUARD" frequency.

"MAYDAY,MAYDAY, MAYDAY, THIS IS CROSSBOW 33 ON UNIFORM GUARD FOR ANY FORWARD AIR CONTROLLER OR DUSTOFF AIRCRAFT IN THE VICINITY OF X-RAY TANGO ??? ???"

Bill and I were stripping off equipment as we got ready to jump out. I got rid of my chicken plate and flak vest and then put my shoulder holster back on. We both reached for the M-14 rifles hanging from the pilots seats and also grabbed the equipment harnesses with ammo and water. Bill made a questioning motion at the first aid kits and I

nodded yes. We both grabbed the one from each bulkhead and stuffed them into our jungle fatigue shirts.

"Sir, recommend Bill and I jettison both rocket pods to get rid of some weight."

"Uh, negative, Bud. I'll fire the explosive bolts and get rid of them if we have to. I want to keep some ordinance aboard in case you and Bill need some help."

That suddenly made me realize that we were deep in the Iron Triangle. I had only been thinking of getting to the other crew and hadn't even considered enemy activity.

"Okay, here we go. You guys ready?"

We both clicked twice on the intercom and then I stepped out on the skids as we turned final. The landing zone looked wet which was going to make the landing that much harder. Mr. Peters took the controls and then did a long slow approach. I threw off my helmet and released my monkey strap safety belt. I glanced at Bill and he nodded and then we both jumped off the skids. We still had some forward motion so I made a pretty big splash as I impacted into a grass covered swamp. Mr. Peters rolled the nose right over as he felt us get off and started to climb back out. And suddenly, with the exception of our rapidly departing aircraft, it was real quiet. Bill and I just naturally ducked down. I scanned the tree line surrounding the swamp but didn't see anything. I started moving towards the crash scene as Bill covered me from some brush. I found more cover and then he splashed by me and I covered him. He held up as the ground started to rise up out of the swamp. I moved up along side him and we started to look for cover to begin the trek into the crash site. Suddenly, with a burst of beating rotor blades, a Robin Hood slick burst over the tree line behind us. He began his flare as his crew chief hung out and motioned us to get ready to be picked up. Bill and I spread out and the aircraft commander, CWO Henry Perez placed the skids between us. The crew chief helped me to climb onto the skid and then I grabbed the stretcher pole as Bill did the same on the other side. Mr. Perez picked up to a high hover and we moved forward towards the crash. We cleared some tall trees and then Mr. Perez started down right on top of the fire. He moved slightly forward and then started using the main blades to chop a hover hole down. I could see "Tiny" our wingman's crew chief looking up at me as Bill and I dropped off. Mr. Perez climbed right back out and we could see him starting a left hand orbit as Bill and I walked up to the scene. We were both hyper, not only because of the possibility of VC in the area, but because the aircraft was completely destroyed. We both knew that we were probably going to have to recover the bodies of friends. "Tiny" stared at me as I approached him as if I was an alien. I asked him what happened and he merely responded that "we crashed". I asked him where everyone else was, fearing that they were still in what was left of the gunship. Tiny pointed to his rear and I spotted Mr. Cole standing there.

Bill stooped to help Tiny and I walked up to Mr. Cole. He had a huge laceration running from his chin across his throat. His gunner was trying to get him to stand still so he could tie a bandanna around the wound. At least three of them were okay. I handed the gunner

my first aid kit and asked him where Mr. Adams was. He pointed deeper into the jungle and said, "He's right over there. He's paralyzed. He went through the chin bubble." I ran over to Mr. Adams and knelt down beside him. He was conscious but didn't seem able to speak. I could tell by his eyes he wanted to, but his mouth didn't seem to work. I told him to hang on, help was coming and that I would be right back. I kicked some wreckage out of my way as I got back to Bill.

"Let's get these three out, we're going to need a basket and a Dustoff for Mr. Adams, I think his neck is broken."

Bill nodded and stepped out into the jungle opening caused by the crash. He waited until he could see Mr. Perez in his orbit and then popped the spoon on a smoke grenade. He held it up in his hands so Mr. Perez would know that he wanted him back in. I turned to Mr. Cole and told him that a slick was coming in to take him and the two crewmembers out. I told him to tell Mr. Perez that we needed a Dustoff with a basket for Mr. Adams. He nodded and then with a clattering roar, Mr. Perez was hovering down. We helped the three of them climb up on the skids as the slick crew chief and gunner pulled them aboard. Bill motioned to Mr. Perez that he was loaded and then suddenly the slick was gone again. There was sudden quiet as Bill and I traced our steps back to where Mr. Adams lay. Bill went past him and then took up a position behind a tree as he started scanning the jungle for movement. Both of us were hunkered down and crab walking as we tried to make ourselves invisible. I squatted down alongside Mr. Adams and started watching the opposite direction of Bill. I glanced at Mr. Adams and realized that he was trying to talk. I leaned down and whispered that we were waiting for Dustoff because we needed to put him in a basket. His look was pleading and I knew that he was afraid that we would leave him. I tried to calm him by telling him that it would just be a moment or two and then we would have him out of there.

The silence was broken every couple of minutes by the low pass of a Crossbow gunship. I could see the crew looking down for us, but we were under some pretty thick foliage and I doubted that they could see us. We started hearing occasional birds as the last of the aircraft slowly burned out. Bill turned to me and pointed at his wrist silently asking the time. I glanced down and realized that it was after 6 o'clock and it would soon be dark on the jungle floor. I held up six fingers and Bill widened his eyes in mock alarm. I just shrugged my shoulders and continued watching. A million thoughts were going through my mind. I was really kicking myself for not grabbing the PRC-10 emergency radio from Mr. Peters before we left our ship. I wasn't sure if a single Dustoff was going to come in or if there was going to be an insertion of troops to secure the area first. I looked at Mr. Adams and tried to figure out would we do if the Dinks showed up first. I knew we couldn't run with him and I wasn't sure that Bill and I could fight for very long. On the other hand, the VC would be able to tell it was a hated gunship pilot that was wounded and I knew I couldn't let him be captured.

Suddenly, a forward air Controller was overhead in a fixed wing O-1 Birdog. I walked out to the crash site and waved at him as he came right over head. He waggled his wings and then climbed out. I could hear a pair of jets in an orbit and then the Dustoff blotted out

the remaining sun as he hovered overhead and started down into the hover hole cut by Mr. Perez. A medic appeared in the open door, his eyes bulging with excitement. He slid a wire basket stretcher off the floor and let it fall down to me, then he jumped down. He had an old Thompson submachine gun and he was just frantic.

His head was on a swivel as he looked every where for enemy troops. I grabbed his arm and the basket and dragged both back to where Mr. Adams was. The medic started to grab Mr. Adams by the shoulders and throw him into the basket. Suddenly he was looking at the bore of Bill's M-14 and it was stuck right in his face. He froze and then I scooted the basket alongside Mr. Adams and Bill and I coordinated picking him up and gently placing him in. I motioned for the medic to take the foot of the stretcher as I picked up the head. Bill walked backwards behind us as he covered us moving to the hovering Dustoff.

It took all three of us to lift the basket high enough for the crew chief to drag it in. Then all three of us climbed up the skids and we were suddenly flying again. The medic started an IV into Mr. Adams as the Air Ambulance pilot poured the coals to the Huey. They stopped on the active runway at Lai Khe long enough for Bill and I to get off. Then they were off again, headed for Long Binh and the 93rd Medical Evacuation Hospital. I never saw Mr. Adams again.

We heard later that he was evac'd all the way to the States to recover. He had been demonstrating power off autorotations to Mr. Cole when they suffered an engine failure. On impact, Mr. Adams had been catapulted, still in his seat, through the chin bubble. But even though his aircraft was totally destroyed, he managed to do well enough that his crew survived. I've often wondered about him for all of these years, but I've never been able to find him.

Chief Warrant Officer John Adams, a Crossbow Aircraft Commander.