

Dancing the Foxtrot

Navy rescues Army

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There I was, an experienced Scout pilot by the summer of '70. I'd arrived in late April, drafted, naïve and immature. Other boys with peach fuzz, teenagers-on-typewriters, had sent me to the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry Regiment in Phouc Vinh. Charlie Troop. I wrote the folks of the luck I had, not having to fly the Hueys we'd watched shot down on TV, but rather a small observation chopper that "only needed one door gunner". I was to just observe the war. I have the letter. What luck thereafter, to have survived all that war-watching. I was still an FNG [*f--king new guy*] back in early May, riding left seat with Frazier as we raced from Cambodia to discover Whiddon's burning little one door gunner helicopter, adding to the continuing fiasco. After days like those, the hot Vietnam evenings were spent in the O-Club, or in a dim hootch-corner, relieving the stress with your own click of guys, witnessing the stories of the day and those before my time, mostly boasts. We were survivors, hiding the fear with bravado. Strung together, those nights could become a diary of the daily trudge of our uncommon young experiences then.

Out of the blue on a mid-summer day, the Navy sailed into Papa Vic [*Phouc Vinh, where we were 'stationed'*] on an HH-2D Seasprite. Affixed starboard was the anti-submarine Magnetic Anomaly Detector [*MAD*]. They would fly lowish over a designated map grid, deploying their torpedo-like thingy on a cable to get a "reading": an arms cache so highly desired by all. But us take-it-to-the-enemy alpha-warriors didn't like this high-tech crap. Convoy cover was the worst, but this just seemed like another fruitless concoction, like people-sniffers [*another high-tech thing by the Air Force*] and silent ghost planes [*yet another high-tech and very secret plane that had no engine noise – deployed at night*], already had this mission hanged by the cojones [*gonads in Spanish*]. It was a new "Golf Foxtrot" [*'goat f--k'*], the C Troop phonetic for wasted missions, or the war-wide "Romeo Foxtrot" [*rat f--k*]. We had elevated the rat to a goat, retaining the war-soldiers' beloved Foxtrot.

Unwashed in aircraft technology, we were secretly intimidated by the Navy's deep blue, shiny high-class ship, what with it's electric trim tabs and refined fuel needs. And us unrefined Cav Guys of course derided the Navy's presumed cush mission; air conditioning and steaks and what have you. No nightly rockets and mortars like us. I was the last Scout to have a turn on this unlikely interservice ride. My day began cruising in lazy circles with the high bird Cobra, bored from the get-go, listening to rock and roll on the ADF, not looking forward to a wasted day of no results. And no revenge. We were way east of our usual AO [*area of operation*], low hills with heavy cover. The Air Force had clearly ignored this place [*no bomb craters*]. Sure enough, their MAD gear soon had a "reading" and they threw out a smoke [*standard thick colored smoke to mark everything in Vietnam*]. Notified, I tossed out my cigarette and started my drop-like-a-brick twirl to the deck below. Scudding over unexpectedly to the smoke plume, I was just starting to look down when I heard the shot. Didn't feel anything though, which

was good. I'd been hit by one shot before of course; going low and slow tempts them. But you get to know when a bullet hits your bird; usually there are more than one. My gunner-crew chief was new, though it was really his bird. But I was supposed to be the teacher that day, so that he didn't hear the shot, or didn't feel the hit, didn't bother me.

But I must've had an odd feeling, as for some reason I decided to pull pitch and get some altitude, though I don't remember why. I didn't realize it then, but an experienced pilot can sense something wrong, without needing flashing lights and ear buzzing warnings. Or a dashboard blasted to hell. Very soon, the aircraft started to vibrate, and it got worse in a hurry. A white, acrid smoke quickly had me IFR [*can't see shit*] in the cockpit, though a little left pedal swooshed it away in the doorless Loach. I radioed my High Bird desperately asking to confirm that I was on fire. I didn't know if I should gain or lose altitude. My hootch mate, Wyatt, sitting front seat Cobra above us, answered in his Kentucky drawl that he 'don't see no smoke'. In my own Mississippi drawl I cursed out loud, as if anyone could hear in what was now a shrieking, metallical grinding racket of terror, vibrating the bone marrow. I asked for a vector and steered west toward an unseen opening. Scouts weren't given maps, as they tended to provide them to the enemy when they crashed.

Suddenly, with a loud "pop" and a violent jerk, the helicopter went from maelstrom to dead silent calm. What the Foxtrot [*fuck*], over? Then the console started flashing and sirens buzzed in my helmet. Something still was not well with my war-watching helicopter. I had never experienced this before, as usually we just were simply shot down, or quickly plopped into a nearby clearing, with no time for conscious decisions. But I was now a Cav Scout with altitude [*'attitude' is what we Cavalry pilots were always accused of (a play on words here)*]. Then I noticed the dreaded "splitting needles" [*engine RPM no longer linked to rotor RPM*]. Holy crap. I vividly remember looking down at my left hand holding the collective, and the voice that told me: "push it down". It was the voice of my flight instructor (thank you). I remember subconsciously trying to pick out a "soft looking spot" in the mosaic of green now rushing up too fast. I didn't think to call "going down" [*standard call of impending crash*], as I guess it was obvious; surely they saw my trailing smoke by now. Anyhow, I'd switched off my battery.

I was lucky. The little bird flared itself [*right!*] over the jungle top, pulled pitch at the tips of the trees like taught, and then we fell, straight down, flopping through greenery, tensing up for the impact that never seemed to come, like falling through a hole in the earth.

I never remembered hitting, but when I came to, I was staring at bamboo in my lap and liquid dripping off my face. JP4! [*jet fuel*] And worst of all, the sounds of grenades that had been strung by the Gunner on a wire behind me, jerked loose by the violent impact, their crackly spuming telling me of the impending immolation in the spilled fuel and homemade bombs. "Get the Foxtrot [*f--k*] out!" I remember screaming in panic. I lept out the door but was foolishly restrained by my harness. Unhooking, I dived again only to splat myself headfirst into a foot-deep streambed under the jungle canopy that enclosed

us. Creek water, again on my face, and hissing smoke grenades behind me, forming rainbows of colors in the slanting slits of sunlight piercing the crash dust.

We'd plummeted 150 feet, bobbling down a bamboo funnel through a deep jungle ravine, the OH-6A incredibly landing "on its feet" smack in the middle of a hidden streambed. The jungle "just swallowed ya'll up" Wyatt later said. We'd somehow missed the big trees that cause the usual Loach conflagration. As the Hughes Tool Company had promised, the rotors folded up, the tail boom broke away, the skids splayed out on final impact, and my seat had collapsed as advertised. Still don't know how the hell we'd fallen all that way without flipping over. Maybe we had. And thank you Mr. Hughes and Co. for the overrunning clutch that allowed us to become a free-spinning metal parachute after the transmission seized. At least as far as the treetops.

Out of the bird now and glancing around, scared, I saw that we were in some sort of dark tunnel coursing through the dense jungle, formed by the creek, the steep sides thickly lined with huge bamboo stalks and covered over at the top by the arms of giant trees. I had my Gunner take his M-60 and slosh up to the nearest bend, and the Observer to go the other way with his M-60. I figured the gooks would have to use the creek as a highway if they were to get to us -- a fear that I'd previously decided would never happen. I tried my 2-way emergency hand-held to no avail as the sweet noise of unseen helicopters were swarming somewhere above us, shooting rockets and stuff that killed any attempt to send or receive [*radio communication*]. The old joke that Scouts marked their position by their burning Loach didn't hold water here, and I was glad. I weakly shot some pen flares that my shaking fingers had extracted from my survival vest, but they couldn't penetrate the foliage above. But I had my .38 cal., which I swung menacingly at the shadows. Yee ha. I then proceeded to shoot up the place with a half clip of 35mm [*Pentax Spotmatic*].

Finally realizing we'd crashed a good ways from One-Shot-Charlie and his comrades, and that the Blues [*our rescue team*] could never get to us this deep, I called my guys back and told them to start trying to make it up the steep ravine through the dense dark bamboo so we could show that we were alive and be rescued. Just as we started to pick our way up, a surreal voice from heaven came down to us: "Stop! Stay where you are! We will get you out!" Totally freaked, I looked up to see a helicopter's bottom, rotor wash parting the vegetation high above us. It was the Foxtrot Seasprite! It must have a damned electronic megaphone. Sumbitch! Holy Moly! It took me some time to grasp what was happening.

Well, they let down their rescue hoist cable, and one by one we were reeled up like wet puppies to the high-tech mothership, each of us soaked with creek water, sweat and piss.

In the Charlie Troop club that night I was subjected to the expected barbs of fellow competitors -- I mean Scout pilots. "Was it a 'prang' or a 'ditch'?" demanded Chuck Frazier, self-appointed judge and jury. I was feeling terribly guilty, and they meant to preserve it. I still didn't know why we'd gone down. But that was the way we learned to forget. That we escaped unscathed meant torment. A death or serious wound would

have provided deference for the rest of the tour. So I was lucky to be taking the crap. The tail rotor chain bracelet was my most cherished award, wherever it is now.

I couldn't friggin move my sore body for a couple of days. But someone kept coming by my hootch to plead with me to write the Navy pilots up for hero medals. I blew a fuse. Told them to Foxtrot off. We went out every day knowing that our thankless mission might get us killed. At night, we sat in the club, never breaching the juju talk of people we'd lost. Why should the Golf Foxtrot Navy guys get medals? We don't need no medals! We did this every damned day. Screw them and the huddy-toddy helicopter they sailed in on.

Well, those fun times are long ago; we all went on to different lives, burying those days that now seem like a dream. But the club nights could never erase the memories of Whiddon, McKiddy and Skaggs in my first May, much less all the ones that followed. VHPA records told me the names of my crewmembers that summer day. But Wilkes is dead and I can't find Mitchell. I have tried my best to locate some history about that Army-Navy game that put us in a water-plunge in the center of red-dusty III Corps. I guess Operation Barnacle had some success. I hope that someone else can find those Navy folks; they should get their medals. I'll pin them on myself. Besides, I find that being back again in the presence of the guys and family from those days brings an unexpected, unspoken comfort. That may be the real legacy we all took home from that dance.

Historical Perspective on why HH-2D Helicopters were Operated In South Viet

Nam : In late April of 1970 President Nixon authorized the U.S. military to launch a campaign to locate and destroy North Vietnamese Army (NVA) sanctuary sites in Cambodia. On May 1, 1970 the campaign was launched into Cambodia to seek out, engage and destroy NVA military targets with the stipulation that all U.S. forces would be out of Cambodia by June 30, 1970. Because of the narrow window for the campaign a call went out for all services by the Commander U.S. Forces Viet Nam for any technology that could help locate enemy weapons cache sites.

In the spring of 1970 Chief Naval Operations (CNO) Development Project (D/V 98) was initiated to validate the Light Airborne Multi Purpose System (LAMPS) Mark I concept. D/V 98 was to be carried out in three phases using modified HH-2D Seasprite helicopters. Each phase would separately evaluate the three technologies that make-up the LAMPS mission suite: ASQ 81 Magnetic Anomaly Detection (MAD) (Phase A to be conducted by HC-5 based in San Diego, CA), Antisubmarine Warfare (ASW) (Phase B to be conducted by HC-4 based in Norfolk, VA) and the Electronic Support Measures (ESM) and radar (Phase C to be conducted by HC-5). Additionally, the ability to operate helicopters independently for an extended period of time off of low freeboard ships would be evaluated.

In May 1970 the pilots from HC-5 that had been selected to be the D/V 98 Phase A project pilots were at Naval Air Development Center, Warminster, PA undergoing systems familiarization on the ASQ-81 MAD. The HC-5 project pilots were LCDR Russ Thompson (OIC), LCDR Phil Olson (AOIC), LT Bob Clark (project pilot) and LT Scott Milner (project pilot). Late in the afternoon on May 22 (a Friday) Russ Thompson was notified that we were to fly the two ASQ-81 equipped HH-2Ds to the Kaman Aerospace facility in Bloomfield, CT immediately; that they (the two HH-2Ds) were going to be

modified to operate with the U.S. Army in South Viet Nam (the first we had heard of this). Russ was told to standby in Bloomfield for further orders after delivering the helicopters to the Kaman Aerospace facility. At noon the next day Russ received a call from a former HC-5 Commanding Officer who worked for CNO directing us to return to San Diego. He then said to Russ, "we need pilots to fly the birds and can't think of a better group than the pilots already familiar with the equipment." When you get a call from CNO's office volunteering you for a mission, how do you say "No?" Upon our return to San Diego, on May 23, we were formed into a detachment and two additional pilots were assigned as copilots, LTjg Leroy Anderson and LTjg Jim Marsh. On May 26 the pilots departed San Diego International for Saigon. The enlisted crew from HC-5 that was maintaining the two HH-2Ds in Warminster returned to San Diego and started putting a maintenance pack-up together. After the HH-2Ds were modified by Kaman they were flown to NAS North Island in a C-5A to pick up the maintenance crew and two conex containers with the support pack up. The modifications that were made to the HH-2Ds consisted of armored seats for the pilots, an FM radio so we could communicate with the Army, and a piece of armored hard face to provide a modicum of protection to the MAD operator in the cabin from small arms fire.

The detachment was hosted by the First Air Cavalry in Phouc Vinh, located in III Corps. The Army named the operation Iron Barnacle. During June the detachment flew missions in Cambodia, always under the watchful eyes of an experienced Army Hunter-Killer team consisting of an AH-1G Cobra and OH-6A LOH. Our mission profile was to fly at 300 to 400 feet above the triple canopy jungle (measured on the radar altimeter) with the ASQ-81 deployed and to fly at the maximum possible speed (because of the density altitude blade stall was always on our mind) in order to have the maximum possible sweep width of the MAD. Our operations in Cambodia were deemed a success by the Army and on July 1, 1970 we were notified that our deployment was being extended to support operations in SVM. For many reasons this was not a crowd pleaser with the detachment, but as military professionals learn to do, we salute and carried on.

Navy Rescues Army – the Navy Perspective: An Iron Barnacle crew consisting of Bob Clark, Leroy Anderson and AT1 Arnie Hardin was assigned to a search and locate mission in III Corps, northeast of Phouc Vinh. The search area was in the general vicinity of the southern extremity of a spur off the Ho Chi Minh Trail (if memory serves me correctly this extension was called Jolly's Trail) where NVA activity was suspected. Late in the afternoon and approaching bingo fuel state Arnie Hardin got a MAD contact. He chucked a smoke to mark the location and we climbed to altitude so the LOH could descend and conduct an expanding circle search around the smoke. After a few minutes the pilot of the LOH reported strong signs of enemy activity. As it was late in the day and all three helicopters were at bingo fuel, we broke off the search and returned to base. Evidently the report the LOH pilot made to his Operations upon returning to base was impressive enough that a troop insertion mission was planned for the next day. Since the location of the site was deep in the jungle and with no landing sites for the UH-1 Slicks, the Air Force was tasked with creating an "instant landing zone" using a 10,000 pound bomb dropped by parachute from a C-130.

The following morning an Iron Barnacle crew consisting of Phil Olsen (HAC), Bob Clark (copilot), LTjg Anderson (observer and gunner) and Arnie Hardin (MAD operator) joined up with a Hunter-Killer Team from Song Be to relocate the site of the contact. Bob Clark and Leroy Anderson were flying as part of Phil Olsen's crew because they were familiar with the area. Once in the general area of the previous day's contact the HH-2D started its MAD search. It wasn't long before Arnie Hardin reported a MAD contact and chucked a smoke. We climbed to 2,500 feet and the LOH descended to start a search. Shortly after starting the search, the LOH pilot reported smoke in the cockpit and

requested a vector to the nearest clearing in the jungle. The closest clearing was approximately five miles away and a heading to that site was relayed by the Cobra pilot. The LOH started a turn to the heading, still at a very low altitude just over the top of the jungle canopy. There was one very tall tree protruding above the top of the jungle canopy. The LOH passed behind the tree in a 90 degree bank and didn't reappear on the other side. The Cobra pilot immediately got out a "mayday" on Guard and we started a search for indications of survivors (at that moment I didn't have much confidence that the crash through a 250 to 300 foot jungle canopy was survivable). To everyone's surprise, within three of four minutes we started hearing static on Guard as the LOH crew tried to make contact and then we started seeing pencil flares.

As we were in a suspected area of NVA activity immediate rescue of the LOH crew became an overriding consideration. The delay while the Army got a helicopter with a rescue hoist to the scene was unacceptable. Phil immediately informed the Cobra pilot, the on-scene commander, that all Navy helicopters were equipped with a rescue hoist and carried trained rescue aircrewman (Arnie Hardin), so we would give it a go. Because the rescue hoist cable on the HH-2D can only be extended 90 feet it was necessary to execute a hover-down through the jungle canopy. This was going to be exciting enough, but the prospect of enemy reaction really raised the level of the adrenalin flow. Phil executed a flawless hover-down maneuver with Arnie calling clearance from the trees on the right side of the helicopter and Leroy calling clearance on the left side. I was monitoring engine performance, communicating and looking out for any sign of the enemy activity. On the first attempt Phil stabilized the hover with tree limbs extending just below the rotor system and the tail rotor almost touching the trees. We only had a horse collar on board so Arnie rigged for rescue and lowed the cable to the maximum. Three problems became apparent, the hoist cable wasn't long enough to reach the ground, the LOH crew couldn't move the few feet required to get to where the horse collar was because of very thick undergrowth, and we couldn't slide the helicopter to get over them because of the trees. We broke hover and prepared for another attempt. As Phil, Leroy and I worked to get a better fix on the location of the downed LOH crew, Arnie busied himself demonstrating the out-of-the-box thinking that makes the U.S. service member special. He decided to extend the reach of the rescue hoist cable by attaching a gunner's belt to it.

After getting some direction from the LOH crew we had a good fix on their location. Phil started his second approach and hover-down maneuver. This time we were able hover-down further into the trees. Phil stabilized the hover with tree limbs so close that I could reach out and touch the one on the left. Leroy had provided direction so the tail of the helicopter was in the "V" between two limbs of a tree behind us. Arnie's quick thinking to extend the length of the rescue cable allowed it to reach the ground allowing the LOH crew to be extracted from the jungle. After winching the three crewmembers aboard the HH-2D Phil did a vertical climb to clear the trees and we returned the downed crew safely to Phouc Vinh for medical evaluation.

Because the LOH crew operated out of Song Be it was disappointing to the Iron Barnacle detachment that we were never able to meet them over beers to exchange war stories. To us "squids" the Iron Barnacle experience left a lasting impression and deep respect for the professionalism and tenacity of the Army aviators that we worked with during our short period of joint operations.