

Witness to Night Shoot Down

By [Dennis Dupuis](#) 114th AHC

About August 10th, 1969 ... I arrived at Vinh Long, IV Corps as a “Red Knight” assigned to the 114th Assault Helicopter Co, 2nd Platoon. I shared a room, in a “hooch”, with Francos a short, thin, heavily mustached guy who reminded me of Jim Croce.

Our living quarters were sandbagged, single story buildings on a 16’ x 36’ concrete slab. The walls above the sandbags were open for ventilation and screened. Insects seemed to get into the hooch and were not able to get out. Somehow the US got into Vietnam and couldn’t get out either.

The pilots living area had a tendency to flood during the six month monsoon season. Twelve to fifteen inches of water collected in the Hooch area. Knee high concrete dams had been built to complete a “sandbag dam” around the Hooch. Screen doors kept the bugs inside, and knee high concrete doorway dams kept the water outside. My scraped and bruised shins reminded this “New Guy” to step over these damn concrete dams that kept the hooch dry. They also served nightly, as a “too much to drink” check for the FNGs (f___ing new guys).

Around August 16th, 1969... My successful in-country check ride granted me the honor of flying the unit missions. These daily missions allowed me to practice the SOP (Standard Operating Procedures) for RED KNIGHTS’ combat assault missions. 5 or 10 slicks (UH-1 troop transports), two guns (AH-1G attack helicopters), a Charlie Charlie or C&C (UH-1 command and control) would depart Vinh Long airfield around 0800 or 0900, land at the PZ (Pick-up Zone), load Vietnamese troops, insert them in an LZ (Landing Zone) and return to Vinh Long airfield for lunch. The afternoon mission was the reverse of the morning mission. Soon I was tasked for the night missions.

The nights were ready reaction missions of three slicks , two guns , a C&C or Charlie Charlie and a (UH-1) flare ship. These night missions were different from the assault missions I had known just days before. We flew to some forward base, refueled, and shut down by sundown. The slicks were on “stand-by” during these shut downs. C&C, the guns, and flare ship received a briefing from the supported unit and then planned our mission.

Aug 31, 1969.... Moc Hoa Airfield, north of Vinh Long, approximately 20 miles south of the Cambodia border. We staged at Moc Hoa airfield surrounded by the Plain of Reeds. The Plain of Reeds was a large, flat area that stretched from horizon to horizon, it was more like an “Ocean” of Reeds. Very few roadways marked the landscape of this sparsely populated area. The ruins of villages were connected by many tree lined canals and waterways. It vividly reminded me the salt water marshes of South Carolina.

The northern edge of our operational area was the Vietnam-Cambodia border. International boundaries might be a river, mountain ridge or man-made road but here it was an invisible, surveyed line in the Plain of Reeds. A 5 km or 10 km no-fly, buffer zone in South Vietnam protected Cambodia’s airspace at its border. This no-fly zone was drawn on our map. The border and buffer zone were not visible on the ground nor from the air.

On this particular mission, I was the copilot of the trail ship. My AC or aircraft commander was: Dennis... or Don... or Doug Wilson. I was a brand new Army Aviator, not a seasoned combat pilot. After flying 300 to 400 hours, I might be seasoned and

might be considered for an Aircraft Commander. Wilson briefed me on my responsibilities as a new Peter Pilot (co-pilot).

Tonight, my primary “job” was

1. To stand by the controls and fly if and when the AC was shot. When this happened, I was to take him to a safe place for treatment.
2. It was my duty to keep the slicks position on the map.
3. “And by the way, keep us out of the international buffer zone.”

That was my job as the trail Peter P.

Around midnight we received our mission: pick up some mercenaries from BTT, Bien tin tan... I don't remember the towns name exactly. We cranked up the Hueys, flew to BTT, and loaded 8-10 pacs, passengers, in each aircraft.

There was something different about these men in the back of the helicopter. The brass belt buckles and bright color unit patches of the Vietnamese soldiers were not part of these uniforms. Their boots weren't shined, and their uniforms didn't fit tightly to their bodies. These uniforms looked more like work clothing. These guys weren't going to a parade, they were going to work. They were going to fight. Hell, they were going to war.

We got the call to launch, rolled the throttle to 100% power and the flight of three helicopters left the ground. We were on our way to the LZ at 90 knots airspeed. 90 knots (Nautical miles per hour) is about 105 mph, very close to 3 kilometers per minute. We could fly thru the buffer zone in about 3 minutes.

While heading east towards Moc Hoa, C&C told the flight to “hold your position.” We started to circle to the left, while C&C made a different selection for our LZ. One orbit, two orbits, at last, we received a call to continue in an easterly direction.

One at a time, three flares illuminated and seemed to be hung slightly above the night horizon. Each flare's golden globe of light illuminated its parachute and trailing smoke. They drifted over the Plain of Reeds and over our LZ. C&C briefed the final landing instructions to the flight over the radio, “Make your approach to the North in line with the flares. Vee of three. Land to the north of the L shaped tree line. Straight out departure with a right 90 degree turn to the east.”

“Roger that”, lead replied.

There were six flares burning now. Another set of three had been dropped to maintain the light. The first set was lower than our flight. The fresh set of flares seemed to burning higher above the horizon; we were closer to them now. The flares would be above us at the LZ. Only three flares were burning now, the lower set had burned out. As we made a left turn to the North, I was able to see the lights of Moc Hoa thru the open right side cargo door. I located our position on the map and strained to find the diminishing landmarks to update the flights position.

We were inbound to the LZ. Still flying at 1500 ft altitude and 90 kts airspeed when three more flares ignited. We could make out some of terrain features in front of us by light of the flares. That same light had destroyed our night vision making it difficult to see into the dark hole directly below the flight. We passed over a wide east – west canal. I checked the map, the FNG, told Wilson that we were in the buffer zone.

(At 90 kts, we'd be inside Cambodia in 3 minutes.)

“Are you sure ?”, Wilson asked.

I checked the map. "Yes."

"Are you sure?", he would have questioned any new guy who had been in country for a month. I had been flying with them for just two weeks.

I rechecked the map. "Yeah! We flew over the big canal and you see the little stream running to the southeast. A little further north is the border", I replied assuredly. (The flares had to be in Cambodia.)

Wilson relayed the message to flight lead. "Are you sure?" came the reply.

Wilson looked at me. Once again I told him that I was sure.

As the flight started to descend, he replied, "Yes, we are sure!"

We were committed to the final approach. "Back me up on the controls", Wilson said. Without touching the controls, I moved my feet next to the pedals that controlled the tail rotor. I dropped my left hand beside the armor seat and slightly above the collective stick and throttle control. My right hand and fingers surrounded the cyclic stick. I was ready to take control of the helicopter, if no when he was shot.

We were on approach into an LZ, in Cambodia, with mercenaries onboard. Maybe we were supposed to land there? But hell, what did I know? I was 20 years old; as of ten days ago; a helicopter pilot, and in Vietnam.

The Red Knights were making a steep approach. We were about 20 kts and 100 ft above the ground when a machine gun started firing at the lead aircraft. The night was dark. The tracers were green. "Lead's taking fire, six o'clock." I heard over my headset.

I could see it all. The lead helicopter puked bright glowing engine parts out its exhaust. It looked like a big bottle rocket. The green tracers continued into the lead aircraft. Lead started descending vertically, his engine had failed. "They were crashing", I thought. Whhhhoomp... ..whhhhhoomp..... whhhhhoomp. Flashes of bright light accompanied the impacts. I thought we were being mortared in the LZ. The lead slick started burning before it hit the ground. The green tracers were still hitting lead. Mortars weren't impacting, it was rockets impacting beside us and behind us. The AH-1 Cobras (the 114th guns call sign was also COBRA) were covering the flight with 2.75 inch rockets. Wilson was landing our aircraft; the troops were getting off the ship. Lead had hit the ground so hard that landing gear had collapsed. The belly of the helicopter was laying flat on the ground. More flames. Bigger flames. Huge flames consumed the dead Huey helicopter. My hands were close to the controls but I was hypnotized by the scene. A move by the enemy to their left and right and our entire flight would be down in the LZ, in Cambodia. Our aircraft started to take off. I thought of the crew in the burning aircraft. This new guy wondered silently "Why are we leaving?"..... "They're gone".

The safety of the dark surrounded us quickly as we flew out of light of the burning ship. We made right turn. Chalk two started climbing. When he switched his green /red navigation lights from dim to bright, we moved into formation.

"Oh no," I thought, "Where's the map?" Chalk two turned right.

"Where's the border?" "Where's Moc Hoa airfield?"

I found the map between the armor plated seat and my hip. We stopped climbing. At last we reached the security of 1500 ft altitude.

The drone of the rotors filled the cockpit. The quiet of the short flight back to Moc Hoa was broken with the mayday call that C&C transmitted over the emergency (Guard) frequency. "Mayday, mayday, mayday. Army helicopter down north of Moc

Hoa. Mayday, mayday, mayday.” Initial contact was made with the Search and Rescue group. They changed to a different frequency and coordinated further action.

We landed at Moc Hoa, refueled, and waited. The Cobras landed to rearm and refuel and updated us. The crew had made it out of the aircraft and was evading the enemy. Radio contact with C&C was established by using one of the mercenaries’ FM radio. The wounded American advisor was being carried by the aircrew members and an attempt to pick them up would be made at first light. One Air Force gunship said the crash was on the other side of the Red Line. A different Air Force gunship replied, “If they’re American, they’re on my side.”

C&C landed, refueled, and went back to the area to coordinate the rescue effort.

Meanwhile, the Air Force gunship, Spooky or Puff, arrived to engage the automatic weapons and enemy troops. They supported the rescue at first light. The Med-Evac helicopter rescued the survivors, dropped off the aircrew and departed with wounded. We found out later that the MACV advisor, a young American Lieutenant, had died on the way to the hospital.

A few weeks later, this event was reported in a hometown newspaper as an emergency autorotation from Vietnam into Cambodia.

66-16849

CP W1 YOUNG WJ
AC W1 KLOPFENSTEIN GW

TRAIL Aircraft –

AC- WO Wilson
CP -WO DuPuis, DP

C&C -- CPT Bisson (sp) and WO Sedy (sp)