

The Crash of the Pusher in Cambodia - Tail #66-19114

By [Clifford J. Morley](#)

Before I begin my “Hook” story perhaps some background information would be in order. My second tour of duty in Vietnam was a short one from Jan. 1970 to Sept. 1970 with Charlie Company, 228th Aviation Battalion, 1st Air Cavalry Division at Camp Gorravd Phuoc Vinh as a flight engineer. Basically it was a continuation of my first tour which was from May 1968 to May 1969 with Bravo Company at LZ Sharron Quang Tri, Tay Ninh and Bearcat. In between I was stationed at Hunter Army Airfield, Savannah, Georgia.

From day one of the incursion into Cambodia in May 1970, the Chinooks of Charlie Company were kept busy flying in men and materials and hauling out vast quantities of captured enemy weapons and supplies. The initial thrust was expected to be like flying into one big hot LZ but that proved otherwise. I was not aware of the specific tactical zones of operation i.e. The Parrots Beak, the Fish Hook and the Bulge but I quickly became familiar with many of the places we were flying missions into.

On May 4, 1970 I was the Flight Engineer on a Charlie Company CH-47 “B” model Chinook helicopter, tail number 66-19114, named the “Pusher”. The five man crew that day were as follows:

The Pilot and Aircraft Commander - Captain L.D. Mohler

The Co-Pilot - Warrant Officer 2 G.K. Yeager

The Flight Engineer - SP5 Clifford J. Morley

The Crew Chief and Right Gunner - SP4 David Petty II

The Left Gunner - PFC J.A. Williams

There were no passengers on board as we approached a fire support base which was being cut out of the jungle in the general vicinity of a place called Memot. Captain Mohler was flying the aircraft and I was lying on the floor peering down through the open cargo hook hatch at the external load of a 105 MM Howitzer with an attached A-22 bag of ammunition slung beneath us. I was giving instructions to the pilots as to the distance of the load from the treetops and as we cleared the triple canopy jungle and were hovering forward into the LZ. I apprised them of the condition of the terrain, the many tree stumps, tangled brush and personnel movement. There was no green, yellow or red smoke, nor anyone signaling as to where to set down the cargo. The howitzer was about 40 to 50 feet above the ground. The sling attaching the Howitzer to the cargo hook is in total about 25 to 30 feet. That means the “Pusher” was hovering at around 80 to 90 feet in the air.

Suddenly, “shit happened” in split second heartbeats! A rotor blade strike occurred, the aircraft began to vibrate un-unnervingly, the co-pilot CW2 Yeager panicked and pulled back the throttles effectively shutting down the engines and I was looking at dirt and the cargo hook sticking up through the hatch. The thought quickly came to mind of the

possibility of rolling over, blades slashing through the fuselage, and possibly fire erupting. I crouched down and went ducking out over the ramp only to find myself somewhat higher off the ground than I expected to be. The "Pusher" had belly crashed dead center on a dirt mound and all 4 wheels were 2 to 4 feet from touching the ground. The rotor blades were stopped and a small amount of smoke was drifting from the front of the engines. The Howitzer was protruding from and partially stuck under the right fuel pod which did not appear to be ruptured or any indication of any fuel leaking. The left fuel pod also appeared intact. SP4 Petty and PFC Williams were well clear of the aircraft by the time I was jumping out over the ramp. Captain Mohler and CW2 Yeager were not able to exit the cockpit so quickly.

We all gathered our wits and began a damage assessment. There was no disagreement to the conclusion of extensive structural damage to the center under carriage and airframe. Captain Mohler, myself and SP4 Petty proceeded up top to inspect the rotor system, blades and other vital components. CW2 Yeager was on the radio in the cockpit and PFC Williams was keeping an eye on the ship. The tip of one rear blade was badly mangled and the two others to a lesser extent. The front blades were not damaged. The engines, the five transmissions, the drive shaft and the flight controls appeared intact and that was determined in as much as it should be in the field. Not one "Lord Mount" was broken. I was amazed!

At this juncture, the Commander of the 228th Aviation Battalion came flying into the LZ in his personal command "Slick" and landed among the tree stumps and thick brush about 80 yards from us. He came over and we greeted him appropriately. The Colonel was speaking with Captain Mohler and it became clear to me that the crash of the "Pusher" had created a tactical dilemma in that she was impeding the massive military activities in play to establish this LZ as a fully operational fire support base. I did not see any bulldozers around and there was no time to fly in a maintenance crew to dismantle the aircraft for a lift-out by a flying crane helicopter. There was only one other option!

Apparently, since I was the Flight Engineer and the highest ranking MOS 67U20, the Colonel asked me if I thought it would be safe to fly this aircraft over to the edge of the LZ..... "No Sir! I don't think that would be a good idea." I added, "The aircraft has extensive structural damage, the rear rotor blades are damaged and no telling what else which could not be determined in the field." He grunted and asked Crew Chief SP4 Petty who was the next highest ranking MOS 67U20 the same thing. Petty's answer was the same as mine. The Aircraft Commander, Captain Mohler stepped forward and took control of the situation by saying that he would "just do it by himself". CW2 Yeager, myself and Petty and Williams were instructed to gather our gear and get into the Colonel's "Slick". We took out the M60D machine guns, our flight helmets and bullet bouncers and I made sure the aircraft log was in its proper place. I also disengaged the cargo hook. We hoofed it over to the Colonel's Command Huey helicopter and what a sight it was. It was all spit shined and polished with red carpet on the floor, looking like it had just flown in from Fort Rucker. We buckled in and watched.

Captain Mohler wasted no time in doing what he had to do. At any other time and any

other place it would have been incredulous to crank up and fly a helicopter that had just experienced a serious crash, but not that day. I could tell from the puff of smoke that he was firing up the “P” and then engine one. The blades slowly turned and a mass exodus of personnel began running in all directions into the jungle. In an instant engine two and full rpm and the Pusher rose up off that dirt mound, shimmying and shaking like the mythical Phoenix rising up from the fires of hell. Captain Mohler took her up to about 30 or 40 feet and hovered her over about a hundred yards to the edge of the clearing and set her down and shut her back down. Keep in mind here that he performed this action with no co-pilot, no flight engineer or crew chief to assist him. Later as we lifted off in the colonel’s “Slick” I looked down at the Pusher for the last time, sitting there at the edge of the jungle looking forlorn and abandoned. I felt kind of sad. Just one of those weird war things.

This story had a good ending since no one was injured or killed. So from the realm of my memories and dreams of those days, I propose a toast. A toast to Captain Mohler for his “guts and glory”! A toast to the entire crew of the Pusher for their stalwartness! A toast to all Vietnam helicopter crews and pilots! A toast to all the men and women who served in Vietnam and for those who lost their lives! A toast to the Pusher, one tough old war bird!

My thanks to Jimmy Ketchum the webmaster of the 228th Aviation Battalion website for providing me with a copy of the Army’s accident case report. It corroborates the core elements of my recollections of the event. However that report doesn’t include SP4 David Petty II as being the crew chief and a crew member. Hopefully my account of the event will correct that omission.



Photo 1: FE Clifford J. Morley and the Pusher, March 1970



Photo 2: CC Petty is at the front rotor blades, AC Mohler is in the middle and FE Morley is at the rear pylon, the tall guy.



Photo 3: The 105mm Howitzer protruding from the right fuel pod.



The aircraft commander, Capt. Larry D. Mohler, is on top of CH47B 66-19114 making a final inspection before flying the damaged aircraft, alone, off to the side of the LZ. Army Accident Report #700504321 says our approach to the LZ was from south to northwest so my conclusion is that 114's nose is pointing in a general northwesterly direction.



John A. Williams, the left gunner on "The Crash of the Pusher in Cambodia". Note his trademark white plastic spoon. He was always ready to chow down on some delicious c-rations. Photo is courtesy of John A. Williams.



David Petty II (picture on left), the crew chief and right gunner on "The Crash of the Pusher in Cambodia". Note the Arizona state flag behind him which was often mistaken for a Vietcong flag. Per the CH47 crew locator page on <http://webpages.charter.net/228th/>. Davids' crew profile of Nov3, 2003 says he was an SP5 and FE of hooks 67-18468 and 67-18464. Photo is courtesy of Clifford J. Morley.
Revision

Thanks and credit to Jim Ketcham, the webmaster of

<http://webpages.charter.net/228th/> for providing me with a copy of the Army's Accident Case #700504321. The Accident Summary is accurate in all that it states from our approach to the LZ and 114's contact with the LZ controller to the brief statement about aircraft damage and the condition of the landing area. However, the statement "with the resulting power loss the aircraft settled on top of its load and came to rest in an upright position" lacks descriptive power. The reality of it was more like this: "with an abrupt loss of power the aircraft dropped like a big rock from 100 feet up and crashed hard on a large dirt mound atop its load, the impact primarily being absorbed by the ships center undercarriage". Also, the report doesn't include SP4 David Petty II as being the Crew Chief and a crew member. Hopefully, my account will correct that omission.

Update

Also, thanks and credit to John A. Williams, the left gunner, who took photographs of the crashed CH47B Chinook tail number #66-19114 named "The Pusher" with his 35mm camera. He gave me some copies, back then, three of which accompany this "Hook Tins". John was a grunt with Delta Company 2nd/8th Cav based at Tay Ninh prior to joining C228th ASHB as a Chinook gunner in April, 1970. He was primarily the gunner on Hook #67-18471 and later became a Crew Chief. He can be emailed at JOW560@aol.com.

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