

The Sissies in Blue Bird One

When I first got in the Crossbow Gun Platoon, the war was still fun. We were at Lai Khe, 60 miles north of Saigon and on the eastern edge of the Iron Triangle. Highway 13 ran up from Saigon to Ben Cat, outside our perimeter and then meandered its way north. Convoy crews had named Highway 13, "Thunder Road" long before I got there, because of the frequent ambushes.

There was nothing more I looked forward to, then being scrambled. We maintained both a primary and a secondary light fire team on scramble alert. The rule was you had to give off within ten minutes, but within five was the unwritten rule. We actually practiced when we were on alert, and our aircraft were always pre-flighted, fueled and ready to go. Scrambles at night were cool, but the ultimate was day time scrambles. During the day, we always had an audience.

The Robin Hoods used an air horn off a duece and a half to sound a scramble. It was powered by a battery and some days we would be scrambled several times and the battery would get pretty run down. The horn would start off strong, but suddenly just fade away to nothing. Kind of took out the suspense when it happened. But normally, you could hear the horn and its ten second blast all over the perimeter and when that happened, every thing seemed to come to a halt as we ran from the hooch area to the flight line.

We always made a big show when we scrambled in day light. We used the excuse that we were keeping up morale of the troops, but really, we were letting everyone know that the Crossbows were going hunting. All of the crew chiefs and door gunners had red scarves tied to their flak vests and we always had one foot on the skids as we made a fast, low level break over the perimeter wire. I can still hear my Fire Team Leader on the radio to the tower as both aircraft came up to full power.

"Lai Khe Tower, Crossbow 33, a light fire team on scramble."

"Crossbow 33, Lai Khe Tower, wait one. Break, All traffic in the vicinity of Lai Khe, make an immediate go around a Crossbow Fire Team on Scramble. Break, Crossbow 33 the altimeter at 29.96, wind from the north at five, you are cleared for immediate takeoff from the revetments at the pilot's discretion."

"Lai Khe, 33 with two on the go."

And we would move out from the revetments in military precision, hit the runway and blast off. When I daydream, not the late night sneak up on you, throat clenching nightmares, but when I remember the good times, that's one of the ones I miss.

So on this day, we're sitting around the alert shack, untubing rockets, screwing the warheads on and having the odd sword fight with the empty tubes when the horn goes off. With the gleeful exuberance of schoolboys that had just been released unexpectedly from class, we started running for the aircraft.

I was standing by the cockpit door, with all my gear on, when my aircraft commander came running for the revetments.

"What's up, Sir?" as I held his chicken plate up for him to slip into it.

"Robin Hood slick just went down 10 clicks to the north with an engine failure, they're under fire."

Well, that sort of took the fun out of it, but only momentarily. We climbed in, went through the routine and climbed out to altitude. Altitude for us was 50 feet or so, while our wingman lagged back a quarter of a mile or so and at the nose bleed height of 200 feet. We followed Highway 13 and the AC came up on the Company UHF push.

"Robin Hood 22, Crossbow 33 on Uniform"

"Crossbow 33, Robin Hood 22!"

I could hear the excitement in his voice, but he was using the aircraft radio so it couldn't be too bad.

"Robin Hood 22, Crossbow 33, a light fire team on the way to rescue you. Say situation."

"Crossbow 33, 22, we're down in a clearing just off 13. There's some deadfall trees to our west and we're being fired on by a sniper."

"Robin Hood 22, 33, we're 01 out. Say how far west the fire coming is from?"

"33, 22. About 100 meters; seems like just one guy."

Well, this didn't seem too bad. We were both minigun ships and both armed with two miniguns, 14 2.75 inch rockets with 17 lb warheads and two door guns. We'd

be able to finish this off in no time, kill the dink, and drag smoke down the runway in a low level pass.

"22, 33, okay, we're on station, we see you, have your people stay down. We'll make our first pass from west to east and see if we can spot your sniper."

On intercom, the AC briefed us to stay "cold" and see if we could spot the shooter. The pilot dropped the nose as the aircraft commander brought the mini gun sight down from the ceiling of the cockpit.

"37, 33, cover us in we'll make a run, west to east, breaking south. See if anything happens behind us."

We started in, and both my gunner and I, with our M60s in our laps, leaned out watching the ground below us. As we passed over the slick, we waved and we could see them crouched on the right side of the aircraft. Robin Hood 22, the AC, had his helmet on and was leaning in the cockpit door as he talked to us. As we passed to the east, I could see some giant mahogany trees down. They were interlaced on top of each other and as we passed over, I saw Luke the Gook tracking us with what looked like a bolt action rifle.

"33, 22, he's firing at you!"

As we suddenly broke right, I laid red smoke really close to him and the AC told our wingman to hit the smoke.

I watched as we sped back to the right as 37 laid into him. I could see the tracers from the miniguns and the door guns hitting the downed trees and bouncing all over the place. Suddenly two consecutive pairs of rockets were launched and they impacted right on top of poor Luke. "Damn," I thought to myself, "37 got the kill!" But then,

"37, 22, he popped up just as you broke and he's firing at you!"

Well, with this, my AC started climbing to altitude and extended out far to the west. On the intercom, he said, "Okay, enough of this, when you guys have the target spotted, and you're clear of the slick, start firing. Keep right on the target. Pilot, start laying down pairs of rockets. Once you have the range with first pair, fire a second, and then alternate with me and the miniguns."

"37, 33, enough of this, we're going to dump everything on top of him this time. Follow us around and hit him as soon as we break."

"33, 37, roger."

Then we started in. I waited until we were almost to the slick and then started firing. My gunner followed my tracers and we had him in a crossfire. The first pair of rockets left the tubes and they were right on the money. The second pair had just left when the deep throated roar of the miniguns went off and then it was like an orchestra with the steady firing of the door guns, the whoosh of the rockets and the dentist drill grind of the miniguns. Everything was hitting right on top of Luke and the pilot managed to get all seven pairs off, on target on that one run. As we broke out, 37 was already starting in. I could see his rockets fire and I had a clear target, so I fired at Luke while we raced back to the south in a race track oval. It looked to me that 37 was having the same luck as we did. All his rockets were right in the area where Luke was. As he broke right and away, we were starting our next run.

"Uh, 33, 22, the Victor Charlie was firing at 37 when he was climbing out, and he just blew our windshield out."

"Robin Hood 22, Crossbow 33. We've expended our rockets and can't hurt him with machine gun ammo. You guys stay down we're going to get some help."

The AC turned to the radio console and came up VHF Guard.

"Any Tac Air vicinity of XT ??????, this is Crossbow 33 on Victor Guard."

Now as a word of explanation, all the helicopter gunships, and the Tac Air, the fighters, used VHF as a common air to air radio. The gunships all had macho names like in my Battalion, the Crossbows, the Stingers, the Gunslingers, etc. And usually, the Air Force fighters had fairly neat call signs like Gunfighter and similar names. But suddenly, on Guard, a slow southern drawl comes up and says,

"Crossbow 33, this is Blue Bird 1, come up 121.5."

With this we collapsed. What the hell was a "Blue Bird." We started cat calling on the intercom as the AC dialed 121.5 on the VHF. He held up his hand, so we all shut up.

"Blue Bird 1, Crossbow 33. We have a single helo down with a mechanical failure at XT ??????. They're under fire from a single sniper, about 100 meters west of their position. The target is in some downed mahogany trees, and we've expended on him without success. Can you hustle up some Tac Air for us?"

The AC changed to intercom and said, "It must be a new Forward Air Controller or something."

"Crossbow 33, Blue Bird 1, we're a flight of two, with max ord, we can probably handle the target, can you mark?"

And again, this set off gales of laughter. "Maybe he has some extra hydraulic fluid he can throw out at Luke, Sir."

"Okay, I'll put the target on the left side and make a run in. Bud, drop a Wily Peter on him as we go by."

"Blue Bird 1, Crossbow 33. We'll mark the target with smoke, make your runs south to north, breaking east. There are no high ground features in the target area, nearest airfield is Lai Khe, 10 miles south."

"We'll be suppressing with the miniguns on the way in, Bud, get the smoke as close as possible."

I grabbed a white phosphorous grenade from the rack on the back firewall and leaned out as I pulled the pin and held down the spoon. As we crossed over the slick, I could see them running to the west--the whole crew. Odd, I thought. And then suddenly we were there, and I released the Wily Pete. It was a perfect shot. "Smoke out, on target, hit the smoke, Sir."

"Blue Bird 1, Crossbow 33. The smoke is good, hit the smoke. Say type of aircraft?" as we all started looking around for the tell-tale smoke trails of high performance aircraft.

"BREAK RIGHT, JESUS, QUICK, BREAK RIGHT SIR!" from my gunner who was panic stricken. I shot him a look, and he was staring straight up through the rotor blades. As the aircraft heeled to the right, I had an unobstructed view of.....

A B-57 Canberra, followed by a second one, in a terminal near perpendicular dive straight down. As I watched his rotary bomb bay eject six, 500 lb bombs, the entire length of his two wings lit up from the flashes from his six 20mm cannons. As he broke out, and his bombs were just beginning to impact, his wingman copied his lead.

The multiple explosions rocked us around for a second, and the target area was completely obscured with smoke and debries. We finally spotted our wingman, and the AC called him to join up with us over the highway. We turned back in and could see the four crew members from the slick getting up from a depression and standing staring at the impact zone. There was one giant hole where the trees had been and nothing left for a 50-yard circle.

"Crossbow 33, Blue Bird 1, any chance for a BDA?" (Bomb Damage Assessment)

"Blue Bird 1, uh, the target is, uh, destroyed. We can only give you a body count of one."

"Roger, Crossbow 33, Blue Bird 1! Very well, glad we could assist. Have a nice day!"

And they joined up at about 5000 AGL, wagged their wings, and headed south.

We stuck around until the maintenance ship and a Chinook showed up to sling the slick out. And then we went back to Lai Khe and very quietly, without any fanfare, put the ships away.