

Water and Ammo in, Bodies Out

In early 1967, I was still with the 2nd Platoon slicks, crewing 6982, "Maid Mary." 6982 was a brand new "D" model which the Company got to replace one of our aircraft which had crashed and killed the crew in December. I sweated over it everyday, trying to keep it clean, scrubbing the floors out, and a futile attempt to keep the carbon off the tailboom from the jet exhaust.

I had a lot of hours in, was kind of senior in the platoon, when my gunner rotated home. The Platoon Sergeant sent us out to the flight line early one morning for a Combat Assault. He promised me that he would bring my new gunner out to the ship.

I went on out and started getting ready. I popped the cockpit doors open for the pilots who were still being briefed, opened the engine cowling for the pre flight inspection and then got my gear ready.

The platoon 3/4 ton truck skidded to a halt and SSG Lawson dropped off a scruffy little guy wearing a boonie hat with the front brim pinned up. He got out of the truck, dropping his flight helmet to the ground, and then stood up and I got a good look at him.

He was OLD, at least 30. As he rambled over to me, I saw he was already wearing the red scarf that we all wore around his neck. As he came up to me, he stuck out his hand and said,

"Hi! I'm Ray Dussault, I'm your new gunner, I just transferred in."

I couldn't believe this, this guy was older than the hills. SSG Lawson came around the back of the truck and grabbed my guns off the bed. He was grinning like a maniac, knowing that I was getting a royal case.

"Now you guys have fun, and remember! I'm grading on 'works well with others' today."

And with that he was gone. I watched Lawson pull away and then I turned to Dussault. He was a Sergeant! That meant he outranked me as I was only a Specialist 4.

"Okay, Sarge, here come the pilots, we got to speed it up. Mount the guns and get your gear ready. And say listen, I'm the Crew Chief. Even if you outrank me, this is my airplane and I'm the boss."

He listened attentively, smiling all the time. He nodded his head and then strolled back to the ramp and grabbed the two door guns, carrying them back to the ship. He dropped one off on my side and then disappeared on the other side with his. I figured "what the hell" and went ahead and mounted my M60D machine gun on the mount on the right transmission well. Both pilots showed up and started the preflight.

As I was throwing on my chicken plate, Dussault came back over on my side.

"Say, Specialist, could you give me a hand with the gun? I've never mounted one before."

I just stared at him for a second, then followed him back. I grabbed the gun, showed him how to mount it and then started back to my side. I got as far as the cockpit when Dussault said,

"Hey, Specialist, could you show me how to load this thing?"

That's when I found out that Ray Dussault had his first helicopter ride late the evening before. He had never crewed, didn't know how to fix his gear, wear his flight helmet, I mean we're talking total cherry here. So I quickly told him what he needed to know just to complete the start up, and then I told the pilots I was going to have to teach all day using the intercom. And that's what happened. He didn't know about clearing the tail rotor, watching for other aircraft or even what the rules of engagement were.

As sure as luck would have it, the first mission was a combat assault carrying 1st Division troops into a landing zone. We picked the troops up in the field. On our arrival, they weren't quite ready, so we shut down; and I had a few more minutes on the ground to teach Dussault. My one thought was to get through the day and then have a face off with SSG Lawson when we got home. Dussault kept trying, and he was good at learning everything.

But, as the time went on, I kept getting madder and madder.

We finally loaded up the troops and headed for the landing zone. Our formation was staggered trail right, and I was on the inside. That meant I couldn't fire suppression on the way in. The flight naturally drew fire on the way in, and Dussault never got a round off. I found out later that he couldn't figure out where

the safety was. On the second and third flight with additional troops, there was no fire. And then the rest of the flight departed, and we got stuck supplying the troops we had just landed with everything they needed.

We called it "ash and trash" and it wasn't our favorite mission. We had inserted an Infantry company, and they had split into platoons and moved out in different directions. Ash and trash meant we brought them water and ammo, if they needed it, or heavy equipment that they couldn't haul. It meant a long day, with the constant whine of the engine in your ears, the helmet squeezing your head, and never enough time to stop and heat up some C-rations.

Late in the afternoon, when it was really hot, one of the platoons got nailed. Their pointman spotted movement, opened fire, and then a command detonated mine was blown in their faces. It killed four of them. We got called in to carry the bodies out to graves registration down at 93rd Evac Hospital in Long Binh.

The grunts had cut an LZ for us in the foliage. We hovered straight down; and as the skids touched, they started bringing the body bags over. We had carried these guys in early that morning, spent the day resupplying them, and watched as the heat and humidity, the fear and tension had taken its toll on them as they humped through the triple canopy of the jungle. And now, they were carrying four of their friends to us to take their last ride.

I had to give Ray credit. He moved out of the well into the cargo compartment to help me. I folded the seats up so there was enough room; and we carefully took the rubber bags, one at a time, and gently placed them on the cabin floor. Both of us were silent on the intercom; and we seemed to work as a team, finally. When we were done, I gave the pilot thumbs up, moved back into the well, and then cleared the tail rotor for the pilot as we went straight back up.

It was a pretty quiet flight down to Long Binh. The bodies, exposed to the heat and humidity, had already started to emit that smell that could come from only one source. Blood was leaking out from one of the bags and spraying around. All four of us ignored it.

When we arrived at Long Binh, the pilot called for clearance to the Dustoff pad, and notified them we had KIAs aboard. We hovered into the pad as a team came down the wooden sidewalk to the pad to receive the bodies. I remained in the well as they approached my side of the aircraft. The first medic reached in, gripped one of the handles on the bags, pulled it out of the aircraft, and let it fall to the ground, three feet below.

I couldn't believe it; I was just stunned. I wanted to say something, but I just couldn't seem to get it out. I looked forward and could see both pilots watching as the medic grabbed for the second bag.

That's when Ray Dussault became my friend. I heard him scream, not on the intercom, as he jumped into the cabin. He grabbed an M14 rifle hanging from the pilot's seat and hit the ground on his side. I saw him cross the cockpit as he was jacking a round into the chamber of the rifle; and, suddenly, I wasn't frozen anymore.

I stood up, brought M60 up from the stow position, and pointed at the medics as Ray had them covered from the front right of the cockpit. The pilot was already on the radio, and I heard him distinctly tell the 93rd Evac controller to get an Officer out to the pad because "my crew is going to shoot your medics right now."

The doors flew open and a crowd poured out. By this time, Ray had them on their knees with their hands straight up overhead. Some Doctor cooled everything down, and the medics began to reverently place the bodies on gurneys. Ray and I kept them covered the whole time we were there. When they were finally done and backing away from us, we came up to RPM and left.

We were just as silent going back to Lai Khe as when we headed to the hospital. But once we were on the ground and the aircraft was shutting down, I walked around to Ray's side. He was leaning against his doorgun with his head down. As I came up to him, I touched him on the shoulder, stuck out my hand, and then I showed him how to wear the Robin Hood scarf the right way.

SGT RAY DUSSAULT,
Robin Hood Doorgunner