

# Combat Helicopter Pilots Association



**2020 Annual Conference in October, Houston TX area, see page 7**

## Member Spotlight

### Ruminations: on Vietnam and Afghanistan

by Graham Stevens



**W**hen the TV talking heads mention America's push for a negotiated deal with the Taliban in Afghanistan so we can bring our troops home, I get a queasy feeling that we didn't learn much from Vietnam. Even among Vietnam vets, not many realize how much our strength dissipated and attitudes changed in Vietnam over time.

In my first Vietnam tour 1969-70, we had about 500,000 troops in-country and our resources seemed almost unlimited. For a serious situation we could and did bring enormous fire-power to bear.

As just one small example, fellow member Terry Garlock has told you about being shot down in a Cobra in III Corps near Lai Khe in 1969. I was in the other Cobra in that fire team. We landed nearby in that hot area and I broke through the canopy to drag Terry out of the cockpit by the collar of his flight suit since his legs didn't work. He was lighter then!

From Mayday radio calls we made before landing to help our buddies out of the wreckage, we soon had Dustoff on-site with a pair of C-model guns flying cover, engaged in a firefight keeping the enemy off us; a pair of fast movers flew a cap overhead just in case needed; and a combat assault flight diverted from a routine mission to stand by overhead in case ground troops were needed for security. When an aircraft was shot down or ground troops were in trouble, we scrambled a variety of assets because the highest calling for all of us was to bring each other home alive.

My second Vietnam tour was September 1972 to March 1, 1973, and so much had changed. America was weary of the war and leaders seemed

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**CHPA**

**PO Box 2585**

**Peachtree City, GA 30269**

**[www.chpa-us.org](http://www.chpa-us.org)**

**[hq@chpa-us.org](mailto:hq@chpa-us.org)**

**800.832.5144**

**Terry Garlock**

**CHPA Newsletter Editor**

**[editor@chpa-us.org](mailto:editor@chpa-us.org)**

**770-630-6064 Eastern time**

**James Wilhite, President**

**[president@chpa-us.org](mailto:president@chpa-us.org)**

**Jack Bailey, Chairman**

**[chairman@chpa-us.org](mailto:chairman@chpa-us.org)**

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desperate for any way out. Our footprint had diminished from 500,000 to a thin force of 24,000 and policies limited the use of American ground troops along with many other restrictive rules our enemy quickly learned to exploit.



*Graham Stevens in Vietnam, 1970*

I was posted to a small airfield at Can Tho in the Mekong Delta in IV Corps. Can Tho airfield had just one Cav Troop, C Troop 16<sup>th</sup> Cav (C/16), one Huey Lift Company (Green Delta), a Chinook company, and a U-8 fixed wing military intelligence unit. That was it, not only at Can Tho but in the entirety of IV Corps. We had no other American aviation or ground units at all. The same was true for the other three Corps. There were only four Cav Troops in the whole of Vietnam. No Aerial Rocket Artillery (2/20 or 4/77), no Aerial Weapons Companies (334<sup>th</sup>), nothing.

The priority had shifted from military strength to pulling up America's pants to scurry home. Meanwhile, we still had missions to fly and some of our guys still had to make the trip home zipped up in a black rubber bag.

We worked as Heavy Pink Teams: two guns, two LOHs, and a C-in-C Huey up high with a Regional Vietnamese Colonel, whose permission was required before we could pull a trigger. We flew the canals, constructed when the French ruled Indochina, doing VRs (visual recons) with the scouts down low and the Cobra's flying just hundreds of feet above them for low cover that moved quickly to evade ground fire, a paradigm shift since the Russians had provided our enemy the Strella SA-7, a shoulder-fired infrared homing missile.

We had already lost a Chinook to these SA-7s,

just before the end of January 1973, down by the old US base at Vinh Long, loaded with troops going back to Saigon for their Freedom Bird ride home. I made a low pass over the wreckage of that Chinook, and I saw nothing left but one engine and an aft wheel. They had been flying about 2000', just ripe for an SA-7 to take them out.

As a second tour guy, I made Fire Team Leader quickly, since I already had 1000 hours combat time in the cockpit. One day I lost two scouts to ground fire in less than twenty seconds. Thank God the guys were in OH-6s, the most survivable cockpit we had. They both rolled to a stop after all the blades and tail boom, and skids had ripped off. They jumped out and ran to the Huey that had landed to rescue them. Not one of my guys was hurt.

A few days later, we lost another scout and were not as lucky. The pilot was wounded, and got out, but the gunner was trapped underneath the wreckage. The pilot confirmed he was dead and ran for the Huey that landed to pick him up. The problem was, we had no one on call to help. We radioed the base and scrounged a team of Crew Chiefs and maintainers to load into Hueys and come to our rescue. These re-purposed crew became our grunts since the "Blues" that used to belong to a Cav Troop were no longer assigned.

I flew my last mission on January 26, 1973. It was too windy for the Scout to stay out with us Cobras, so we went looking for something to shoot, knowing this would be the last day of the war for all of us Cobra jocks. At the Cambodian border we found about 100 military age males, all with good haircuts but no weapons, no women, no kids.

We had the C-in-C Huey make a low pass several times so the Vietnamese Colonel could check them out. Finally, one idiot pulled an AK-47 out from under the straw in his cart and fired at the Huey, a mistake we were prepared for. We expended every ounce of ordinance we had and wanted to re-arm/re-fuel but were told to RTB and "Stand Down." That was the last time we flew our Cobra's in Vietnam, but at least I can say I fired the last pair of rockets in the Delta!

In my first tour we had much excitement flying Cobras. I had multiple hydraulic failures and running landings, lost a tail rotor and crashed, and was shot down in the middle of Cambodia two weeks

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## Ruminations (continued)

prior to President Nixon's announcement of the 1970 "incursion" into Cambodia. Funny, I was shot down at grid XT1313 at 1300 hours on the 13<sup>th</sup> of April but I can't remember if it was Friday or not. That's a lot of character-building experience for a 22 year old.



*The aftermath of Graham Stevens' tail rotor failure. He walked away.*

Then in my second tour, America seemed to have its tail between its legs, desperately searching for the exit. Our country wanted out of Vietnam so badly that we kidded ourselves the Commies would honor their pledge not to attack South Vietnam. Those of us who were there knew better. All the Commies had to do was play nice long enough for Americans to go away. We tiptoed away from protecting our ally while the power structure and the giddy news media pretended we had negotiated a successful end to the conflict. But it only postponed the inevitable without American support.

As we prepared to leave Vietnam behind, I remember the gut-wrenching discomfort of seeing in the eyes of our South Vietnamese friends the unspoken questions: "Really? You are taking the Commie's word they won't attack us? You are really going to leave us and go home to your safety while they plot our destruction?" They didn't have to ask. Many of us wearing the American uniform those days lost a lot of sleep in our final days, then took home with us guilt and disappointment in our country that will never go away.

After the cease fire, our enemy's arrogance was on open display as they drove around South Vietnam brazenly running civilians off the roads. They knew they had won by waiting us out. On the morning af-

ter the cease fire, the VC bastards shot down one of our Hueys as it approached an airfield South of Can Tho. All aboard were killed, and those families had to deal with the anguish made worse by their loved one dying even after the war was over.

Two years after we went home we watched on TV as a new Democrat Congress, swept into control by the Watergate scandal, violated America's pledge by cutting off funding to help South Vietnam defend itself. We watched the North Vietnamese violate their pledge when they attacked South Vietnam in massive force while President Ford literally begged Congress to keep America's peace agreement pledge to come to South Vietnam's defense. The answer was no to the funding request. America threw our ally under the bus, their country was crushed, many who depended on us were killed, and those who lived lost their jobs and homes, to America's everlasting shame.

Our leaders who refused to see this coming remind me still of the three monkeys, with eyes, ears and mouth covered. It still makes me sick. That queasy feeling stirs again with the fantasy spin about a deal with the Taliban in Afghanistan as America desperately looks for the exit out of an impossible situation.

Maybe the deal with the Taliban was the best deal possible. Maybe it can hold together long enough for American troops to get out. But I wonder, does anyone really think the cease fire will hold? I wasn't there in Afghanistan like so many of you, and you might tell me I'm wrong, but given the cultural and language divisions of Urdu's, Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks, constant trouble originating in Pakistan and a long history of killing each other, does anyone really believe any kind of a cease fire deal will last?

Does anyone really believe any deal with the Taliban makes us safer than we were before September 11, 2001?

I can't speak for America's leaders but here's what hard lessons taught me. Maybe we should stop trying to solve the world's ancient conflicts as if we can make cultures in collision like each other. Maybe we should keep America's powder dry, and

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## Ruminations (continued)

when whatever brand of asshole crosses the line to threaten us or our close allies, maybe we should squash them like a bug with overwhelming force, collateral damage and world opinion be damned.

If we did that, maybe enemies who now mock America's weak desperation to be loved would revert to old attitudes as they sit around campfires and warn each other as they used to do, "Don't ever piss off the Americans!"



Send feedback on this article to Graham Stevens  
[stevensgt@cox.net](mailto:stevensgt@cox.net)



Do you want to see stories from the Gulf War . . . or Iraq or Afghanistan or Bosnia or other conflict?

Those stories have to come from you. Contribute something. I'm here to help with word-smithing.

Terry Garlock  
CHPA Newsletter Editor  
[tg.chpa@gmail.com](mailto:tg.chpa@gmail.com)  
770-630-6064





# Our Legacy . . .

**. . . we few, who know the skills, thrills, service to country, commitment to each other and mortal risks of rotary wing combat. Best job we ever had!**







# Posthumous CHPA Membership

Members may nominate for Posthumous membership a deceased person who **WOULD HAVE QUALIFIED** to be a member of CHPA. The cost is a one-time payment of \$100.

## Our First Posthumous Member CW2 Ronald L Tusi, USN/USA

(August 24, 1937 – August 6, 1974)

Nominated by CHPA President James Wilhite

Ron Tusi and I were flight school classmates. Before training to become a US Army helicopter pilot, Ron enlisted in the Navy in 1956. He was attached to the Marine Corps as a Corpsman (Medic), was trained in underwater demolition, and served as a Navy SEAL in operations at Santa Domingo, the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Cuban missile crisis, and two tours as a SEAL in Vietnam.

Ron left the Navy for the Army's Warrant Officer Rotary Wing Aviators Course. During his five tours in Vietnam, three as an Army Aviator, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, two Silver Stars, eight DFCs, three Bronze Stars (one with "V" device), Purple Heart, 80 Air Medals (four for valor), Army Commendation Medal /w "V" Device and one Bronze OLC plus numerous other awards. At the time of his Army Aviation Hall of Fame induction in 1983, CW2 Tusi's record of killing ten enemy tanks with helicopters had never been equaled.

Ron's brilliant aviation career was cut short by his untimely death in a Cobra accident on the night of 6 August 1974 at

Hunter-Liggett Military Reservation in California. He was participating at the time in the dangerous 'Night Owl' experiments, which were used as a basis for today's night fighting techniques.

Ron's memory should be honored.



CW2 Ronald Tusi (Center, seated)

# CHPA 2020 Annual Conference - October

Ladies & Gentlemen:

The 2020 CHPA Annual Conference will take place in Seabrook, TX, a suburb of Houston, in October. The date is being finalized now.

The location is confirmed for the Lakewood Yacht Club with hotel accommodations across the street from the venue. The guest speaker is being confirmed now.

This year our annual dinner will also have affiliated organizations represented.

We apologize for the delay in specificity. We are working diligently to compensate for the COVID impact.

Once the final date is confirmed, we'll publish immediately.



Dr. Jack Bailey, Chairman  
[chairman@chpa-us.org](mailto:chairman@chpa-us.org)





## Books by Members

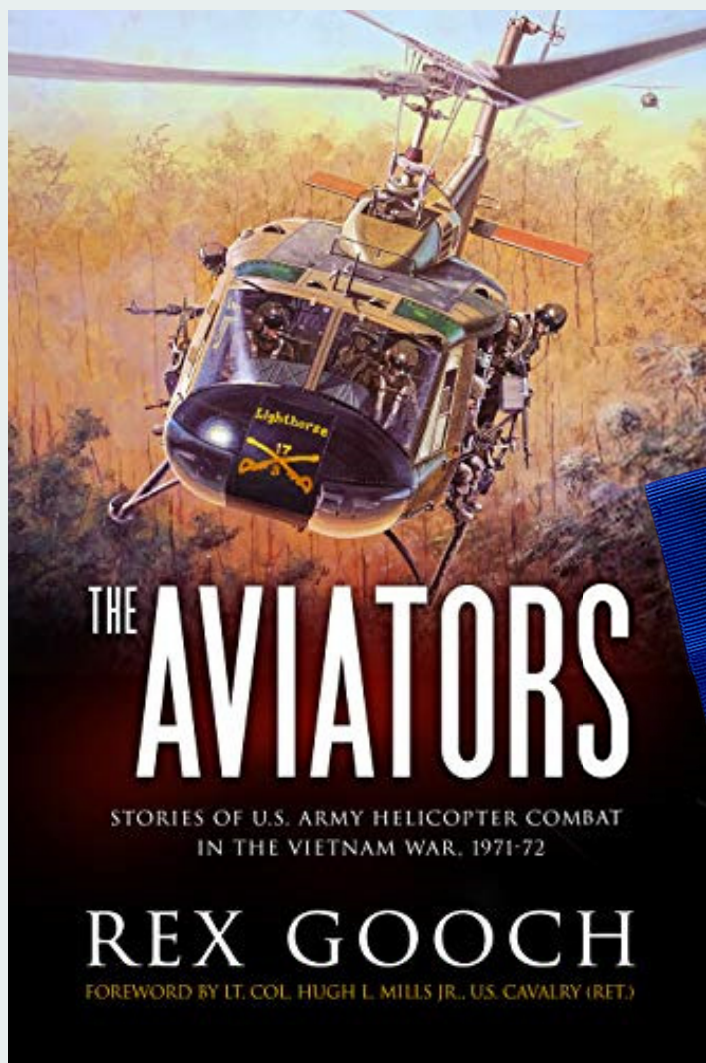


## The Aviators by Rex Gooch

**This book was reviewed and recommended in the 2019 4th Qtr newsletter. See honors received below.**

Rex Gooch reports:

I am pleased to announce that my book, *The Aviators: Stories of U.S. Army Helicopter Combat in the Vietnam War, 1971-72* was a winning entry in the 2020 Independent Publisher Book Awards. This year's competition drew 4,750 entries from the United States and 16 countries overseas. *The Aviators* was awarded a **Bronze Medal** in the **Best eBook Design Category**.



### LINKS

**[Rex's website to order signed books](#)**

**[Amazon website for The Aviators](#)**



# Member Spotlight

## No Hydraulics

A FICTIONAL story by Craig Bond  
Member, CHPA Board of Directors  
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*Editor's note. As any CHPA member will quickly recognize, details in this story could only come from combat flight experience. This is part of a book Craig is writing, and by this example it promises to be a good read. Profanity is left as written because it makes the story realistic.*



Sometime in April 1970, somewhere northwest of the provincial capital of Tay Ninh province in South Vietnam, the flight of six Hueys flew in a staggered right formation. Two escorting Cobras glided behind, ready to attack any threat to the flight. The 187<sup>th</sup> Assault Helicopter Company was delivering 1/27 Infantry, “Wolfhounds,” 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division to a LZ in the jungle about thirteen miles northwest of Tay Ninh. Billy squeezed the button at the top of the cyclic under his index finger to the first detent for the intercom and said to Jack, “Can you take it for a while? My ass is aaaaaching!”

“Did you take that stupid fat ass wallet out of your back pocket like I told you?”

“Yes, boss. Two days ago.”

“Ok, I have the controls,” said Jack with his hands still inches from the collective and the cyclic. He was still checking to see if Billy was verifying a positive transfer of the controls. Still on the controls, Billy glared through the clear visor of his flight helmet until Jack moved his hands onto the controls with a wink.

When Jack took this a little further by not moving his feet onto the anti-torque pedals Billy shouted without using the intercom “Feet on the pedals too!”

“I now have all of the controls,” Jack replied smugly on the intercom.

“You have the controls.”

Jack went on, “And I will now amaze you and all who should be so fortunate to witness how well *Proud Mary* flies with my magic control touch, so deft and delicate that even the birds who see will smile with orgasmic, technicolor pleasure.”

Billy shifted his aching buttocks as much as he could under the weight of his chicken plate and the constraints of his tightly fastened seat belt and shoulder harness thinking, “*He is soooo full of shit, but he sure knows how to make Mary dance real nice.*”

The brief lull of straight and level formation flying ended with a short order on the VHF radio from CPT Austin in the lead aircraft, “Flight. Come up trail.”

In the hazy blue sky at 1500 feet above the ground,

just out of small arms range, the formation of six UH-1s began the shift from a staggered-right formation to a trail formation as they rolled out of a gentle left turn and onto a long final for a landing zone (LZ).

Crew chiefs and door gunners in the six Hueys readied their M-60 machine guns. Billy could see where they would be landing in the distance. He guessed about four miles away. A grey-brown plume of smoke and earth rose from the otherwise undisturbed green carpet of jungle they flew above. It was the signature of the artillery prep that just ended, the barrage of twenty to fifty rounds intended to eliminate any enemy forces waiting to oppose the landing.

“Lead, you’re up trail.” announced Pappy from the trail aircraft.

“Roger. Guns free,” said Lead – meaning if they received fire they were free to return fire.

Billy turned to check Ty, the crew chief and Sammy, the door gunner as Jack slid *Proud Mary* in line at chalk four.

“Guns up?” Jack asked over the intercom.

Billy knew the guns were already up – Jack just wanted to hear from the crew. Billy had learned the importance of listening to the two in the back, to their choice of words, their tone of voice.

“Got some lead rat here for Mista Charles if he breaks bad,” said Ty flexing the belt of ammunition feeding his gun.

“Ready to rock and roll. Charlie is long and I am short!” said Sammy. He was using the word “short” frequently as his days left in country were less than twenty. “Yes sir! This double-digit midget is ready to deal Charlie a bad hand, a double-bad hand.”

Billy thought they were both in high spirits. Both mentioned Charlie - hmmm. Well, “*You’re in the Army now,*” he sang to himself. The song came from perhaps his first exposure to the Army – a comedy starring Jimmy Durante and Phil Silvers. His father took him to see the movie when it cost fifteen cents to see a movie. The song came to mind whenever Billy had some sense of having gotten in a little over his head by joining the

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Army.

Before he turned forward Billy looked at the grunts they were carrying on this combat assault. One man, six man-boys. Five whites, two blacks. One Second Lieutenant, one Staff Sergeant and a Specialist Four. He couldn't see the ranks of the others. The Staff Sergeant was the only man – age wise. Likely, all the man-boys were between eighteen and twenty one. Each staring out, during this brief reprieve from their duty when all they had to do was ride, maybe seeing the new Camaro or Mustang. Or worrying about the girlfriend. A cheerleader perhaps, too good looking not to play around. Or catching bass. Or wondering what waited for them below.

The Second Lieutenant looked worried about all the knowledge and experience he didn't yet have to lead these Soldiers in combat. Odds were he'd be wounded or worse. Charlie always tried to kill the leaders and the radio-man first.

Turning back to his own duty Billy scanned the instruments and their vertical and lateral separation from the aircraft in front. Ten feet above and about forty feet behind. He remembered cringing at being this close to another helicopter in flight a few weeks ago. He had more to learn but he was getting more comfortable flying in a combat assault formation.

Nearing a mile out Billy could see the clearing, about half a football field sunk into one hundred-foot triple-canopy jungle. "Looks like room for six," he shared with Jack then thought to himself, "*No Charlie, I hope.*"

"Before landing check is good – all instruments are in the green, jelly-bean," said Billy.

"OK Slick, I hope your ass is better already. I want to see you do this one," said Jack.

Billy's ass still ached but he was ready to shoot another approach. He felt Jack was giving him more trust. "I have the controls," he said.



Craig Bond in Vietnam, 1970

continued



"You, Slick, you have the controls," Jack said as he confirmed with a glance.

Lead began the descent about a half mile out.

"Flight, this is lead, room for all six, coming out on this heading."

Concentrating on minute changes in his perspective of the aircraft he followed, Billy gently reduced the collective and positioned the cyclic to keep the tail-rotor gear box of the aircraft in front superimposed on that black, almost two-foot round hole of the engine exhaust.

He continually applied pressure and counter-pressure on the controls to stay about forty feet behind the Huey in front of him. He thought about the two aircraft behind him. He tried to be smooth. He didn't want to make the job of flying behind him any more difficult. Just like those long forced-marches in Basic training – the guys at the end of the formation were constantly playing catch-up and slow down.

As they descended below the treetops the light was diminished slightly by the thickening smoke and dust. Billy could smell burning vegetation, the earthy smell of the ground blown skyward, and the chemical smell of the cordite from exploded artillery. "Looks flat, no stumps, just grass," said Jack, trying to be helpful.

Billy visualized how the flight would likely be arrayed in the landing zone and picked the spot where *Proud Mary* would touch the ground. He glanced at the instruments, then back to his separation on the aircraft in front of him, then at the tree line for movement, then the area where he would land for a spider hole with a waiting foe, or a stump, or a trip-wire, then back to the instruments, then separation from the flying machine in front, cross checking everything again and again - all the while intimately tuned into *Proud Mary* and this exquisite experience of flying a helicopter.

On short-final about fifty feet up Billy could feel new force acting on *Proud Mary*: the troops started making ready for the dash from the helicopter to whatever cover they could find. As they shifted, the center of gravity shifted and *Mary's* flight attitude shifted. He subconsciously countered gently with continuous, minute adjustments to the controls, leveling *Mary* with a taste of right cyclic and slightest forward pressure on the cyclic. Billy led *Mary* in this dance to their destination.

At thirty feet some of the grunts stepped out onto the skids ready to jump before they landed.

Billy almost talked aloud as he thought, "*Keep coming down with slight downward pressure on the collective. Need to slow the groundspeed with a smidge of aft cyclic. Now steady pressure to bring the collective up reducing the rate of descent. Then pressure on the left pedal to counteract the increase in main rotor torque.*" His eyes darted. The dance with *Mary* continued.

At about four feet above the LZ Billy could feel the grunts jumping off into the war. In the last feet and inches to the ground Billy's senses were maxing out, feeling for the heels of the skids to softly touch the ground.

Brilliant green streaks appeared in Billy's peripheral vision followed immediately by the distinctive sharp cracking sound of AK-47 fire.

"*Sheeeeeet!!! More than one,*" he thought as more menacing green tracers flashed by. Billy tried to duck lower in his seat behind the armor plate. In another part of his peripheral vision, he noticed Jack move his hands and feet lightly onto the controls, ready to help.

"You got this," Billy heard Jack say over the intercom. He wasn't asking - he was telling.

"They're all out," shouted Ty over the intercom as he brought his gun into action. Sammy's gun opened up at the same instant from the other side.

Loud, thought Billy. The two M-60s maybe ten feet behind him dominated the opening to this opus of war, suddenly raging around them. The M-60s were aimed at muzzle flashes, movement of the leaves, or where they estimated the green tracers came from. Firing bursts of ten or fifteen rounds. The two guns alternating then overlapping, cutting in and out: On the right RAT TAT TAT TAT. On the left TAT TAT. Then both RAT TAT TAT TAT TAT . . .

Just an octave below were the other ten M-60s in the flight returning fire. The sound was steady chopping chorus RAT TAT TAT TAT . . . Every fifth round was a tracer. Red lines streaked into the trees surrounding the LZ. Some tracers ricocheted back into the air erratic, tumbling, spiraling vivid red and green arcs contrasting against the green jungle.

The VHF radio came alive, "CHALK TWO . . . (static) . . . TAKIN! . . . (static) . . . FIRE! . . . (static) . . . ON THE LEFT! . . . (static) . . . SHOOT . . . GO, GO!"

The sound of war swelled to a roar as more

weapons joined in. The grunts returned fire with the sharp percussion of their M-16s. Overlaying it all came a deep, heavy THUMP. THU-THUM-TH-THUMP. THU-THUM. THUMP. Rockets from the Cobras escorting the flight struck barely far enough away from the flight seeking to silence the AKs. Trees at the edge of the LZ shook, limbs fell, leaves tumbled as the rockets tore through the foliage and exploded. "*DAMN! CLOSE!*" flashed through Billy's overloading senses as he felt the concussions from the exploding rockets in his chest.

Then a sound like Mars ripping a heavy piece of canvas: RRRRRRRRPPPPPPPPPP. The lead Cobra's mini-gun unleashed 4,000 rounds a minute, like a garden hose spewing a red stream of lead to cover its climbing turn. At the same moment the second Cobra dove, unleashing more rockets, the two taking up a race-track pattern, one covering the other while they aimed to suppress the threat.

There was a crescendo of sound: CRA, CRACK, CRACK, POP, RAT, TAT, TAT, TAT, "FIRE", "23", THUM THUMP, "PULLING," POP, CRACK, ACK, "SHOOT EM!"

Time seemed to coast while Billy's thoughts flashed faster than a string of firecrackers, "*WOW! SHIT! Adrenaline . . . Fear . . . Do something . . . Anything . . . Doing nothing will get you killed . . . Fly this thing!*"

Over the intercom Jack hollered, "ALLGREENNOCAUTIONPANELLIGHTS," the words rushing out, running together, imploring Billy to fly them out of this killing field. The aircraft in front of them were getting out of the LZ like boys fleeing bees.

Billy pulled the collective up - farther than he ever had - just shy of where he thought *Proud Mary's* engine RPM would start to bleed off from the extreme demand for lift on the main rotor. Listening intently for a change to the steady whirling rushing tone of the jet turbine, he worried if the tachometer might drop out of the low yellow. He really needed *Proud Mary* to perform NOW! His senses peaked. He was feeling all of her. She responded. Yawing right before Billy got the left anti-torque pedal in enough. Raising up, almost vertically as if she were a toy bird at the end of a string pulled steadily up, and up by someone teasing a cat. The furious shouting match between the AKs and her two M-60s continued as she ascended.

Billy strained, intently seeking every sensory input *Mary* gave him. Feeling for the dreaded left yaw signaling loss of power. Listening for any de-

crease in the steady deep whirling tone of the jet turbine. The dance went on. Them with her. Her with them. This intimacy is how humans bond with machines. As she carried them upward and away from the angry place below, he lippled "*Love you Proud Mary.*"

Billy scanned the instruments: Engine torque was at the top of the yellow, exhaust gas temperature was in the red, and engine/rotor RPM down into the yellow.

The ascent brought the rotor tip path closer and closer to the wall of trees bordering the LZ.

"*She's not going to fly more vertical. If I apply more collective the rotor RPM will drop and we'll drop. I'm going to cut some leaves. Seen Jack do it.*" Billy could feel Jack on the controls agreeing with his decision. There was a clatter as the rotor sliced into the edge of the wall. A confetti of torn leaves and twigs wisped down in front of the windshield.

Amid all of the variables affecting the ability of this helicopter to ascend out of hell was the will of two nineteen-year old pilots who believed they could.

More cracks and angry green tracers streaked from below. He could feel the sharp impact of some hits on *Mary's* hard parts transmitted through the airframe into his seat. Other rounds passed through the thin aluminum skin with no more sound than a tick, tick-tick like the multiple clicks of a retractable ball point pen. Wisps of bullet-ripped yellow sound proofing floated around the cockpit. Shards of plexiglass glinted, tumbling in the sunlight.

Then something fell out of the cacophony; Sammy's gun went silent.

"I'm hit!" came Sammy's stunned, angry, scared voice over the intercom.

Ty's gun was still pounding away. Billy knew there would be a stream of obscenities fired along with the hot lead.

Billy caught a glimpse of the master caution light. It was illuminated. "*Could be trouble,*" flashed through his busy mind.

"*Mary get us over these trees, please. Please, over the trees, we're almost out,*" Billy coaxed.

The wall of trees gave way to an expanding view of tree tops. As they cleared the trees Billy applied a little forward cyclic. The near vertical ascent changed slightly as *Mary* moved forward and



away from her own rotor wash. Now the rotor began taking in clean undisturbed air providing more lift.

*"Forward cyclic. Stiff. Not right. Come on lady, don't stop, we're not home yet,"* Billy urged Mary on. Over the treetops with airspeed building he eased a stiffening collective down to take some of the strain off her. As Mary skimmed along the top of the jungle and away from the firefight, the unseen senders of the green tracers would lose sight of her. Ty stopped firing. Billy turned his head just enough to see Ty moving out of his gun well toward Sammy.

"You got a hydraulic light. Gas temp is low yellow. Everything else is green," said Jack as he reached forward to reset the master caution light.

"Yah, the controls are getting harder to move."

Just then Billy sensed a warm wetness on his leg.

*"Am I hit? Oh shit, are my fucking-nuts OK? Doesn't hurt,"* he thought, almost in a panic.

Looking down he could see the turn and slip indicator fluid leaking out of its fractured face onto his right leg.

*"Damn where did that round go?"* Billy thought to himself.

Jack looked at the turn and slip indicator at the same time. "Damn! where did that round go?" he gasped over the intercom.

"Right between us. My chin bubble is holed," replied Billy.

Visualizing the path of that bullet brought on a new wave of ecstasy, realizing how close death had come and how good it was to be alive. It was like the feeling he had as a boy jumping, lurching, skipping across a rushing stream from one unstable rock after another, very nearly falling but reaching the other shore thinking, *"Whew, I made it!"* Only this was much more intense.

Every second seemed longer. Every sound, every smell, every color, every feeling seemed richer. This ride with Mary – escaping danger. The sun – warmer. The jungle below – greener. The air – sweeter. The sound of the fuselage rushing through the air. Everything was vivid.

The euphoria was swept away by the thought of Sammy being hit and the increasing difficulty of moving the flight controls.

"I'm going back to check on Sammy. Can you fly her?" asked Jack as he released his seat belt and shoulder harness.

"Yes." Billy's mind flashed back on the time-warped moments since the green flashes. Jack had left him on the controls! Jack let him do the whole thing! He, and Jack, and Ty, and Sammy, and Mary just got out of that hell! And now Jack left him up front, alone and completely in charge of this shot up 7,000-pound helicopter!

Billy glanced back after Jack and Ty moved Sammy from the gunners well to the cargo deck. He was lying in a pool of blood. Jack and Ty were shouting to each other applying bandages. Jack spared a hand to press the intercom and exclaimed, "He's hit in the upper leg and the chest. He's bleeding out."

*"Got to get Sammy right to the 45<sup>th</sup> Evac hospital,"* thought Billy. He could not have imagined how his thought about getting him *"right"* to the hospital would play out in the next few minutes.

Billy started thinking about where he was in relation to Tay Ninh. Instinctively he started a shallow, slow turn to the right looking for his landmark: the Black Virgin Mountain, Nui Ba Den. Ninety-two knots seemed comfortable. As the mountain came into sight, he applied left cyclic to roll out of the turn. It took a lot of effort. He couldn't move the cyclic soon enough to roll out. Mary continued to turn right, through his bee-line to the hospital. Now, a little right cyclic. Billy didn't think he had the arm strength to move the cyclic so he used his left leg to apply more force. Without hydraulic pressure to assist with moving the flight controls he would be constantly chasing the desired control settings. After over-controlling and under-controlling Billy started to get the hang of Mary's hydraulic-less flight.

"Flight, this is Lead. Check in." It seemed like an eternity since Billy heard anything outside of his urgent circumstances.

"Two is right behind you, need a beer."

"Three is up, can we go to the club now?"

With Jack working to stabilize Sammy, Billy transmitted, "Lead this is four, 22 Alpha here. One WIA. Hydraulics are going out. Returning to Tay Ninh."

"22 Alpha, Lead. Roger, see you at the club."

"Five is up. We'll be needing some sheet metal work and clean underpants."

## No Hydraulics (continued)

"Lead, this is six. 27 is breaking off to follow 22. Five, you got trail now. Keep 'em safe."

"Roger 27."

Billy thought, *"Right, see you at the club. What a flip reply. Did CPT Austin care? Or was he trying to instill confidence that this was no big deal? And all that banter and bravado from the flight. Don't they know I have a problem here? This is about the biggest deal in my life – so far. I can't fuck this up."*

"22 this is 27. Are you OK?" asked Pappy.

"27, 22 Alpha. ROGER, sort of, for right now."

"22, 27 is loose trail at your five o'clock. Come up alternate Fox Mike."

Billy glanced down at the center console. His left hand had already found the FM radio. He glanced down and rotated the selectors until 40.20 showed in the window.

Billy transmitted "27, 22 Alpha is up."

"22, you got peppered pretty good. Who got hit?"

"Sammy"

"Status?"

"Hit in the thigh and chest; bleeding out. We're heading for the 45<sup>th</sup> Evac."

"There is a lot of fluid on the tail boom."

Mary's tail boom had long streaks of hydraulic fluid mixing with rivulets of Sammy's blood. There were several places where her fuselage was punctured by bullets leaving what looked like aluminum colored flowers where the paint came off around the black bullet holes.

"27, 22 Alpha. Roger, that's our hydraulic fluid."

"22, I'm following you in. Stay under ninety knots, approach at sixty, aim for the approach end, touch down above twenty knots. Don't over-control. Find the middle of your inputs. And wind the clock."

"27, 22 Alpha. Roger, thanks for the advice. What's that about winding the clock?"

"22 Alpha, 27. You are going to make this work. Understand? And when you're done you will need to know what time it is when you shut down to properly fill out the log book."

"Oh. I get it. He thinks we're going to live

*through this. If Mary doesn't fall out of the sky,"* thought Billy.

With Tay Ninh in sight the euphoria came back momentarily. Like those who came close to death and survived, he experienced a deeply reflective moment. He felt he was doing what he was meant to do. He was measuring up. He flew at the ragged edge out of an LZ after people tried to kill Mary and her crew. They did kill the hydraulic system, and he was making it work - so far. He was feeling the top of the pyramid. He was fulfilled. It was a feeling he would never forget.

Billy was jolted back to reality, worried about what else had been hit. What else might fail? Is one of the critical parts damaged and is Mary about to fall out of the sky? He scanned the instruments: engine and transmission temperatures and pressures were normal, fuel was above five hundred pounds, one caution panel warning light – hyd pressure. No unusual vibrations from the main or tail rotors. She might get them back.

Jack climbed back into his seat and fastened his seat belt and shoulder harness.

"You OK? You got it?" asked Jack just after he plugged back into the intercom.

"Yes," said Billy.

"How does she fly?" asked Jack.

"She's good but the cyclic is stiff like a shovel in drying concrete . . . been using my knees to help push the cyclic. It's hard to know how much to move without overcorrecting. How is Sammy?"

"Lots of blood. I slipped and almost fell out. We can't stop the bleeding. It's all up to you now Slick. Sammy might not have a golden hour."

Billy felt very much on the spot. *"Oh, it's all up to me. All right Jack, it's all up to me. Good, he is testing me."*

There was a period of silence between them. Then Billy spoke without keying the mike, "God, I don't talk with you as much as I should, but I need some help to get Sammy to the 45<sup>th</sup>!"

A funny memory briefly came to mind. His hands were full like that time he was slow-dancing with Sally, one of the wider girls in his class. She outweighed him by a good forty pounds. She was drunk, and close to passing out.

Billy felt the challenge of flying without hydraulic pressure to assist movement of the controls. His mind was searching ahead of what he knew,

continued



## No Hydraulics (continued)

trying to stay ahead of the aircraft. *"How do I get us back to Tay Ninh, back on the ground?"*

Over the euphoria and adrenaline Billy visualized the approach and the many simulated hydraulic failures he had flown in flight school. Then a missing piece came to mind. "Jack, read me the emergency procedure."

Jack retrieved the operator's manual opened to chapter nine and read the procedure for Hydraulic Pressure Failure to Billy. Billy noticed the red smears on the page left by Jack's blood-soaked flight gloves.

Jack keyed intercom with his floor switch, "Airspeed adjust to attain the most comfortable level of control movements."

"Ok, she feels pretty good at 80 knots."

Jack continued "Hydraulic circuit breaker- out. It's out. Any better?"

"No."

"Ok, back in. Hydraulic switch is off."

Jack started to call Tay Ninh, but stopped and said, "I was getting ready to call Tay Ninh for you, but I didn't. In case you haven't noticed I'm letting you work this by yourself until you need help, that's how Pappy taught me. You're riding it well so far cowboy."

Billy met Jack's eyes. "Thanks."

With another scan of the instruments and then outside to navigate, Billy switched the UHF to Tay Ninh tower and transmitted, "Tay Ninh this is Crusader 22 Alpha, flight of two UH-1s 11 miles northwest. Requesting a running landing to two-zero with crash rescue. One WIA, hydraulics out."

"Crusader 22, standby." A moment later, "Roger 22. Cleared for runway two-zero, winds are light and variable, altimeter is two niner, niner two. Crash rescue on the way. Two Cobras departing to the north. Negative arty."

*"Negative arty! Well, yippee! Now I don't have to worry about dodging our guys firing artillery."* "Tay Ninh, 22 Alpha cleared for two-zero, niner, niner two. Got the Cobras."

Billy wanted to go faster for Sammy but *Mary* could become uncontrollable above some unknown airspeed. In the back of his mind was the worry about some damage he didn't know about could cause her to fall out of the sky. She was gently wallowing like a drunk: a little nose up, a little nose

down; yawing slightly right and left at eighty-four knots. Without hydraulic pressure it would be difficult to find the right control settings for steady flight. All Billy could do was to chase the elusive right spot for steady flight while he concentrated on getting Sammy to the hospital before he bled out.

"Tay Ninh, Crusader 22 Alpha three miles northwest, modified final for two-zero."

"22 Alpha, flight of two cleared for two-zero. Crash rescue and an ambulance on station."

"OK, Jack get on the controls."

"OK, pre-landing check is good."

"Here we go, down collective." Immediately there was a gradual right yaw.

"Let's have some left pedal!" said Billy forcing his left leg forward, his back hard against his seat.

The nose yawed gently around to the left, then ten degrees past the desired heading. At the same time the nose pitched up ten degrees.

"Forward cyclic!"

*Proud Mary* oscillated above, below, right, and left of a shallow approach path. Billy and Jack wrestled with not-so-gentle pressures to keep the nose aligned with the runway, the airspeed coming down through fifty knots and a shallow descent to get them to the approach end of runway two-zero. Both wondered if the other could sense the anxiety. Both knew they did not have full control. They could lose what they had.

Billy's mind flashed back to that time when he was driving his dad's car. He didn't see the ice. He knew the car was going to leave the road. He couldn't do anything to stop it. He lost control and knew there would be a crash. He had some of that feeling now, but he had to get Sammy to the hospital.

Just past the big white numbers at the end of runway two-zero and passing through thirty knots they felt the skids crash onto the runway. *Mary* rebounded back into the air.

Inexplicably, through the merging circumstances of temperature, wind direction, lift, weight, thrust, drag, destiny, other unknown circumstances, and whatever piloting Billy and Jack were attempting, *Mary* flew in a level attitude straight down the runway at about 19 knots and seven feet. She wasn't ready to land.

Billy and Jack had visualized a running landing, ending with a stop on the runway, but now Jack saw

continued

another option.

“Keep going to the 45<sup>th</sup>.”

Billy gulped and transmitted, “Tay Ninh, 22 Alpha is air taxiing to the Medevac pad.”

“Roger, 22 Alpha. Will advise 45<sup>th</sup>.”

As they went by the crash rescue truck and the ambulance personnel on the side of the runway, Jack could see anxious faces, wide eyes, raised eyebrows, mouths agape.

This might not end well. Both now visualized some sort of crash landing. It would be impossible to hover without hydraulics. Somehow, they were now only a few feet off the ground and almost down to a fast walk. The medevac pad was out in front of them 100 yards to the right of the runway. As if sharing their hopes of getting there, as if looking there, *Mary* veered off the runway and into the domain of pedestrians and motorists. They flew through commo wire between poles and across an access road. Soldiers walking on the road scattered, hats and all manner of loose things were blown away by *Proud Mary*’s rotor wash. An approaching jeep careened into a ditch. Closing on the Medevac pad, Jack urged, “Come on Billy, lets drive her right in there!”

Slowing below translational lift *Proud Mary*’s rotor wash blew up a larger cloud of dust and debris. The plywood siding of a shed tumbled away chasing after pedestrians.

Billy and Jack desperately pushed the collective down to ease *Mary* down. They tried to get the cyclic back to reduce the airspeed down to a walk.

“Roll some throttle off,” said Jack

*Mary* eased onto the ground, grinding, jerking, amid a dust cloud of debris a few yards from the Medevac pad. Straining against their seat belts and shoulder harnesses, they gave all they had to push the collective down and pull the cyclic aft. They grimaced, winced, and gritted their teeth as *Mary* began to pivot forward on the front of her skids. Billy wanted to close his eyes, sure the rotor would hit the ground and they would be consumed in violent awful twisting and tearing convulsion. But then *Mary* rocked back, settled in a near level attitude and came to a stop at last.

Hospital personnel on the medevac pad turned back around after shielding their eyes from the storm the rotor wash brought. They didn’t know how close they had been to being consumed by a disintegrating helicopter.

Four medical personnel rushed through the dust cloud to the bloody gunner. Jack and Ty eased Sammy off a blood-soaked cargo floor and with the four others lowered him onto the stretcher. Jack looked at Sammy for a sign of life. Nothing. Sammy’s left arm hung off the stretcher. His longish blond hair blew in the rotor wash, much of his olive drab Nomex flight suit darkened by blood.

As the medics crossed the concrete Medevac pad one of them tripped and fell heavily. Sammy’s limp body almost rolled off. Billy noticed the shoulder length hair of an Army nurse had come undone during the fall. After a hasty look at a bleeding elbow they hoisted the stretcher back up and raced into the hospital.

Billy rolled the throttle to flight idle and instinctively started the clock for the two minutes to cool *Proud Mary*’s faithful jet turbine. As he sat there some heavy thoughts came to mind. Sammy was hit bad. Would he live? A bullet went through the turn and slip indicator and right between him and Jack. He thought about the trajectory of the round. “*It could have hit me above my chicken plate in the neck or face. What else was hit? How close did we come to not getting back?*”

Billy looked over at Jack now standing on the skid toe, reaching through the open door, plugging back into the intercom. He was grinning and nodding his approval.

“That was cool. I didn’t know we could do that.”

“*We* did it. Front door service,” replied Billy. “How is Sammy?”

“I don’t know.”

“Ty you OK?”

There was a pause while Ty reached for his intercom switch “Sir, FUCK NO I ain’t OK! Sammy daed. *Mary* all messed up. Blood! Lawd, ‘days blood all over back here. Hydraulic fluid all over. Holes all over. I be havin’ to train a FNG (Fucking New Guy) gunner. Lawdy, we got to get out of this place!”

Billy replied “Ty, we’ll get out. You did all you could.”

Pappy arrived and standing on the right skid toe shook Billy’s shoulder. Billy keyed the mike so Jack could hear what Pappy had to say.

“That was fucking amazing! I would have left it on the runway. I was afraid you guys would lose it and fly right into the hospital.”

continued



## No Hydraulics (continued)

Billy replied, "Sammy was bleeding out. Jack thought we could get him closer to the hospital. I guess we did. We don't know if he made it."

As they looked at each other and absorbed the meaning of those words Pappy said, "He will be alright." Then he tried some humor. "You know the Signal guys are going to charge you for the commo wire you just flew through and you are going to have to pay for a crane and a flat-bed to get *Mary* out of here."

Billy grinned as he watched the clock come around to two minutes and rolled the throttle off. He looked at Pappy and said, "Thanks for reminding me to wind the clock."

After helping Ty wash the blood out of *Proud Mary* and rigging her for the crane, Billy and Jack got to the mess hall before it closed. Dinner was puny pork chops and runny mashed potatoes. Some of it was still warm. It was far better than the Wolfhounds would have that night. Billy thought about the Soldiers and asked God to protect them. He prayed for Sammy and gave thanks for surviving the day.

After dinner Billy and Jack headed for the Officers Club. The other pilots cheered when they entered. CPT Austin was at the bar and welcomed them.

"I knew you would get her back. Good job, Jack."

Jack replied, "Thank you, sir. Billy had it all the way. I just helped out."

"Is that right? Well, then you'll be coming up on Aircraft Commander soon won't you Mr. Burton?" said CPT Austin as he shifted his eyes to Billy with an approving smile.

"Right. I mean Yes sir," said Billy, standing a little taller and feeling confidence being awarded.

"Well, all we need now is some good news on Sammy," said CPT Austin.

Billy's mood slipped lower as he thought about Sammy – happy energetic, and short - reduced to a bloody lump on a stretcher.

"Anyone else take hits?" asked Billy wanting to get his mind away from Sammy.

"28 and 21 took hits, but nothing serious. Not like you and Jack. Drinks on me. You guys are off tomorrow," replied CPT Austin as he moved away to visit his other pilots.

The mood in the club remained subdued. Billy and Jack answered questions about how they handled the flight back to Tay Ninh without hydraulics. Jack let everyone know that Billy flew it back, he just helped. Boilermakers for Jack and Budweisers for Billy came one after another. They couldn't buy a drink.

Sometime later, MAJ Ford, the CO, came in with news: "Sammy bled out and was pronounced dead."

When it was silent he added, "But! They kept pumping his heart and kept giving him blood and they got him back!"

The club erupted in howls and shouts of joy, shrill whistles, and pounding on tables.

When the celebration subsided the CO continued "They told me he would be flown out to Japan tomorrow and although he isn't out of the woods yet, they think he will make it. Good on Jack and Billy for delivering him right to the 45<sup>th</sup>, with no hydraulics, I would add."

Then followed boisterous cheers running together, "To Jack!" "To Billy!" "To Jack and Billy!"

The CO held his hand up. As the noise subsided, he turned to Jack and Billy and continued, "Mr. Rae, Mr. Burton, I had a visitor this evening. It was MAJ Atwood, the Signal Company commander. He was very upset about the amount of work the Signal Company had to do to replace the commo wire that you two flew through and to restore most of the land line communications on the east side of the base camp. He recommended that I ground you two for reckless flying and to give you article 15s."

After a few curses, the club grew silent.

The CO continued "I explained to MAJ Atwood that the crew was attempting to deliver a severely wounded crewmember to the Medevac pad in an aircraft that had combat damage including an impaired flight control system. MAJ Atwood said there was no excuse for endangering other personnel by flying through the populated area of the base camp, damaging communications. He insisted I impose punishment and if I didn't, he would take it up with the commander of the base camp." The CO paused for effect then added, "So, I asked him, Howdya . . ."

In the second or two it took the alcohol fueled officers and gentlemen of the 187<sup>th</sup> Assault Helicopter Company to recognize the opening word of a

continued

## No Hydraulics (continued)

juvenile insult frequently used on each other, they broke into a rowdy chorus of “Howdya, Howdya, Howdya like to smell my ass?” Raucous laughter, whoops, and cheers followed as they imagined MAJ Atwood’s reaction. Someone flicked the lights on and off. Jumping, dancing, hopping around in merriment was accompanied by plastic cups and beer cans tossed into the air. The CO approached Billy and Jack and completed his story. “MAJ Atwood left without another word.”

Billy was getting drunk and reflected on their good luck that day, that Sammy survived, and that

there was no punishment in store. He also realized how lucky he was to fly with Jack and to learn from him.

Soon, those scheduled to fly the next day began to drift out of the club. Billy savored the moment knowing he could sleep into his day off.

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Send Craig Bond your feedback comments on this story: [bond00e@aol.com](mailto:bond00e@aol.com)



Craig Bond at the dedication of the Vietnam Helicopter Pilot and Crewmember Monument at Arlington National Cemetery, April 18, 2018





Take care of yourself and those you love.



End