

Date: 1 Feb 1967

Team members:

Ervin Laird (KIA)

Charles Rose

Dennis Noga

others

Two Down - I just wanted to be a part of the D Troop team

By Mike Vaughn

Cu Chi, Vietnam - Home of the notorious CU CHI tunnels...

February 1967

No more free ride for me...I'm the man now. I was barely nineteen years old, with all the headaches and responsibilities of a crew chief (CE): my very own helicopter. I was the proud owner of 65-09660 (old six-six-zero). A Huey UH-1D (slick): one-each, OD in color. For those who may not understand, the CE actually believes he owns his helicopter, it's his baby. However, out of the goodness of our hearts, we would allow the pilots to fly our ships from time to time.

I had been a CE for only a few days before this mission, and I had been in country just a couple of months. I was still thought of as one of the new guys. Before getting my own ship, I had been lucky enough to get some very valuable experience from SP4 Laura, an incredibly skilled crew chief. I believe he was from Texas. During this period, I had been assigned to him as his gunner. I had flown with him for several weeks; but I was still pretty green. He was very patient with me during my training. After each flight, CE Laura would take the time to explain every part of the last mission. He would first explain what I had done right and then he would describe what I had done wrong. He told me what I needed to do to get it right. I learned a lot from him. One of the many things he taught me was to have pride in my helicopter and in my job as CE. I think of him often, even after all these years.

Our mission that day would be to make a pick up of a six man infantry ambush team; they had been out in the boonies all night. We were going to make the extraction just after first light, from a place called "The Devil's Playground." The Devil's Playground was only a short distance outside of the perimeter of our Cu Chi base camp, so we were going to low level out to the landing zone (LZ). I realize that everyone was not fortunate enough to experience what our pilots considered low level flight. Just to clarify, low level flight, or contour flight, means just what the name implies. It means on the deck, sometimes flying as low as 24 inches or less above the contour of the landscape. Just to illustrate, when we left base camp on that mission; we were flying so low we had to actually had to climb a few feet just to clear the barbed wire strung around the perimeter of the camp.

I can only imagine how my aircraft commander (AC) WO FL Anderson must have felt on this particular mission. Mr. Anderson was hardcore all the way through, a very good pilot with many rough missions already included on his resume. On this mission, however, he was stuck with a

brand new crew chief, a new gunner (SP4 Wilcox) and a second pilot that was still pissing stateside beer.

"The sun is almost fully above the horizon, and the air still feels quite cool as I sat in the open door of the chopper. We are not expecting any trouble on this one, just a routine pickup. The chopper is cruising along at around 110 knots, just a couple of feet above the ground. We approach the LZ and start a gentle right turn; we are coming in very low and very fast. The new pilot is at the controls; he must have seen he was going to overshoot the LZ. He pulls back hard on the cyclic as he tries to dump his airspeed. Old six-six-zero's nose is pointed toward the sky and she is almost standing on her tail. Unfortunately, we are too low and the maneuver too radical. There is the sound of a huge explosion, as the tail-boom of the helicopter comes into contact with a rice dike. I feel a tremendous jolt run through the whole helicopter. The tail rotor and the complete gearbox assembly are immediately ripped away from the tail of the helicopter. It's as though everything is moving in slow motion. I feel myself holding onto my machine gun with all the force I can muster -- like that's going to help me. We hit the ground the first time with a glancing blow. All I can think of is the fuel tanks are going to explode. We briefly become airborne again while managing to miss several more rice dikes in the process. As we become airborne, the helicopter goes into a very violent spin. By this time, I knew Mr. Anderson (AC) had taken over the flight controls, and I feel him instantly floor the collective pitch; the helicopter and crew proceed to hit the ground extremely hard."

"God! This has to be a dream; it can't be really happening to me. My head is a kind of fuzzy, I'm a little shaken, but I soon realize that the chopper has come to a complete stop. Thank God, there is no fire. The entire crash lasted only a matter of seconds, but it seemed to me as though the helicopter would never stop bouncing and banging around that rice paddy."

"The crew is momentarily dazed, but somehow I manage to quickly exit the crippled chopper. I run to the front of the chopper to open the pilot's doors, and I help both of the pilots out of their armored seat enclosures. I hear the main rotor blades as they are still spinning above my head. As the rpm's of the blades slow, they start to dip lower, and the blades begin to make contact with the ground. Here we go, I thought. I managed to live through this extremely frightening crash, only to be crushed by those spinning rotor blades. I just try not to think about that and continue to help the pilots out of their seats. I turn to see if my gunner needs help. He gives me the thumbs up sign as he starts to unhook his monkey harness (a long harness attached to the gunners to keep them from falling out of the chopper before they have finished their tour duty)... he's ok."

"Most of the final impact is on my gunner's side of the chopper. During the crash several small trees ripped completely through the bottom of the chopper, under the gunner's seat. A few more inches and the trees would have punched through his flimsy canvas seat and impelled him."

"After everyone is safely out of the chopper, we frantically rush around the chopper, quickly removing all the radio equipment, the guns and ammo. Our gun ships have heard our "May Day", and in only minutes they are overhead providing cover for us. Our other slicks quickly land. The legs (our infantry), in full battle gear, unload from the choppers and start to set up a perimeter around our downed helicopter. We hastily load ourselves and what we have salvaged

from our wounded bird onto one of the other slicks and we head back to good old base camp. As they say "any landing you can walk away from, is a good landing. We have a few cuts and bruises, but everyone is ok."

My reward for that very eventful ride on six-six-zero was a couple of days off. Much appreciated time I assure you. I got time to just rest, to catch up on sleep and write some letters home. Well, to be brutally honest, it wasn't really a reward. The much needed time off was only because Uncle Sam didn't have another helicopter for me. It would only last until we could get a replacement helicopter, then it was back to work.

A few days after our last ride on poor old six-six-zero, Mr. Anderson came to talk to me. He approached me as I was on the flight line working on my replacement chopper. He said he "liked the way I had handled myself during the situation in "The Playground." He said he "thought I had remained cool under pressure." Man, did I ever have him fooled. The only reason I got out of that chopper so fast was because I thought it was going to explode into flames at any time. For a moment, I considered of running off in absolute panic, but it was a long walk back to base camp, and, besides, I didn't really know the way. I quickly decided it would probably be a lot healthier to just stick around and help the others out of the chopper.

Mr. Anderson said he wanted me to join his crew, to be his gunner for a big long-range reconnaissance patrol (LRRP) mission that was coming up soon. He explained that he needed me for just this one mission and then I could return to my own chopper. This man was a very experienced pilot, and, as I said before he was hardcore; all business. For him to have that kind of confidence in me, to ask me to join his crew on such an important mission, I felt very honored. That was the first time since I arrived at D Troop that I felt like I belonged, and I was being considered a part of the team. At the same time, the thought of going on my first LRRP mission made me, well let's just say I was a little nervous. I had heard many stories about those missions from some of the older, slick crews. I remember them saying, "You don't usually have to worry much about the insertion (putting the team on the ground). Likely that part will be a piece of cake. It's the extractions (getting the team out) that can end up being the real entertaining part." As I would soon learn, more fun than a trip to Disney World.

Nice day for a helicopter ride

The much anticipated LRRP mission was now a reality. We had landed at a small fire support base named "Go Dau Ha" just a few miles north of Cu Chi our base camp. As we sit around and hurry up and wait, the morning sun was completely up, the air had already started to get thick with the heat and the humidity. This would be a day light insertion. We gathered around the helicopter, the LRRP team and our chopper crew, waiting on the Brass to give the order to go. Nervously, we all try to make small talk with each other. Everyone handles the pressure of this kind of combat mission differently. Some men get very quite, some seem to talk constantly, and others may laugh a lot or joke-around. One of the members of the LRRP team told us, "We are going to a place in War Zone C where no American Soldier has ever set foot." Two of the men on the LRRP team are new guys. One of the new guys said that he had just completed his training and was fresh out of RECONDO School. I remember one of the new men was named Rose, a real nice guy. The other new guy, man he was a real talker. I had never met him before

this mission. Sorry I didn't know him long enough to remember his name. He was full of piss and vinegar and tried his best to convince us that he was a real bad ass. He told us he, "had been out on only a few training missions and a couple of ambushes so far." He boasts, "I want to get into some real shit this time out. I want to kill a few gooks." The old timers on the LRRP team just looked at him like he was nuts. I think we all understood that he was only talking like that to mask the fear he was trying very hard to hide. I knew exactly how he felt; he wasn't the only one who was trying to hide fear that day. We were all dealing with that same emotion, in our own ways.

"Finally, we get the call to "saddle up" (remember this is a Calvary Troop). The mission is a "go". We load up and start our climb into the bright morning sky. We fly to a heavily wooded area northeast of Tay Ninh. My eyes scan the jungle below, even from 2500 feet, it's obvious to this old country boy...this is not a good neighborhood. This is Indian country, nothing but triple canopy jungle everywhere. I can just make out a small speck in the jungle below. We start to make a very steep approach toward that speck; it feels more like a zero pitch autorotation, actually. We are approaching the ground at a high rate of speed. That speck in the jungle is our LZ. We are on short final; the AC starts to slow our descent. Now maybe my stomach can return to normal; it feels like it is somewhere around the roof of the chopper. The LZ is nothing more than a freshly made bomb crater, probably made just for us. The LZ is littered with fallen trees and other debris, it is impossible for the pilots to land the helicopter.

"The bomb crater is about 20 feet deep, , we hover about five feet above the rim of the crater as my eyes scan the jungle for any sign of movement. My M-60 is locked and loaded. The CE tells the LRRP team to get off his helicopter...jump, jump. I had never seen the kind of damage that those bombs can do, not this close anyway. I see enormous trees splintered and snapped like twigs."

The LRRP team got off the helicopter safely and we make a nearly vertical climb out of the LZ. I maybe new to this game, but as I scoped out our LZ, it seemed a little on the small side. Oh, well, everything went well on this one, and I took some comfort in knowing that we would surely have a more accommodating LZ when we made the extraction...Ha, little did I know.

We have two down... come and get us; now !!!

We flew to Tay Ninh base camp, where we made our temporary home on the edge of the airfield. We started a very long wait. Since we were the main extraction ship on this mission, the CE and I were required to remain with the helicopter at all the times. A call for an immediate extraction could come from the LRRP team at any moment; we had to be in position and ready to go. The waiting was the hardest part of all. It was so boring, continually listening to the radios for a call from the LRRP team. The CE and I even eat our meals (C-Rations) and sleep on the helicopter. We would sleep on the stretchers we carried for the wounded and actually found they were pretty comfortable. Well, at least they were better than the hard floor of the chopper. We would get a brake once in awhile to go get some real chow (the Army's version of food) or to try and find some clean water to shave and brush our teeth. That is if you could find someone to stand in for you.

We continue to just wait. After a while we had all told our life stories to one another. At first the extra sleep and rest was kind of nice, but after a day or two it gets very boring. I just wanted to be flying. I would have taken just about any mission to end the boredom. But we must endure many more hours of waiting and constant monitoring of the radios.

The LRRP team has been out for about two days, maybe three. We received a radio message that they had made contact with two VC. They reported that they had killed one VC but the other one had gotten away. This detail would prove later on to be a problem for the LRRP team. The Chuck (VC) that got away must have wasted no time in rounding up every VC in the province. They were busy planning a nice welcoming party for us, and I don't mean "Welcome Wagon."

While we continued waiting for a call from the LRRP team, a flight of about 10 or 12 helicopters from the 196th Light Infantry Division landed just in front of our choppers. Those poor bastards had been through hell; many of their slicks had been shot to peaces. One of the slicks had holes in the cabin floor and tail section the size of softballs. The CE on that chopper told me what happened. VC mortars had been trained on their LZ and they had to leave three of their helicopters burning in the LZ. The site of those damaged helicopters made me think, what the #%%XX am I doing in this place!

"Finally, in the wink of an eye, our waiting is over. A frantic call comes over the radio. One of LRRP team members shouts "We have two down...come and get us, now!!!" It was not a particularly good time for this to be happening, as the other chopper crews have just gone to chow. The CE and I are right where we are supposed to be, and we hastily start to get the chopper ready to go. Mr. Anderson arrives within two or three minutes. He quickly puts his chest plate and helmet on, but we can't find the pilot who is assigned to fly the second seat. A pilot from one of the other slicks arrives on scene and without any hesitation, jumps into the seat of the chopper. By this time, the AC has the helicopter's turbine engine running up to speed. The CE and I load up, and our helicopter is immediately cleared for takeoff. We are now leaving absolute boredom behind for the possibility of a great adventure."

"I listen intently to the radio conversations over my helmet headset. The LRRP team is in a hell of a mess; they're defiantly in real trouble. I hear them say "We have one KIA (killed in action). Later I would learn that it was one of the young guys...the talker. They also had one WIA (wounded in action). The wounded man had been hit in the chest and he was having a lot of trouble breathing. I'm sure glad we have a medic with us on this one. We are a few minutes out of Tay Ninh when we hear the call from our gunships. They are just taking off from Tay Ninh and will not be able to catch up in time for the extraction. Oh dear God, this can't be!! I hear my AC inform Centaur 6 (troop commander) "we're going in without the guns" (words that still strike fear in my heart). Centaur 6 replies "Rodger...Continue the mission."

To quote a source that's unknown to me "Be careful what you wish for, you may just get it." I had wanted to be a part of all this and now it looked like I was going to get my wish.

"The LRRP team is telling us over the radio, "A very large force of VC has them surrounded three hundred and sixty degrees" also "They are currently taking very heavy enemy fire." The AC calls to the LRRP team, "We're coming in to get you...you'd better be ready." They reply,

"We are going to try and break through the enemy position and make a break for the predetermined emergency LZ."

"We are on a very steep approach to the LZ. In the distance I hear the sounds of the LRRP's M-16s as they start to break through the enemy encirclement. The VC answered with a massive volume of AK-47 fire. We are on final approach; I hear the loud echoes of the exploding LRRP claymores and the sounds of exploding grenades. The AC gives the command for the CE and me to start firing. With only our two M-60 machine guns for support fire, it's important that we concentrate our fire very carefully. I start to hose down the area to the front and below the chopper. My face is stinging from the hot powder as it is blown back into my face. Anything that movies within my target range, even a leaf blowing in the wind, will be met with a hail of bullets from my M-60. Man, I sure miss those heavy hitters (the gun ships)."

"The air is filled with the sounds of heavy automatic weapons fire and the thud of more claymores and grenades. The AC starts to flare out just above the LZ; he gives the command to "hold your fire." It is a very tough order to obey. Right now the last thing I want to do is stop firing my machine gun."

"Our chopper finally hits the LZ. All the members of the LRRP team are on my side of the helicopter. Just before the AC sat the helicopter down, the team had made a brake for it and fought their way to the edge of the LZ. They start their run though a gantlet of small arms fire and try to fight their way through the thick under brush. I can't see the VC, but I know they can see us. The air is full of their tracers and I can see a lot of muzzle flashes at the edge of the LZ."

"I watch helplessly as the wounded LRRP struggles toward the chopper. He can't make it without some help from one of the others; he's hurt awfully bad. His team members stop to help him, but then they are unable to return fire on the enemy positions. I hear myself screaming "Come on, move it, move it, we're a sitting duck here!!" It's obvious that we can't stay here a minute longer; the VC will be all over us any second. #%%XXX%%!!! Man, I can't hold my fire much longer!!!"

"After what seems like an eternity the LRRPs finally fight their way aboard the chopper and at last the AC yells, "Full suppression". We open up with all we have; I start to return fire on those commie bastards. Before, I was gripped by intense fear, but now I'm pissed. Everyone on board the helicopter, that is everyone that is able to, is firing some kind of weapon...M-16s, M-79. The CE and I keep blazing away with our M-60s. It is total madness.

"The AC has our big green bird powered up and ready to roll, we start our take off run. There's not a lot room to work with...would you believe another very small LZ. The VC are not our only problem at the moment. Our helicopter is dangerously over loaded, we have the extra man on board, the medic. Some good news, the helicopter is starting to pick up airspeed. The bad news, we are also running out of prime real estate and we are approaching the end of the LZ. A wall of very large trees awaits us if we can't gain enough airspeed for our climb."

"Man, these trees must be at least a hundred feet tall. The AC is trying to get everything out of his ship he can. He waits until the very last possible moment to pull pitch. He must gain more airspeed or the helicopter will stall when he starts his climb."

Without enough airspeed, the Laws of Gravity become quite undeniable. The chopper will fall out of the sky with all the aerodynamics of a giant brick. Mr. Anderson will get us out of here if anyone can. Hell, he's already saved my ass once.

"My fingers are locked onto the triggers of my M60; I'm squeezing so hard I actually feel the trigger cutting into my fingers. All the fear has disappeared, I'm in a zone, right this minute I'm locked in my own little world. All my training, the lessons learned from the older guys...it has taken over. My M60 is on rock-n-roll, and I keep on firing a relentless stream of tracers. My gun is beginning to over heat; starts to slow down it's rate of fire, then speed up again. One thing is for sure, I am not going to let up until we are out of this place or my damn gun burns up."

"One of the LRRP team leaders starts to throw ropes and any other nonessential, non-lethal gear out of the helicopter frantically trying to reduce weight. It is now do or die time...the AC starts to pull pitch. He has only one shot and he had to get it right. The chopper starts a rapid climb; the g-force pushes me down against my seat. We all continue firing out both sides of the helicopter. One of the LRRPs tosses smoke grenades out to mark the enemy positions. I watch the low rpm light on the dash of the helicopter...the red warning light is flashing like crazy. The helicopter made a quick climb to just about treetop level, then just seems to float there for a second. Man, this turn of events is not good. This is not turning out to be one of my better days. The AC instantly drops the nose of the chopper, it's his only hope to get back some of his airspeed. The chopper begins slipping through the tops of the tree; the branches are hitting my M-60. The impact of the tree limbs against my gun almost knocks it from my hands. The tree limbs are like giant fingers, reaching up from the jungle floor, trying to rip us from the sky. For awhile the bottom of the chopper is actually flying through the tops of these huge trees. This is definitely not what the UH-1D helicopter was designed to do."

"By the grace of God and the phenomenal ability and courage of our pilots, we begin to gain some valuable airspeed and altitude. In only a few short seconds we are finally out of the tops of the trees and clear of the LZ. We are cruising at max airspeed just above the jungle canopy. At last we can stop firing our guns. Silence, it seems so quite, all I hear is the sound of the turbine engine, the slap of the rotor blades, and the ringing in my ears. All guns are silent for the first time since we begun our approach to the LZ."

"A forward air control aircraft (FAC) soon arrives over the area. Over the radio, I hear him directing the incoming jets onto that little piece of real-estate we had left behind. He tells them to unload their lethal cargo of napalm and high explosive (HE) on the smoke. I hoped all those little bastards down there are blown to hell. They will receive no pity and absolutely no mercy from us today."

"I began to relax a little...for the first time I tell myself... we made it. I sat quietly thinking, how in the hell did we ever get out of there. For the first time, I understand what this outfit, D Troop, is all about. Through baptism by fire, I am now an important part of it. It also dawned on me that the next several months were more than likely going to be very interesting and certainly challenging."

"It is a wonderful feeling to know we are safe, but our job was not quite finished. We still have a very seriously wounded man on board. I watch as the medic is working on the wounded LRRP. The wounded man is having a lot of trouble breathing; he has an entry wound in the front of his chest and a large exit wound in his back. One of his lungs has collapsed, he needs a doctor and soon!! My mind starts to wonder again, what the hell just happened? The shock and the terror started to really take hold. I didn't think we had much of a chance of making it out of that LZ. There had been a few times during my tour that I thought I had a pretty good chance to die, but death seemed a certainty on this day. It was a great relief to have made it out, but then I remember that death has been a certainty for one of our men. One of us didn't make it out and another suffered horrifying, painful and near fatal wounds. I take a brief moment to say a short silent prayer of thanks to God for His merciful protection."

"The AC has the airspeed indicator red lined; he's doing everything possible to get our wounded man to a hospital as swiftly as he can. As we approach Tay Ninh, the controller clears us to land and directs us to a MEDEVAC (hospital unit) pad. When we land I can't believe my eyes, the hospital is made of rubber. It is a large inflatable hospital. I'm sure that the doctors are real, but not sure about the nurses. They could be inflatable too(attempt at humor... no disrespect to our wonderful nurses). We leave our wounded man in very good hands for some desperately needed treatment."

"We return to our initial staging area at the edge of the airfield, for debriefing. To hell with a debriefing, I need a cold beer. We finally shut down the helicopter, and it becomes apparent that the main rotor blades have been severely damaged. The blades have been literally ripped to shreds by the trees in the LZ. The leading edge of one of the blades had started to break away from the rest of the blade. We may have been very near complete rotor failure."

New rotor blades had to be flown in from Cu Chi. The rotor blades had to be changed on the spot, with only a few tools to work with and a lot of muscle powder. The heavy blades had to be lifted into place by hand, just good old human muscle. Then the chopper would be able to fly again and we could get back to our base camp.

God Bless... James M. Vaughn

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