

Memoir: Nam Combat Pilot

Captain Ronald A. Radcliffe 1972 Army Aviator of the Year

He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross with five Oak Leaf Clusters, Bronze Star with Oak Leaf Cluster, 59 Air Medals with one "V Device", Army Commendation Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster, Purple Heart with three Oak Leaf Clusters, Good Conduct Medal, National Defense Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Palm, Vietnam Campaign Medal.

He joined the army at age 17 and after a posting to Germany did three tours in Vietnam. His first tour was with an MP company. He then went to OCS and Army Aviation School. He was a helicopter pilot in his second and third tour.

For years Ron has delighted friends with tales of his experiences. Since he has ignored entreaties to write them, a friend is compiling them as a ghost writer. Ron has consented with the understanding that any errors are the fault of the ghost writer.

Part 1-First Tour

Lincoln and Friend	1
Advisor	4

Part 2-Pilot-Tours 2 and 3

Wounded Rescue	7
Scavenger Hunt	8
Bicycle caravan	10
Headquarter search	12
Tank discovery	15
Shot down	18

Part 1 First Tour

Lincoln and Friend

Lincoln was an MP in my MP company. He was from Hawaii and was always practicing karate. When we found out he was a black belt, the rest of us were always waiting for him to get in a fight so he could whip some karate on somebody. Then one day a South Vietnamese ranger battalion had just graduated from ranger school. Their officers and advisors had marched them into town. They were armed with everything they had because their last problem in ranger school was an actual operation against the enemy. So they started throwing grenades on the beach because this was a beachfront city. They were shooting up the beachfront restaurants and having a good time. So all we MPs had to go in town and get all the Americans out of town so there wouldn't be any incidents. There were a couple of incidents and a ranger was having a fight with an American in one bar. We didn't know who was at fault but the American had been stabbed in the hand, cut between the index and long finger. That made both of those fingers longer. When we came in, the ranger turned with a bayonet and pointed it at Lincoln. There were other rangers in there but we were all looking at Lincoln because we thought he was going to whip some karate on him. Lincoln puts his hands up and says, "You can go." Ranger looks at him and takes off. We were getting ready to be pissed off. He runs past Lincoln and Lincoln casually pulls out his .45 and shoots that sucker in the back of the leg. He flipped over and landed right on his face because a .45 is a big bullet and he wasn't that big of a guy. We ran over to the guy and were trying not to laugh because the other rangers were standing there making a murmuring noise. Luckily for us their officers came in and told them to get outside and get in formation. Since they were rangers they all jumped to and ran outside and got in formation. Then we laughed but also had a sigh of relief that we didn't get in a shootout with heavily armed rangers in a bar. That was how Lincoln whipped karate on a guy. We never did see Lincoln whip any karate on anybody.

It was Christmas Eve 1965. We were working on the strip, an "L" shaped conglomeration of bars and whore houses. They were made out of 2 by 2 teakwood beams and corrugated tin with American and Canadian beer can labels on them. They could build a bar within about six hours. After about a week of business, they made enough money to put two inches of concrete in there. Suddenly we hear four shots down at the end of the strip, the long part of the "L". People are running and screaming, and we are running toward the sound of the gun. We think it's V.C. down there. But no, we get there and it's an American. He's drunk and the bar owner is standing there. We thought the staff sergeant standing there with the .45 in his belt was who fired the shots.

We took him under apprehension but the bar owner came over to me and said, "He's not the one who was doing the shooting. The one over in that truck is the one who was shooting."

He was another sergeant who had pulled out the gun in the bar, aimed chest high and fired. The bullets traveled through every bar in the strip and, amazingly, did not hit anybody. I go over to the passenger side of the deuce and a half, a two and a half ton truck. I opened the door and stepped up on the running board. This guy is sitting there behind the steering wheel with his right hand flat on the seat.

I tell him, "Get out of the truck."

His response is a string of obscenities.
I said, "You need to get out of the truck."
He cursed me again.

I had my .45 in my hand but he couldn't see it. I had it on half-cock as that's a safety so you won't accidentally shoot somebody. I turned the .45 around in my hand and without any warning slammed the butt of my pistol on his hand. I'm pretty sure I broke a couple of bones in his hand. He got out of the truck and we went around to the front of it.

He knew my name and said, "Why don't you pull your gun now, Radcliffe."
I said, "You better put your hands on that bumper."

He looked at me for a second, then put his hands on the bumper. I searched him, handcuffed him, and we put him in a jeep. In the meantime, a large crowd of rear area Americans, known colloquially as REMFs, or Rear Echelon Mother F-----, had surrounded us. They thought, it being Christmas Eve, let's beat up some MPs. In the front of the crowd were two guys wearing green berets. Green Berets were military gods in those days. Everybody in the world knew who they were. These guys were not Green Berets. They were allowed to wear the berets because they were supply clerks, or clerk typists, or something like that, over at Special Forces Headquarters. They are in front and the rest of the crowd thinks they are Green Berets. They are paying attention to what these clowns are saying.

The crowd is listening to them say, "Let's kick those MP's asses."

I thought the best thing was to get the loudmouths first. I walked over to the two guys who were standing together and punched both in the chest at the same time. They fell back in the crowd and many began to drift away.

I went over to the radio in the jeep and said, "Ten two." Which means, "Officer needs assistance."

At the MP station in the city, there were three or four jeeps full of heavily armed MPs in full combat gear. Their night mission on the highway had been cancelled. They hear the 10-2 call, jump in their jeeps and drive out to the strip, along with the our company commander, Captain Gray, who was also the Provost Marshall, like the sheriff. The bars start to clear out at the sight of all these heavily armed MPs.

Captain Gray arrives, and says, "Shut the strip down."

One of us goes into each bar and says, "The strip is closed, go back to the base."

The base is across the street. Typically we have to toss one guy out, since everybody is drunk. It's Christmas Eve. We get to the last bar, at the apex of the "L". I go in and make the announcement.

There's this big guy in there, six foot three, maybe more. He says, "It's Christmas Eve, you don't tell me what to do."

I just walked out and started across the street as he walked out the saloon doors of the bar.

He says, "I'm going to kill you, Radcliffe."

I turned around and looked at him, and thought "Uh oh". He was huge. We had some Korean MPs with us, and they had night-sticks, which we were not allowed to carry. I asked Sgt. Pak for his night-stick since this guy was walking across the street to get me, repeating, "I'm going to kill you, Radcliffe."

I held the night-stick behind my right leg. He walked right up to me and I said, "You need to go back to the base."

He said, "I'm going to kill you."

I hit him on his forehead with that night-stick, very hard. There was a loud "Crack" and most of the night-stick was gone. All I had in my hand was the handle with a splinter. I looked at the handle and looked at him. He was not hurt and had an even more serious look on his face.

I thought, "Uh oh, I'm going to die." I threw down the night-stick and drew my .45 which was on half cock. It had a bullet in the chamber because I always carried eight rounds in my .45. I put my pistol on the top of his nose, between his eyes, and cocked the hammer.

I said, "I'm not telling you again to get out of here." I wanted to sound tough but my voice may have squeaked. I thought that fool was going to kill me right there in front of all those MPs. In those days, I weighed around 165 and he was way bigger, around 280.

His eyes are crossed on my .45. A jeep drives up on my right, and some guys from his unit start yelling at him, "Sarge, Sarge, come on, come on, get in the jeep."

He looks at them, looks at my .45, turns and walks over to the jeep and gets in.

Every MP is looking at him and he turns and yells, "You're not going to get any more spark plugs and tires." And they drive off.

About three weeks later, the American women who worked for the service club system, were having a talent show in our base, known as Tent City in those days. If you had talent, you could be in the show. That sergeant was in the show. He was a fourth or fifth degree black belt and could break bricks with his forehead. Which was what he did in the show.

I met him later, because he knew Lincoln, our other black belt. He was embarrassed about what he did and told Lincoln he would like to apologize. Lincoln brought him over, he apologized and we shook hands. When he wasn't drunk, and it wasn't Christmas Eve, he was a nice guy.

Advisor

After I had a shooting incident with an American, my company commander thought I should take some time off, before I gunned down some Americans. I did that and made a lot of friends with Special Forces and Advisors. The people who guarded our bases were called Nungs. They were ethnic Chinese, nationality was Vietnamese. They all came from the same section of Saigon, called Cho Lan. They hated the Vietnamese and the Vietnamese hated them. The Vietnamese hated the Mountainyards and the Mountainyards hated the Vietnamese. We had 350 people and four American Advisors. Our senior advisor was a staff sergeant whose name was Robert Stack. Heh, heh. We got our weapons from the Fifth Special Forces. We got our rice from the Fifth Special Forces. We got our meat from First Logistical Command, which usually supplies Americans. And we got our ammunition from First Logistical Command. We got 50 brand new Thompson submachine guns, unaccountable to anybody. I could have sent one home and in those days it would have made it through the mail. They were illegal so I didn't send one home. The four of us had our tent with our bunks. We made deals with people in First Log and Ordinance to get things. We traded a submachine gun, Reising Gun, which a friend in Special Forces got from a V.C. The V.C. was behind a log and kept popping up and shooting. Victor Underwood popped up with him about three times. The fourth time Victor popped up a little earlier and fired an M-79 which is a grenade launcher. The V.C. was hit smack in the forehead when he popped up. Not only did he get his head blown off, but Vic got his gun. He gave it to us because after he tried it, he realized it was a piece of junk. We took it out in the ocean. We had boats in our MP company. We test fired it and discovered it would jam on the fourth round every time, if you fired it on automatic. You could fire it single shot which was what the V.C. was doing. It looked like it was brand new. It was beautiful, but just a terrible weapon. Marines threw them away in WWII and they didn't throw away anything. We traded that gun with one 15 round magazine to an ordinance captain. He wanted to have a unique looking gun that he could lay on his desk and walk around with. He was never going to shoot anybody because he was in ordinance. He gave us a jeep for that gun, heh-heh. So he could look cool and we had a jeep. We made a similar deal with a Lieutenant and QuarterMaster. He would give us a box of steaks, chicken, hams, or eggs every two days. We couldn't eat all of this. There were four of us and 200 steaks, or a crate with two rows of five or six layers of 48 eggs. I once boiled half of one of those boxes just to see if I could. We had boiled eggs for a long time. We always gave extra food to the troops. We had a two burner hot plate. That's how I cooked that stuff. I cooked about 50 pounds of chicken, just to see if I could. We had to guard all the gates and perimeter of the American base at night. We had to run ambush patrols from the back of our compound to the river. We put a big conex shipping container on one corner of our base. Three conexes on the bottom, filled with sand bags. With all the sandbags, it could take a hit from a rocket. We put one on top of the middle one. We filled that one with sandbags and built a tower on top. That's where we had the 30 caliber machine gun and binoculars, and stuff to look out with. I learned how to drive a giant fork lift with 8 foot tall wheels.

We had some incidents. The first one was, our senior advisor, Robert Stack, bought a 52 cup coffee pot percolator. He brought it back to our tent, filled it with water, added coffee and plugged it in. It was making noise and he walked over to his bunk and sat down and reached under his arm and pulled out his Smith-Wessen five shot .38 snub nose revolver. He aimed it at

the coffee pot and blew two holes in it. What the hell? We all leaped out of our skin. We looked at the coffee pot dribbling out of two holes.

“What the hell did you do that for?”

“I don’t know. I just wasn’t thinking.”

Then another guy named Coverdale was really good at making things, put two landing lights on our jeep with a ball so you could control them. They were landing lights from a Huey so they were stunningly bright. He was always cleaning his weapon. He really loved guns. The four of us had four tommy guns, four riot shotguns, with bayonets, four M1 carbines, and M79 and M14 for four guys plus all the ammunition. Coverdale was sitting on his bunk, cleaning his Tommy gun, we weren’t paying attention to him when suddenly, “Bam.”

He shoots a hole in the top of our tent over his bunk. We all leaped on the floor.

“What’s going on?”

He had a sheepish look on his face.

“I chambered a round in this Tommy gun.”

A tommy gun fires from an open bolt position. If you chamber a round it fires it.

Davis, an infantry sergeant, had been in mortars. We had three 81mm mortars. Davis would find ways to almost kill himself. We paddled about 50 or 60 of our troops across the river in little boats. Also we were throwing pineapple grenades, like the ones in WWII and Korea. They were old and one didn’t blow up when it was thrown. It was just laying there. I would shoot at it, or throw another grenade at it. I wouldn’t go out there and pick it up. Davis went out there and was bending over the grenade when it went off. He’s still alive because it was old and didn’t break into all the pieces. One piece hit him right below the solar plexus. But the grenade was so old and crappy it only went in about an inch. He got a concussion so he went to the hospital for five or six days. You don’t get a purple heart for something like that. What you get is everyone laughs a lot. After that I paid attention. Davis was very good with mortars. He could put one in your pocket.

Another time, he was across the river and I was in the tower. I was supposed to watch if they fired a flare, it meant bad guys were out there. They might need a medivac. Davis is demonstrating firing a pencil flare gun. It fits in your pocket. It has a firing pin on a knob which you pull back and fit in an “L” shaped slot. Then you screw the flare in holding it by the sides. You don’t put your fingers in front of the flare. Then you hold it up, pull the firing pin out of the slot and let it go. If you could count the ways of doing that wrong, he found all of them and did every one. He pulled the firing pin back and instead of putting it in the slot, he was holding it with his left thumb. Screwed the flare in with his finger in front of the flare. That’s two mistakes. Then his thumb slipped off the trigger. That’s three and it blew a big chunk out of his finger. So then he had to get medivacked again. The only one out of the four who didn’t have a shooting or blowing up accident was me. Because after the third one I thought, “I’m not joining that club.” I did that advising for four months. Then I went back to my MP company to get paid and go home.

Captain Gray was six foot five and weighed maybe 120 pounds. He was our Provost Marshall and our company commander. The Provost Marshall is like the sheriff or marshall. He got replaced by a colonel, this was in ‘65 and ‘66. About a fifth of the American troops who would eventually be there, were there at that time. My MP company did harbor patrol, ocean patrol, town patrol and convoy escort. We could go out on the boats and we had a lot of unique

weapons. The MPs wanted to fire them too. We would get on J-boats, big boats with two diesel engines. Each had a .50 caliber on the back and two M60s. We had vintage stuff from WWII and Korea: four Browning machine guns, Tommy guns, grease guns and everything. There is an island off the coast of Le Trang, a beachfront city, probably a big resort now. There is also an Air Force base and a field hospital. We would go out there to fire, we would put wooden boxes in the water then drive off a half mile or a mile and shoot at them with a .50. The maximum range is 7400 yards. Plus we would do bullet skipping. Every fifth round was a tracer. So I fired that .50 and a tracer hit that island. The island had dry grass and other foliage and the tracer set it on fire. We heard the Air Force at Long Binh saw the fire and thought there was a battle going on. It was just us, burning the island down with a .50 caliber. We had a great time.

Part 2 Pilot Tours 2 and 3

Wounded Rescue

This took place in early 1970. I was flying the trail aircraft in a flight of five Hueys making a combat assault. We had South Vietnamese troops in the back. Trail aircraft means it is the last aircraft in the flight. We landed and all the troops jumped out. We took off and just as we got clear of the landing zone (LZ) there was a giant explosion with a lot of machine gun and rifle fire. We got a call that there were a bunch of wounded.

"I'll break off and go back and get them," I said, since I was the trail aircraft.

"OK," said the flight leader.

I broke off and went back in there. There was a lot of shooting. I landed and they started loading wounded on the aircraft. The lieutenant, the commander of the troops, stepped in front of me and held up the handset of the radio. It was just a handset and wire. He wanted me to tell his commander up in the command and control helicopter that his radio was gone. I reported that. The radio telephone operator (RTO) had been standing on a bomb when it went off and had been blown in half. They loaded eight and a half people into my aircraft. A warrant officer named Broadnax landed behind me and another explosion went off. He reported his aircraft taking a lot of hits. He took off real quick and went to Lai Khe to have his aircraft checked. He learned that it was not shrapnel but body parts that hit his aircraft.

I took off and was heading to the evacuation hospital in Saigon called the 93rd EVAC Hospital.

"Sir, Sir," Armstrong, my crew chief, called me on the intercom and I turned and looked at him. He was looking kind of sick and queasy and pointed. The lower half of the RTO's body was at the edge of the door. His intestines had gone out the door and were slapping the side of my aircraft. That was why my crew chief called me. He thought it was going to get in the tail rotor.

"Pull it in before it gets in the tail rotor," I said. He was looking sick.

"OK sir, I won't barf if you don't."

"I'm not going to barf." He pulled the intestines in. He is probably telling that story to this day.

I went down to the 93rd and landed at the hot pad across the street from the hospital entrance. There was a long walkway into the hospital and a couple of American stretcher bearers sitting out front waiting for medivacs. They walked across the street. They didn't run, they just moseyed over there. They left the stretcher on the ground and grabbed this South Vietnamese who was seriously wounded by his armpits. This guy was on the floor of the Huey which is two and a half to three feet high. They dragged him across the floor and he fell onto the stretcher. I turned my aircraft to flight idle and jumped out. I pulled my .38 and pointed it at them and said:

"You do that again and I'm going to shoot you right here."

After that, they put the handles of one end of the stretcher on the floor of the Huey and lifted them onto it like they had some respect. They probably never forgot that crazy pilot that jumped out and pointed a gun at them. They took all the guys off.

There was also a foot in there and they put it on the stretcher with the guy whose foot it was.

They brought an army blanket out for the guy who was blown in half. There were about two and a half feet of him left. They put him on the blanket and pulled the corners together. That's how they carried him away.

Scavenger Hunt

One day, we were flying a mission called "first light". I was flying C&C which means command and control and I was sitting in the rear of the Huey Slick, trying to stay awake. I was the mission commander and I did not like it so I went to sleep. The scout pilot was a guy named White and he was operating not far from our home base which was a place called Lai Khe. We called a Light Observation Helicopter (LOH) a Loach. White had a Loach with a minigun on it. A minigun can shoot as fast as 6000 rounds per minute. You can set the rate of fire. He's flying around down there and we're at 1500-1800 feet, or something. A Cobra is buzzing around.

It was uneventful until White said, "I think I've got some movement down here."

I woke up then because that means there may be bad guys.

He said, "I definitely have movement down here. What's my fire clearance?"

I said, "Your fire clearance is recon by fire." That means you can shoot anything down there. I added, "Let me check with operations."

Which I did and they verified it was recon by fire. Which means it's the infamous free fire zone. Which is never what people think it was. I was awake now and paying attention.

White says, "I've got a lot of people down here."

I said, "Your fire clearance is recon by fire. You can shoot them."

He says, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, something's not right."

We wait a minute or two while he's flying around.

White says, "There's a lot of people down here, but I can't shoot them."

I said, "Why can't you shoot them?"

He said, "They don't look right."

I said, "Take another look at them." I reiterated his fire clearance.

He says, "Yeah, I think they are women and children. I'm not going to shoot them"

I said, "OK."

He said, "But there is a lot of them."

I said, "See if you can herd them into one group."

So he herded them into a little group by flying and pointing. Of course they did it because he was armed, heavily armed.

In the aircraft with me were a South Vietnamese major, an interpreter, and an American major. They were the local fire clearance authorities for that zone, area of operations. I told them what we had. They wanted us to shoot them.

I said, "We don't want to shoot them, we think they are women and children."

They said, "See what's happening."

White herded them over and told me, "They are women and children and they have a couple of bicycles."

I said, "Let me talk to the people in the aircraft with me." To them, I said, "He has a bunch of women and children. I think we should go down there and capture them. You guys up for it?"

They looked at each other and said, "Yeah."

I said to the crew of the Huey, "Are you guys up for it?"

They said, "Yeah, let's go."

I said, "White can cover us and the Cobra can cover all of us."

So the Huey crew dived out of altitude and landed in this field of grass about two feet high. We leaped out of the aircraft with our rifles. There were a bunch of women and children there. There could have been bad guys there, and we could have been ambushed, but White didn't see them, so we took the chance. I guess there were about twelve of them, and they are small people so we put all of them in the Huey. The Loach was buzzing around us and the COBRA was buzzing around all of us. Then we took off. The Vietnamese major and interpreter are telling them to keep their heads down and their eyes closed. So they are all sitting in the squatting position which the Vietnamese can do for hours. It would kill my knees. We are at about 1500 feet and this one little kid opens his right eye and peaks out the door.

The interpreter yells, "Close your eyes."

He closes his eyes and puts his head down. Then he opens his eye again and is peeking out the door. These people have never been on a helicopter and are freaked out but amazed at the same time. The interpreter catches them again and looks at me.

I said, "Let's let them look out. They have never been in a helicopter. This is a stunning event for them."

The interpreter says, "Yeah, you guys can look."

So they all looked and were amazed. We flew them over to Lai Khe. We landed and took them all out. The interpreter and headquarters people talked to them for a few minutes and realized they were out there trying to get some junk off an old wrecked helicopter. They would make plates, pots and pans out of the metal.

The Vietnamese headquarters people told them, "Never do that again."

They gave them big bags of stuff: food, pots and pans and whatever else they could find these people needed. Then put them on a truck and sent them home. It was a nice ending to what could have been a really bad day. White could have just gunned them all down with his minigun. I was happy things turned out as it did.

Bicycle Caravan

I flew out of Tay Ninh to a fire base on the border of Cambodia. They had a runway, refueling point, and armpit, where you could rearm. I know it sounds funny, but armpit is what we called them. We flew into Cambodia to do a bomb damage assessment after a B-52 strike. I flew into this place eight minutes after the last bomb had fallen. The dust had just settled, there was a film of dust on everything. There were some big bunkers that wouldn't be destroyed unless they took a direct hit from a 750 or 1000 pound bomb. Some were dead but the rest were still intact. We found cart tracks on the dust. And we found blood trails. The bad guys had run out of the bunkers, grabbed the dead bodies, and pulled them into the bunkers. They don't want us to see the dead. They think it drives us crazy if we don't see any dead bodies after dropping all those bombs. I see a green poncho, which is clean. It doesn't have any dust on it, it is in a square and has a rock on each corner. Since it has no dust, it was put there within the last few minutes. I told my crew chief to get a fragmentation grenade hot. That is done by holding the grenade in the right hand, putting the ring on a finger of the left hand, pulling the grenade off the pin and holding it outside the door. The reason is if you are clumsy or get shot or something, the grenade will fall outside. I flew over to the poncho, right above it, about six feet. We dropped the grenade and moved off. The grenade exploded and we went back to see what was under the poncho. There was a torso with a head and one arm. There was a leg and head next to it. The bad guys didn't have time to pull those in the bunker. I reported what I found there and said the place could use another B-52 strike because the big bunkers were not injured.

I moved on and came to this really big open area with one road through the middle of it. Along the road was an occasional hut the Cambodians lived in, and an occasional palm tree. They had long trunks with a little ball of leaves at the top. I saw a line of Vietnamese wearing khaki uniforms on bicycles. I think they heard me before they saw me. A little south of them was a house with some Cambodian women and children. I think the Vietnamese left all their weapons and maybe a guy in that house. They made two Cambodians get on their bikes and ride with them. The Cambodians were wearing ragged clothes and didn't look like the Vietnamese. There were maybe twelve people in all. The bicycles were loaded with supplies. They weren't war materials, but bolts of material, reams of bicycle tires, and that kind of stuff. I didn't see any weapons, so they didn't meet the rules of engagement, even though they were bad guys since they were Vietnamese and in Cambodia. I wouldn't shoot them unless something weird happened. I wanted them to stop. My crew chief signalled them to stop. The lead guy kept his head down and kept on riding like I wasn't there. I flew right in front of him and put my skid within a couple of inches of his nose. He just kept riding and wouldn't look up. I pulled around and told my crew chief, Sgt. Terry, to shoot the front wheel off his bike. So Terry shot the wheel, the spokes broke, the bike went down on the fork, and this guy flew over the handle bar. He jumped up, was all smiles, and waved as if to say, "Oh, you wanted me to stop?" I signalled for all of them to stop which they did. I flew along the line, pointed at the Cambodians, and told them to go with hand and arm signals. They were pulling rags out of their little bags to show me they didn't have anything and didn't want to get shot. The two Cambodians left. I signalled for the Vietnamese to put all the bikes together. They would act like they didn't know what I wanted until I had Terry fire a burst next to them. They put the bikes together and I signalled for them to get off the road. They hem and hawed for a second until Terry fired a burst next to them and they jumped up and ran off the road.

While this is going on, the Cobra pilots are asking, "Can we shoot them? Can we shoot them? Put some smoke on them. We'll shoot them." They really wanted to shoot these guys. Bad guys in the open. That is a Cobra pilot's dream.

I said, "We are not shooting them because they don't have any weapons."

From the Cobra pilots, I heard, "Oh shit."

I had Terry shoot up all the supplies and bikes. He just ate them up with machine gun bullets. Then Terry noticed a bunch of foliage at the bottom of a couple of the palm trees. That's not right because the foliage is at the top of the tree.

He said, "I think there are motorcycles in that foliage."

I said, "Well, shoot them."

So he shot the motorcycles and they exploded and burned. So all we killed were supplies, bicycles, and two motorcycles. The Cobra pilot wasn't happy but I didn't violate the rules of engagement and I stopped a lot of supplies.

On the way back, I passed a lake on the east side of the Mekong River. The lake was about a mile in diameter and there had been a B-52 strike right through the middle of the lake.

I decided to give the Air Force a hard time and said, "I have a bomb damage assessment of an Arc Light." Operation Arc Light was the code name for B-52 strikes.

They said, "OK, what is it?"

I said, "You killed two submarines and four frogmen."

Then I went home. It was a nice mission and I didn't have to kill anybody.

Headquarter Search

We had been working in Cambodia and at 4:00 P.M. we were about finished for the day. We didn't usually go out after that time because if shot down in Cambodia we would be there overnight. I was called into the headquarters tent at Tay Ninh East, a little airstrip next to the big airstrip. There were two generals: Major General Hollingsworth, the Third Corp Commander, and Brigadier General McCaffrey. An intelligence officer, a major, was with them. They gave me a briefing. They had some radio research which means radio spying. They determined there might be a North Vietnamese Headquarters operating in a certain area of Cambodia. They asked if I would go there and look for it late in the afternoon.

I said, "I'll do it."

My crew was happy about it. My crew chief was Ron Brochu and my observer was Neu who had red hair. Brochu was six foot four and weighed a lot. He wanted to be a scout crew chief and went to our platoon leader. He was told he was too big and ammunition would have to be left to take him.

He asked, "What weight do you want me to get to?"

"You get down to 190, you can be a crew chief."

He put on a poncho and ran around the runway for a couple of weeks until he dropped to 189. Then he became a scout crew chief. He was a great crew chief.

We took off and headed towards where they thought the headquarters was. It wasn't there but we found it about five kilometers away. We saw it from about half a mile away because it was a square about half a mile on each side. It was in a grid pattern like tic-tac-toe with a border around it. The pattern was made of mud walls about three feet high with cut outs for machine guns. There were very strong bunkers which required a direct hit from a 750 to 1000 pound bomb to be killed. On the south east corner was a house with two palm trees: one near the house and another fifty feet from the house. There were four bad guys standing in front of the house. They heard us coming and were ass-holes and elbows trying to get out of the way. Two dived in the door of the house. Two froze in place, hoping they wouldn't be seen because the eyes pick up movement quicker. The problem for them was it was broad daylight. I flew right to them and hovered overhead at about forty feet. One is on a knee and has a RPD, a drum fed machine gun. The drums have about a hundred rounds. The other one had an AK-47. Both were frozen and I was hovering over their heads. I watched the one on a knee very slowly raise his head until he made eye contact with me. Then he had this look of being disgusted with himself because he was freezing in broad daylight with no cover for concealment. He brought the RPD up to shoot us.

I told Brochu, "Shoot him."

Brochu opened fire on him and the other one took off running for the tree farther over. Brochu shot the one kneeling and we chased the other one around the tree until Brochu shot him at the bottom of the tree. I put smoke on that house and the Cobra rolled in on it and put rockets in the door. They had something explosive in there because there were more explosions than the rockets. We flew around some more and it was obvious this was the headquarters we were looking for.

I called the Huey which was at about 2000 feet and said, "This is it. I'll mark it if you want to put an air strike on it."

They said, "Standby."

So I flew around. Every time someone ran out of a bunker, we would shoot at them or throw grenades at them. The Huey crew called the Air Force Forward Air Controller (FAC). Their call sign was Nail. We called them Nail FACs.

They called back and said, "We can't bomb yet, we need permission from the province chief."

I said, "Go ahead and do that, we'll try to keep them from running away."

It took an hour. The FAC had to call the Seventh Air Force in Saigon who had to call the American embassy in Phnom Penh. They had to send someone out to find the province chief and ask if we could drop bombs there.

He said, "Yes."

While we were waiting we shot at anybody trying to get out. They wanted to get out and go to some Cambodian villages. There were three within a kilometer of the compound. If they could get into those villages we would not shoot them. We had 24 grenades and 2600 rounds of ammunition for the machine guns. We used all of it.

Finally after an hour, the Air Force said, "We can bomb now."

I said, "I am going to mark the four corners. Three with smoke and one with white phosphorous. I'm marking the northeast corner with a Willy Peter because they are always shooting at me when I go there."

I believe they had orders not to shoot at us. Whoever was at the northeast corner was disobeying those orders. This was before the invasion of 1972. I marked three corners and when I came up on the northeast corner, that sucker opened up on us again. Bullets came through my instrument panel, my front windows and went out the door right by my face. I got some shrapnel in my right leg which was my second purple heart. It felt like somebody threw wet sand at me. It didn't really hurt, it just stung a little.

I put the Pete down on that guy and said, "We are out of here."

The FAC asked, "Would you like a B-52?"

I said, "No we can't use a B-52 because there are villages on three sides within a 1000 meters."

A B-52 strike, also called an Arc Light, would have gotten at least two of the villages, probably all three. It couldn't be a B-52. It would have to be TACAIR only. That would be F-4 Phantoms, A-7s, Skyraiders, and those types of aircraft. They put a lot of strikes on that place.

As time went on, there was the offensive of March 30, 1972. Tay Ninh had a one or two day attack on it and they backed off. Anh Loc over to the east was attacked by tanks and heavy artillery and was under siege for about a month and a half. They were surrounded by bad guys and nobody could get in or out.

We took off and went back to Vietnam. We counted up the ammunition we had left. I had ammunition for my CAR15 which is now called a M4. I had ninety rounds of ammunition for my .38 pistol. For my machine guns I had three bullets left and no grenades left. Also no smoke grenades left. We used damn near everything.

When we got back a medic came out and I stood on the side of the runway with my pants down while he tweezed some shrapnel out of my knee. Then I was told to get it X-rayed. That was a pretty exciting mission.

When I was in the hospital, General Hollingsworth sent me two letters. He said, "We are still kicking their asses."

I still have those letters. He said that on the news one day and got in trouble with Nixon because Nixon wanted him to say the South Vietnamese were kicking their asses. He sent me those letters because he knew I could have been shot down in Cambodia and been stuck in the dark. He didn't really order me to go, he asked me.

Tank

April 28, 1972

We took off early in the morning and flew to Quang Tri. We landed at Tiger Pad, a helipad east of the city. We were briefed on our first mission. I was flying scouts that day, which I did every day. I was on team one, we cranked up and took off, heading east.

We flew about a kilometer and went over a little town we hadn't flown over when we flew in. Then my crew chief said, "I just saw an armored personnel carrier down there."

I thought, "That's not right." Because there were no armored personnel carriers out there.

I told the Cobra, "I'm going back to check out something, because my crew chief thought he saw an armored personnel carrier."

I made a one-eighty and flew back. When I flew over where he said, there was a light green PT-76 Soviet built tank. It is an amphibious tank with a 76 millimeter gun on it.

I told the Cobra, "That's an enemy tank. I'm going to put some smoke on it."

To my crew I said, "Shoot around it to make sure nobody will surprise us."

My crew chief, Labore, opened fire. My observer, Anderson, did not fire a shot because he was on his first mission, ever. He was a good guy, but he was new so he just sat there and looked around. He didn't know when we were taking fire. I had two Cobras, they were flying below 50 feet. It was hard to shoot rockets under 50 feet. They had to learn a new technique and had only been doing it about two weeks. Before, all Cobras flew at altitude, 800 to 3500 feet. Then they would dive in and shoot rockets. This had changed because the enemy had brought a new weapon, the SA-7 heat seeking rocket. The Russians called it the Stella. It has a heat seeker on the nose and looks for your tailpipe because there is a lot of heat in the tailpipe.

I put a smoke grenade on the tank. The Cobras fired and I flew over to check. The tank had not been hit. So I did it again, the Cobras couldn't see it, because it was under some palm trees on the side of the road. The Cobra missed it again but on the third time when I marked it, the Cobra flown by Chuck O'Connell, hit that sucker with seven rockets, at least a couple were heat rockets which means high explosive anti-tank. We had found that a 17 pound fragmentation rocket would penetrate a PT-76 tank. There was a lot of holes in it and it was on fire. I flew over it and it was burning. I made a right turn, and around the corner in that village was another PT-76. It was track to track against trees on a narrow street. It was covered by the trees but I saw it because my rotor wash was blowing leaves out of the way. I didn't want to go through having them try three times to hit it. I told my crew chief to get a Pete hot. That is a white phosphorous grenade and we call them Willy Peters. He got the Pete hot. I made a hammerhead turn, where you pull up, make a quick turn and come right back from the same way you came. I went slow and hovered for just a second over the tank. Labore dropped the Willy Peter into the hatch. I pulled off and let it explode. Labore was shooting at the enemy who was hiding in the houses. When the white phosphorous exploded I flew back over and checked. There was a giant cloud of white smoke and the tank was on fire.

About ten seconds later, Haynes, pilot in a Cobra, called, "Four one is hit."

Martindale, the commander in the Cobra, call sign was Centaur four one.

O'Connell said, "Are you OK."

Martindale said, "I'm OK, but I'm going down."

I saw him going down and said, "I'm headed your way, I'll pick you up when you land."

Martindale was an engineer captain. That was the branch he was in. While the lead Cobra was shooting at the tanks, Martindale was flying in circles. There were two Air Force A-1E Skyraiders, propeller driven bombers, flying into our traffic. They were trying to bomb a 37 millimeter anti-aircraft gun. It fired rounds that exploded in the sky. You can see the black puffs of smoke when the rounds explode, creating flak. They couldn't see Martindale in the beginning because he was below 50 feet. Every tree line he crossed covered him from being seen by the gunners. While we were fighting the tanks and the Skyraiders were trying to bomb the 37 millimeter, Martindale kept getting higher and higher and higher. My opinion is he got up to 400 or 500 feet and they could see him because the trees weren't masking him anymore. He took a hit from a 37 millimeter anti-aircraft gun. The round didn't explode, because it didn't go far enough to arm.

While I was flying over to get Martindale, I saw an Air Force O-2 Skymaster (military version of the Cessna 337 Super Skymaster) Nail Forward Air Controller (Nail FAC) flying away from us towards the ocean. He had taken a hit in the front engine and it was smoking. There was black puffs of flak going off all around him. The Skymaster is a twin engine with one engine in the nose and a second engine in the aft of the fuselage. It also has two tails. He was heading over to the ocean to get away from the fire. It was the same 37 millimeter that got him that got Martindale. I couldn't get to him because he was heading away from us and I think he was trying to get to the ocean. There were navy ships right off the coast, literally a mile from the beach. He could bail out and they could pick him up.

As I was coming up on Martindale's right side, there was a flame coming from the right side of his transmission cowling. The cowling is the cover over the outside of the helicopter. I told Martindale, "You've got a fire coming from the right side of your transmission and the mast hole." The mast hole is where the rotor mast comes out of the top of the Cobra. He didn't respond. I think what happened, we'll never know, he thought he was having an engine failure, but he was having a transmission seizure. As I approached, he seemed to be moving in slow motion. At about 50 feet, the nose of the aircraft went very high up in the air. Then I could see the rotor. If you can see the rotor, it's going too slow. The aircraft nosed over and crashed on top of the rotor. He had a full load of fuel, ammo, and rockets. The aircraft was burning really hot. I kept flying over to him and was there in about three or four seconds. Ammunition was cooking off and shooting everywhere. I saw Martindale lying on the ground. His helmet was gone. He looked like he had a broken leg and was sleeping. I landed about ten feet from him and told Labore to get out and get him. Labore leaped out and went over and started trying to pick him up. Labore was a tough guy. Labore and Martindale were little guys. Martindale was about five feet five with blonde hair. I was hovering about an inch off the ground. I was looking with my right side to the fire. I couldn't look at the fire for more than a couple seconds because it was singing my eyebrows and it felt like it was burning my face from about 25 feet away. Labore was having trouble picking up Martindale. Another Huey, flown by Wilson, landed on the other side of us and his crew chief ran over and started helping Labore. They were having trouble so I lifted off. I had been hovering about an inch above the ground. I moved until I was hovering within inches of them. They both picked up Martindale and put him in my aircraft. Labore got back in and plugged his helmet in. You can talk on the radio if your helmet is plugged into the helicopter. The crew chief ran back to his Slick and they took off. They took a few hits when they took off. Then I took off.

Labore asked, "What should I do?"

I said, "Try to give him some first aid if you can and cover him up."

Labore took off his shirt and covered Martindale. In the meantime, I thought I saw Haynes lying in the grass about forty or fifty feet away. I hovered over there and saw it was just a piece of junk off the aircraft. Then I saw Haynes, he was still in the front seat in the aircraft and dead. He had been hit in the forehead by the main rotor blade when they crashed on top of the rotors. The rotor went through the cockpit. His right arm was sticking out of the window and he was on fire. Just then, someone on the ground started shooting at us. So I had to leave and flew out of there. We had to go back and get Haynes later, because while I was there, we never left anybody in the field. We took Martindale back to Tiger Pad. A bunch of Americans in combat gear came over, put Martindale on a stretcher and took him to an aid station. They were advisors to ARVN. I was hoping he was alive but just unconscious. It turned out he was dead and had died from a broken neck. I think when the aircraft turned over, he unfastened his seatbelt because you can't break those seatbelts. When he unhooked his seatbelt, he either forgot or didn't have time to unhook his helmet from the aircraft. I think he was thrown out in the crash and his neck was broken because his helmet was still plugged in.

I went over and shut down until our next mission. There was a lot of shooting that day. We had seven aircraft take hits. All day it was shooting, shooting, shooting. About 30 minutes later I had to crank up and rush off to go get the crew of another aircraft that was shot down. Quang Tri was cut off from the east and the bad guys were already on the west side. It was gone the next day. It was surrounded and cut off. We were having a tremendous amount of action every day and all the teams were having it.

That was the day that I killed one tank with my crew chief Labore and set up another tank to be killed by the Cobra. That was the last time I was in Quang Tri until a few days later when I got shot down.

Shot Down

May 1, 1972

Quang Tri City had been cut off from the east. A bunch of friendlies were trapped in a citadel in the center of the city. Among them was Captain Riddle, one of our operations officers. We decided to go rescue him early in the morning. We had two Loaches (scout helicopters), two Cobras and a Huey. The Huey and the Cobras were going to wait at Evans Army Airfield, south of the front line. The two Loaches would fly in there in the dark. We're flying about six inches above the rice paddy or marshland in the dark. We flew there everyday so we were familiar with the area and knew we could fly there without hitting anything. When I say we, I mean my crew chief Labore and I, and my wingman, Ledfors and another pilot named Clark was flying as his observer. We only took ammunition for the machine gun, no grenades or anything else. We're trying to sneak into Quang Tri, into the Citadel, and get Riddle, take as many as we could, and get out of there. We didn't know there were 80 friendlies in there. We would fly over bad guys in the dark. I saw a couple wake up and try to point their weapons at us. We would disappear into the dark. It started getting brighter as the sun started coming up. We started seeing more and they would try to shoot us but we would be gone before they could get a good shot at us. They were trying but couldn't hit us. We were at echelon left, meaning I was in the lead and Ledfors was at my left and at 45 degrees behind me. We started hitting tree lines, south and east of Quang Tri. We had to go over the trees, so we would pop up over them and dip down under them. Right after hitting a tree line, Labore fired a long burst, maybe a hundred rounds. He told me, on the intercom, he shot at least ten of them. A few seconds later, we came over another tree line and there were a hundred bad guys, standing there, aiming up in the air looking for us. As soon as I saw them I tried to make a left climbing turn so I could go over Ledfors and get on the other side of him. But the nose of my aircraft went down instead of up. They had opened fire at the same time. All my windows were blown out and I didn't know it but my tail boom was blown off where it attaches to the fuselage of the helicopter. That's why my nose went down even though I had full aft cyclic stick in. Instead of going over Ledfors, I actually hit him. We had a midair collision. I was completely out of control because I lost one main rotor blade and the right skid on my aircraft. Ledfors lost about three feet of one main rotor blade and he lost the blades on his tail rotor. Not the gear box, just the blades. If you lose the gear box you are out of center of gravity. We were both spinning around. The best way I could describe it is I was doing an elliptical spin. I also had a lateral one-to-one vibration. Which means, for every rotation of the rotor, I had a left and right vibration. It was very hard, slamming left and right. We crossed a river which saved us. The river was a barrier between them shooting at us and getting us. I guess I went about 80 meters past the river bank. Then I hit the ground really hard on the right side of the aircraft.

My head whipped really hard and then my first thought was, "Holy shit, I'm still alive."

My next thought was, "Get out of the aircraft."

I tried to get out and my seat belt was on and locked. Seat belt locks on cars come from seat belt locks on military aircraft. It's the same kind of lock. My right shoulder was in the dirt. I unhooked my seat belt and climbed out the front window, because it was gone.

My next thought was, "Where is Labore? Did he get thrown out? Did he get shot? Did the aircraft land on top of him?"

I didn't know what had happened to him. I got out and stood up. I walked around the nose of the aircraft and Labore was standing right there which scared the Holy Hell out of me.

He said, "What do you want to do, sir?"

I said, "Get the machine gun out." In more of a squeaky voice than I wanted it to be.

He got the gun out but it was no good because the cover of the gun was broken off. He had about 1800 rounds left but the gun didn't work. I had 240 rounds for my CAR-15 which is now known as a M-4. My rifle went out the front window when they shot the windows out. Or maybe when we had the midair. I don't know which. I had a .38 with about 90 bullets and three grenades. Two were what we call mini-grenades, about as big as a silver dollar, but would kill you if close to you. The other was a standard, baseball shaped, M-26 fragmentation grenade. I gave it to Labore and told him to get down in the grass, a little to the north of where I was. I heard an engine running, I looked over and saw Ledfors helicopter. It was sitting right side up and looked OK. My first thought was that they had been shot or else they would have turned the aircraft off. Just as I thought that, I heard the engine start winding down, they turned it off. They were next to a village with cinder block houses. I got my survival radio out and called the Cobras out of Evans. The Cobras cranked up and headed our way.

Ledfors helicopter had been spinning and he cut the throttle. It stopped spinning and made a hovering auto-rotation descent from about three feet.

It was sitting there with the rotor turning and Clark said, "Why don't you turn this thing off?"

Ledfors said, "OK" and pushed the slide fitting forward to turn the throttle off. He said, "It won't go off."

Clark said, "Pull the fuel valve." It's a little wire handle, wrapped in plastic, in the top of the helicopter.

Ledfors pulled that and the engine went off. They got out of the aircraft and were talking to each other and hear some talking. Ledfors goes over to one of these cinder block houses and peeks around the corner. There is a large number of North Vietnamese soldiers getting called into formation in the street. Their eyes got real big and they dived on the ground and started low-crawling away. When they got far enough away, Ledfors turned on his survival radio. My radio was on beeper, which is a setting called beeper that makes a loud noise on any radio turned on. That's to alert them that somebody is down. Then you can turn it to voice and talk. So he turned his radio off real quick, and they kept low-crawling. In the meantime, I turned mine to voice and called the Cobras.

I told them, "If you make a rocket run right now, you'll be pointed right at us."

OConnell, the Cobra pilot, said "OK, I gotcha" and then turned around and headed south.

I asked, "Where are you going?"

He said, "We are going to get the Huey."

I said, "OK, tell the Huey to come right up the highway."

They hadn't been able to do that before because the bad guys owned the highway.

I said, "They have closed the corridor we have been using. They won't be expecting you to come up the highway because we haven't been doing it. We can get away with it once."

He said, "Roger" and went to get the Huey.

I decided to find my rifle. I walked over to the river, and somebody took a shot at me from the other side, north side, of the river.

I said, "You can have the rifle." and returned to where I was.

I was on the ground with Labore and there was a rise a little over. There was a cemetery with Catholic and Buddhist monuments around the graves. The Buddhist monuments are circular, made out of concrete, and the Catholic graves have rectangular monuments around them. Suddenly a guy appeared, looking around, with his back to one of those monuments. I pointed my .38 at him before I realized it was Ledfors.

He didn't see me so I whispered "Ledfors". He looked at me and I said "Get over there." So I told him and Clark where to hide. I said, "I'll talk to the Slick."

I told OConnell to let me know when they were 1000 meters out. I had three smoke grenades. One regular smoke grenade, the size of a soda can, and two mini-smokes, the size of film cans. The color of the can is the color of the smoke. You unscrew the top, turn it over, there is a scratch pad like a matchbox, you strike it and toss it on the ground. They will burn for about a minute or so.

I said, "When they are 1000 meters out, I'll pop one, when 500 meters out I'll pop the other. Then I'll put the big one on." I could hear them coming. The Cobras came over us and the Huey came up the road. I popped one mini-smoke, then the other one, and then the big one. But right before that, the Cobras were right overhead and took a tremendous amount of fire from across the river.

I got on the radio and told OConnell, "You guys are taking heavy fire from the north side of the river."

He said, "Roger" and the Cobras went into a rocket run. He started firing 17 pound high explosive fragmentation rockets. And he started firing nails. The official name is flechette. They look like darts about an inch long. One rocket has 2300 of them in it. You can tell when they are firing nails. The rocket goes a certain distance and arms. Then there is a puff of orange smoke and it has opened up into a cone of nails. He punched off about six nail rockets plus the high fragmentation rockets. When he made that first rocket run, the shooting went down to almost nothing. When OConnell pulled off, the wing Cobra did it again, firing the rockets plus the mini-guns and 40mm grenades. In the meantime, the Huey was coming up to us and I put the smoke out. When they came up to us, they did not land. I called Labore, Ledfors, and Clark over and told them to get in. Then I got in. The Huey was about three foot skid height and both machine guns were firing. They were not firing bursts, they were holding the triggers down. I didn't know why, until they told me later, the bad guys were low-crawling up on us. They told me they shot four on one side and six on the other side, who were trying to sneak up on us. Those were the guys in the village who were getting into formation. It took them about 20 minutes to get their act together, get some coffee, come out and get us. There were two pilots in the Huey, Captain Barber and Captain Voirees. After they picked us up, they made a pedal turn, meaning you just push on the pedals, and headed back in the opposite direction they had come. We climbed out of there, it was an overcast day so heat seeking rockets were not getting a good lock on a Huey taking off. When a helicopter takes off, the tail is up in the air, unlike an airplane where the nose is pointed up. We got the hell out of there, in a hail of gunfire.

We got back to Phu Bai and I had to talk to a colonel, whose name I can't remember. He was the 11th aviation group commander. He wanted me to brief him and hear his plan to get the people out. That's when I found out there were more than eighty people in there.

He said, "We'll take 30 Hueys and 30 Cobras and go up and get them."

I said, "I don't think you should do that because they would all have to be orbiting around Quang Tri waiting to land and pick people up. They will be taking heavy fire and you will lose a lot of aircraft and people."

He said, "OK, we'll have to think of something else."

It was still only seven o'clock in the morning. All that had happened from just before sunrise and seven o'clock.

A couple of days later, a South Vietnamese ranger unit went through the area on the north side of the river and found about a hundred dead bad guys, killed by the Cobra attack. That was a really good Cobra attack.

To get the people out, the Air Force used Super Jolly Green Giant helicopters (CH-53) and 30 fighter bombers, jets and Skyraiders. Skyraiders are propeller driven airplanes. It can carry a lot of bombs and has four 20mm cannons. They sent in one helicopter at a time with the airplanes on each side, shooting and bombing all the way. The helicopter would land, pick up as many as they could, and leave. Then another would come in. They had five available but only used three to get everybody out. Ledfors and I went down to Da Nang, to the 95th Evac Hospital, on China Beach. We got checked out by the doctors. I think Labore also went down to get checked out. He didn't go with us, he went with somebody else. I got checked for shrapnel in my leg, and neck injury for hitting the ground like I did.