

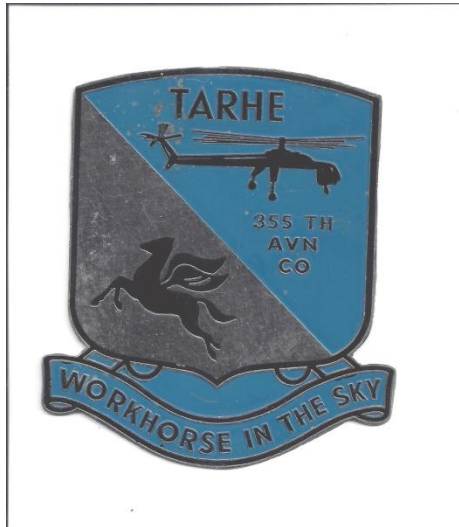
Flying Cranes

In the summer of 1968, with Basic, AIT and OCS under my belt and approaching the end of Flight School we young lieutenants were given verbal orders (VOCO) regarding our future assignments. I would be headed for an Arial Rocket Artillery (ARA) Battalion (BN). Some days later we got our written orders, but mine were to report for the CH-54 (AKA Tarhe, Sikorsky Flying Crane) 6-week transition course, which I thought it had to be a mistake. Cranes were only for second tour or more Captains, senior Warrant Officers and above – nobody got Cranes out of flight school. The NCOIC let me know in no uncertain terms that orders are orders. When I reported at the CH-54 flight at Hanchey Heliport, a CW4 IP asked me where was my first tour in Vietnam..... I think I was one the first “turn-around” student pilots for their transition. MY IP was CW4 Bob Marsh, one of the early, if not the first CH-54 pilots. I enjoyed the transition into that incredible helicopter, which had very cool features like the Automatic Flight Control System (AFCS), a voice warning system (a female voice which would, for example, inform you through your helmet in a sweet tone “Fire, Engine Fire”!), an aft facing pilot’s station with an “electric” cyclic, and of course, massive lifting power (10 ton loads on a good day). The course ended with an “unofficial” qualification requirement to fly the complete pattern, takeoff to landing, at the Crane stage field from the aft pilot position.

Several weeks later, after a home leave, with my orders in hand for the 273rd Crane company located in Vung Tau, I made the trip on Tiger Airlines “over the pond” via Hawaii and Japan and landed at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in early December, 1968. At the Replacement (REPO) Depot, I was told I would be assigned to a UH-1 slick BN and to forget about Cranes. A phone call or two later (Bob Marsh warned this might happen), my orders changed again and I was headed for the 355th Heavy Helicopter Company (Hvy Hel Co), located at Phu Hiep Army Airfield (AAF) on the coast near Tuy Hòa in the II Corps area.



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After completing my in-country flight training, I was signed off as pilot by none other than (recently assigned to the 355th) CW4 Bob Marsh and told to report to the Company Commander. Major David E Baeb asked me if I played any musical instrument or could sing country western songs. I was not able to do either and some days later I was assigned to take command of the 1st Platoon of the company, located 110 miles away at Camp Holloway, near Pleiku in the Central Highlands. This was great news as the 1st Platoon was OPCON to the 52nd Combat Aviation BN (CAB) and had 4 CH-54s, 7 pilots and 16 enlisted.

Whenever an aircraft required a periodic maintenance, it was flown back to Phu Hiep and traded for another, keeping us with 4 flyable at almost all times. I was now in the company of highly experienced Warrant Officers and the operations required about 90 hours per month per pilot, flying single ship resupply and recovery missions throughout the II Corps area.

CH-54 missions for the 1st Platoon were primarily resupply of II Corps Fire Support Bases (FSBs) located on various mountain tops to the northwest of Pleiku with names like Mile Hi (west of Kontum), Firebase 6 (south of Dak To), Challenge, Hardtimer and many others. 8 ton sling loads of ammo for 155 or 105 howitzers were delivered to these isolated batteries, at times under fire from AK, 51 cal, mortars and counter battery fire. On occasion, emplacement or replacement of 155 howitzers was needed as well as return sling loads of spent brass ammo shells and other trash. These missions were always single ship and frequently involved an unfriendly reception by nearby enemy. Although we were supposed to request gunship support when delivering under fire, we were pretty sure if we made such a request, there would be none quickly available and the mission would later become a "tactical emergency", probably at night and with no gunships. And I knew that taking 8 tons of ammo to a flashlight on a mountain top is not fun, having done that once on a night tactical emergency mission to FSB 6.

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Other missions for the 355th Workhorses included recovery of downed aircraft (e.g. A1-E Skyraider, CH-47 Chinook, CH-34 Choctaw, OV-1 Mohawk), delivery of single point loads of 4 each 500 gallon fuel blivets (about 7 ½ tons), 175" gun replacement tubes (one of the heaviest and trickiest loads at 9+ tons), and numerous one-off unique requirements. In 1969, Workhorse Operation totals included 5,496 flight hours moving 34,620 tons of cargo.

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An example of a “one-off” mission came up at the end of a day of FSB ammo resupply sorties, with a radio call requesting a pickup and delivery of some unspecified loads to a given location further south. We arrived at the Pickup Zone (PZ) and hooked up a sling load of 105 Ammo crates. It was an easy load, but my Flight Engineer in the aft pilot’s station stated that the ammo boxes were filled with dirt. I set the load back down and told the ground contact that I could not use the aircraft to haul dirt. On the way back to Camp Holloway, I got a radio call on FM: “Workhorse 16, this is Eagle 6, do you know who I am?” I confirmed that I did (4th Division Commander) and he added, “You will haul that load. There are troops in hard terrain in combat and no way to provide cover. Understood?””yes Sir!”

The most memorable “one-off” mission I recall took place toward the end of another long day hauling ammo into the mountains. On the way back to Holloway we got a call on FM from a ground unit that an M-113 Armored Personnel Carrier (APC) had overturned and pinned two troops riding on top underneath the upside down vehicle. We were pretty certain we could not bring the APC to a hover (they weighed more than 10 tons dry), but there was no other chance for the two men so we agreed to give it a try. When we arrived a few minutes later, the 113 was rigged and we hooked up and took the slack out of the straps. I pulled maximum torque (the limiting factor for the CH-54 was the titanium transmission) and then exceeded the maximum slightly for about 5 seconds (any more would have required replacing the transmission). We benefitted from the circular depression in which the APC rested, as it provided a more effective ground cushion. The 113 came up a couple of inches and the ground troops were able to pull out the two survivors. I was never able to find out anything further about that mission but I hope they made a full recovery.

Although we were undoubtedly a high value target for the VC and NVA (rumor had it that downing a CH-54 entitled the shooter to a paid vacation in Vung Tau), perhaps the unusual profile and flight characteristics contributed to their poor aim, as for the most part, damage was limited to a few holes in the rotor blades. However, on one occasion the threat was more intense. Our mission was replacing an M114 155mm Howitzer at a fire base on a hilltop near the Plei Trap Valley. All was going smoothly as we made the final approach to the purple smoke marking the desired gun position. With the 8 ton load about 6 feet above ground, we started taking 51 caliber rounds from a hill in the jungle about a click or two to our front. It was my first time seeing those green basketballs coming toward me and then came a couple of very loud sharp clangs as the rounds went through the cockpit below my feet. We dropped the howitzer from a few feet and pulled collective to max torque and made a vertical climb with less than normal left pedal, causing us to “corkscrew” straight up. The tracers tried to follow us, but were unsuccessful as we flew up several thousand feet into the cooler (and more peaceful) air. Looking back on that episode, I am thankful for the excellent training and superb

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aircraft that the US Army provided. As I am sure is the case with all US Army helicopter pilots, the aircraft and you become one, and you instinctively know what to do and how to do it without thinking. And yes, the 155 was not damaged by its short drop.



Another short story deals with hot refueling at Dak To. We were in and out of Dak To on numerous occasions, to pick up or drop off loads and to hot refuel at the Forward Area Refueling Point (FARP). What you wanted to avoid was being there for “rocket hour”. The bad guys would set up a 122mm rocket launch site in the mountains to the south and frequently launch their salvos in the late afternoon. But sometimes, after a long day, there was no choice but to refuel there for the trip back to Holloway. With No 1 Engine shut down and while the Crew Chief and Flight Engineer (FE) were up on the side of the CH-54 doing the refueling, I climbed down from the cockpit and walked about 50 meters to the “wire” to relieve myself. During that process, I heard a “whoosh” and then, at what seemed like about 30 meters to my front (probably more like 80 or 100), there was an explosion and a geyser of dirt and smoke erupted from the ground. I ran back to the aircraft and climbed in as the Crew Chief and FE closed up the fuel tanks and scrambled down. The pilot that day (Maybe Jim Church, also known kiddingly as “Magnet Ass” for his seeming propensity to attract enemy fire) was starting No 1 and getting the aircraft light on the gear and within a few seconds we were lifting off (with no load, the Crane could hover easily on one engine). As I pulled No 1 back up, Jim asked me “Did you forget something?” I wondered for a second what he meant, but then I

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realized I had forgotten two things – my safety harness and my fly! I took some kidding about that later at the Ten Ton Annex* (our platoon “lounge”) as we celebrated cheating death, the less than accurate aiming of the NVA and their evident use of a time delay fuse on the rocket.

As my time in RVN grew shorter and I looked forward to heading back to “the world”, things heated up a lot in Ben Het, as the NVA and VC were making a concerted assault. Ben Het was an Army of Viet Nam (ARVN) base with Special Forces advisors as well as US Army artillery and armor support. Road access had been cut off to that base and they were consuming ammo at a fast rate. For several days, we were making multiple ammo resupply sorties with Pink Panther Cobra (AH-1) gunship support and on one day at least, we had Cobras in a race track pattern on our left and Air Force jet pilots making strafing runs on our right (one of the AF pilots was close enough for me to notice that he needed a shave!). With tracers coming up and tracers and rockets going down, it was quite a show. Our delivery technique there was similar to an autorotation – keep the speed up as long as possible, then time your deceleration to have the load touch down as vertical descent neared zero, while increasing collective as the inertia of the loaded aircraft continued the approach. The FE or Crew Chief in the aft pilot station would be calling the last few feet of altitude and then releasing the load as it touched down, calling out “load released.” As pilots, we knew that without hearing that callout, since with significant collective now engaged and the load released, the Crane would leap into a climb, with our rate of climb increasing by adding collective to maximum torque.

Not long after the Ben Het campaign, my replacement arrived I headed back to the Company at Phu Hiep and eventually back to the USA.

I am forever in debt to and thankful for the group of Army Aviators that it was my privilege to work with during my time In II Corps. Many have passed on by now, but they showed me the best qualities of Army Aviators. They included:

CW4 Robert R Marsh

CW3 James K Church

CW3 Russell Neesmith

CW3 Wayne C Adams

CW3 Thomas P Lundgren

CW2 David L Spivey

CW2 Homer Rogers

CW2 Clayton A Grindle

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* The Ten Ton Annex was named after the 355th Company Ten Ton Tavern at Phu Hiep (The CH-54A was rated for a maximum load (at sea level on a good day) of 20,000 pounds or ten tons). In Camp Holloway, we dedicated one half of one "hooch" to the lounge. We furnished the lounge by installing on the inside walls ¾" mahogany veneer plywood to include some built-in bookshelves (a pallet of the plywood was provided by the Special Forces as a reward for an "unofficial" recovery of a combat loss 2 ½ ton truck). We quietly ran plumbing from a nearby shower point to make a wet bar, and stocked booze and snacks brought over from the PX at Camp Enari (4th Infantry Division Base). By providing beer at 5c and hard liquor at 25c a shot, we were able to quickly furnish the lounge with a refrigerator, stereo and air conditioning! The final touch was to make an agreement with the Camp Holloway Officers Club to hire a local woman to come in the afternoon with the other local Officers Club employees to get the Ten Ton Annex cleaned up, cooled down and ready for tired and thirsty customers.

