

# SILENCE

By Ron Durham

This is the second story of my trip to the Far East in 1970-1971. It is as true as it gets. I was a very new military pilot and knew just enough to kill ME. But, as you can tell by my writing this story I am still here. So, enjoy the story and remember, I was one of the lucky ones who came back, despite all my missteps.

Phuc Vinh, Vietnam was the headquarters of the 1st Calvary Division in Vietnam while I was there from March 1970 through March 1971.

I was picked up from the center where all of the pilots came into Vietnam. After the indoctrination period, it was a relief to finally know when I was going, although that was all I knew.

I had come up from Bien Hoa by truck convoy to Phuc Vinh. It was dusty sitting in the back of a deuce and a half, and it was a long ride. Of course, I didn't know anything at all and I was afraid that we would be attacked at any time. We pilots had not been issued any firearms, so I had to depend on the other soldiers who had weapons. That is not a good feeling. Not knowing that the route we were taking was so heavily patrolled that it would take a division of NVA (North Vietnamese Army) to successfully attack any of the convoys along that route at that time of the war.

We arrived late in the day at the 1/30th Field Artillery Headquarters. The headquarters and our living area were on the northeast end of the runway. I started my processing and began meeting the other men of the unit. After meeting the Commanding Officer and his Executive Officer, I had to get my bedding and be assigned a place to bunk. I was the most junior of all of the Officers, so I was temporarily bunked in the non-commissioned officers' quarters because we lacked enough quarters for all the officers.

One of the good things about being a Warrant Officer, is that Warrant Officers are more technicians than command officers. Commissioned officers command men, run companies and in general do many different duties that are not assignable to Warrant Officers. The main duty of pilots who were Warrant Officers was to fly, and the Commissioned Officers who flew had other duties besides flying.

The other pilot in my unit was Mr. Lee. He had been in-country for about 11 months, so he had just another month to serve, then he would be sent back to the United States or to another country like Germany, or one of the other countries where U. S. pilots were stationed.

We became friends quite soon, especially since there were only the two of us pilots in our unit. He made sure that I received a chicken-plate (body armor), pistol, and a survival radio. Once that was accomplished, I had to take a check ride in the OH-6a helicopter, because I had never flown one of them before. I also had to take a familiarization flight around our area of operation.

The other pilot who came to Phuoc Vinh with me was John Campbell. He was stationed with E/82nd Arty, just a few hundred yards away from my unit. His unit was primarily an ash and trash helicopter unit. For all non-military pilots, that is a unit that does odd jobs, like carrying personnel to their units in the field or bringing them out of the field. His unit also carried mail, small supplies that could fit in their helicopters and recon missions. They would also do Redleg (directing artillery barrage) missions when there was a need that we could not fulfill.

Mr Lee tried to tell me all of the things that I would need to know for flying in Vietnam. He told me that the FM radio was to be used only for artillery advisories and talking to the Blackhats at the artillery bases we would visit in the jungle, and that the VHF and the UHF radios were to be used for communicating with other aircraft and the control towers.

Our ADF radio was to navigate to the Automatic Direction Finder radio stations and the VOR was to be able to triangulate with the ADF to find our exact position. We also used the ADF radio to tune into the Armed Forces Radio Vietnam.

I was told that I should fly at an altitude of 1500 feet while flying from one point to another to keep out of small arms range, follow the roads until I got used to the area of operations (AO), Be sure to keep the radios on at all times while the aircraft was running and to not get into a hurry just because one of the passengers was in a hurry. He told me that prior planning and being exact in following the advice of veteran pilots would keep me in good stead.

Finally John Campbell and I were to get our transition into the OH6a, which is a small helicopter. It is a pilots dream machine as far as having the maneuverability of a fly. Fast and quick! Our transition was supposed to be three hours apiece, and our orientation was to cover the whole area of operations, especially since we were to be flying by ourselves from day one.

John and I were really nervous and we knew that with just about 210 hours of helicopter training time in the United States, we were not yet comfortable even being in Vietnam, much less having to fly all over and having people shoot at us. We met the check pilot and he told us that we would be flying to Phu Loi and then to Song Be, then back to Phuoc Vinh, our home base. I don't remember which one of piloted the aircraft first, but we ended up only having 45 minutes of flight time each during this transition/orientation flight. So we were set free to fly all over the AO, by ourselves. Yikes! I think neither one of us were ready to be let loose. We covered less than a quarter of the AO and we each got to start the helicopter once each. That was it, no more. So, all of my time in Vietnam, I logged only 45 minutes of co-pilot time.

I received a map that was 1:1,000,000, from my operations section. Remember that they are artillery, not aviation, so I had a map that covered our whole AO in about a 14x14 inch square. In aviation we normally fly with a 1:50,000 map in a combat area. I studied my map and I used the operations room map on the wall to locate and write all of the fire bases and their frequencies down their proper locations on my 1:1,000,000 map. After studying all this information, I was still not sure that I was ready to be set free. But set free I was.

I had to fly to a firebase by myself to pick up a pax (passenger) to bring back to Phuoc Vinh to get ready to leave Vietnam for home. I was so nervous because I would be going to a firebase in the middle of the jungle, with no roads to follow. I had to navigate with this 1:1,000,000 map and find this place on the first try. I cranked up the helicopter and got clearance to take off for my destination. I backed out of the revetment and took off and I was on my way. The firebase was on the border of Vietnam and Cambodia, so I had to be sure to not stray into Cambodia. That could cause a lot of problems, especially for me.

I kept looking at my map and thinking, OK, so far so good. I decided to climb a little higher so I could see a little further and also, when flying higher, there is a different perspective and fire bases tend to stand out better when looking at them from a higher altitude. I finally found it and headed right for it. I tuned in the correct frequency but I could not get an answer to my radio calls. I flew for a while and then I got the bright IDEA to flash my landing light to let them know that I was landing. I looked around and then I found an area next to a Huey that was already there. I came in and landed and the firebase commander came out to the helicopter, yelling and screaming at me.

I didn't know what to think, except that I had to land. He came charging up to me and I thought he was going to hit me. He yelled, "what in the hell is wrong with you. You didn't call in and we were shooting 155 mm rounds right in your direction, you idiot." I told him that my FM radio did not seem to be working and that I would have it fixed when I got back to Phuoc Vinh.

"you are not leaving this firebase without a working FM radio, we will contact your unit and have a radio tech sent out here. Do you see that Huey there, The pilot just got shot through the head and he is dead, his co-pilot got shot in the chest and he barely got the helicopter on the ground. What in the world were you thinking when you came in here without a radio? No clearance, no artillery information and you just made us stop firing at the NVA who killed one of your fellow pilots."

I sat at the firebase until another loach (OH6A) brought the maintenance officer from the E/82nd Arty. After they shut down, he came over to my helicopter and inspected the radios, and lo and behold, I had not turned on my FM radio.

I got yelled at again for having forgotten to turn my FM radio on. Oh boy, was I not only embarrassed, but I was also scared to realize that I had nearly caused me, myself to get shot down by our own artillery. That day, I think I set back helicopter aviation by five years, all by myself.

After the verbal lashings I had received, I was not very bold. I decided to fly in formation with the other helicopter back to Phuoc Vinh, after insuring that ALL my radios were on. One of the lessons I learned that day was to use my checklist and to always double check that I had done everything correctly.

I expected to be chewed out by my Colonel when I returned to Phuoc Vinh, but luckily for me, nobody told on me, they just reported that I had a radio failure.

Now this is not the way to start a tour of Vietnam.

I talked with Mr Lee and he thought it was not necessarily funny, but comical. After reviewing my actions on that day, I realized that he was right. It was a comedy of errors that eventually turned out all right. I learned a valuable lesson, and I knew that I would never make that same mistake again.