

Deuce and a Dime

A War Story

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It was long time ago in a far away land across the Pacific Ocean on a hot afternoon at a fire support base near Xuan Loc (pronounced "Swan Lock"), Vietnam. . There was lots of what we called "triple canopy jungle" I stood with my pilot next to Deuce and a Dime. The UH-1H helicopter had been called Deuce and a Dime because her tail number ended in the numbers 210. Deuce and a Dime was assigned to the 195th Assault Helicopter Company and was the prettiest bird in the company as she was one of the few birds that had a camouflaged paint job and the crew chief worked hard to maintain her appearance as well as her mechanics. The pilot was affectionately called "Spanky" McFarland and was a few years older than my nineteen years and had been in-country a lot longer than my one month. But it seemed as if everyone was under 21.

Soon, in a trail of dust, a jeep and a deuce and a half (Two and One Half) truck drove up and stopped. A Major stepped out and approached us. He gave us our orders to move the truck load of mortar ammo to another near by fire support base and then we would be mission released to return to our base at Plantation. With the help of our crew, and the Infantry troops (grunts) that came with the truck, Deuce and a Dime was quickly loaded until Spanky thought we could just lift the load. By loading heavy, he thought we could make the move in two round trips instead of the three that a "less experienced" crew would have used.

The Crewchief and Gunner (enlisted crewmembers) with the worried looks had loaded as directed by Spanky. We all donned our chest armor plated (chicken-plates) vests and survival vests before climbing in to the front seats and, after we got Deuce and a Dime started and Rotor RPM up to idle, the crew chief and door gunner came forward to slide our side-panel armored plates forward to protect our sides and close our doors. They then climbed in behind their M60D machineguns as Spanky ran up the throttle to 6600 RPM and called out over the intercom "ready to come up (to a hover)" and the crew in back replied "ready up left" and ready up right". Deuce and a Dime came up to a low hover and Spanky and I scanned the instruments. We noticed that we were using the maximum allowed (red-line) 50 psi torque the rpm had dropped to 6,400. Deuce and a Dime was overloaded.

We then looked out over the takeoff path that would take us over the barbed wire and mine infested perimeter and then a swamp before we would reach the wall of helicopter-eating trees of the triple canopy jungle a quarter mile away. Spanky looked at me with his crooked grin sort of a smile, as if to tell me "this is how it's done". He then eased the nose down to start the take-off run and the skids scraped the ground as Deuce and a Dime

shuddered as she went through translational lift in to clear air and started a climb, the climb could be measured in inches-per-minute. Then we heard the "whoop whoop " sound of the Low RPM Warning System in our helmet mounted earphones and notice the flashing red "LOW RPM" light as we cleared the first strands of barb wire that surrounded the perimeter of the take-off area. Spanky eased down on the collective to get the rpm increased to 6,200 as we slowly descended over the contour of the hill towards the swamp as the airspeed crept towards forty knots. We both knew if we could not reach seventy knots while remaining airborne there would be no way we would clear those tree that were getting ever nearer. Now just ten feet above the swamp and still at forty knots we again heard, "whoop whoop" warning. Even thou the guys in back could not hear it they could see the flashing red "RPM" light and knew we were in big trouble. Just then Deuce and a Dime stated to climb as if an angel was lifting us. Before you knew it we were up to seventy knots and had cleared those trees as they snapped at our skids.

Spanky then looked again at me and, with a bead of sweat dripping of off his nose, smiled that crooked grin. I looked further over my shoulder at the crew chief and door gunner, as they set panting on some of the few remaining ammo boxes in the cargo floor, and wondered what we going to tell the major why half of his ammo was now in the swamp.

Epilog: It would be a little longer before I would come to fully appreciate the enlisted men and woman that would support us "throttle jockeys." I do not recall the names of the crew in the back but I do remember their faces. It seemed like we all looked like we were sixteen years old. Two weeks later I was at the 24th Evac Hospital waiting outside of the room where Spanky and the crew chief were recovering from some medical work. Just twelve hours earlier Deuce and a Dime had met her demise in those triple canopy jungles not far from Xuan Loc. Her engine had failed and the helicopter-eating trees had claimed her but not her crew. All four would survive along with six American grunts on board who although some were also injured. The crew chief was purported to have said "I knew they would never paint Deuce and a Dime O.D. (Olive Drab)."

I would like to hear from the crew of Deuce and a Dime, WO1 "Spanky" McFarland, 1LT Cole, and the crewchief and door gunner. tnadeau@sprintpcs.com