

Chinook Rescue Attempt in Fall 1966

By [Steve Pearce](#)

I was looking to see if there might be any record of an attempted rescue by a Chinook with a hastily rigged footbridge suspended below it and below the bridge a long heavy rope to be used to guide it in by those on the ground. For some years (since around 2007) I've sought details on the mission.

It happened in the fall of 1966 somewhere in western Vietnam. At that time I had been a young Combat Engineer with A Company of the 1st Engineer Battalion of the 1st Infantry Division. After having been in the field for some weeks, we the Company was in the process of moving out by truck to head back to our base camp half way across Vietnam. There had been a small group of about eight of us waiting for a ride when we were approached by a Sergeant and asked to volunteer to attempt to rescue some men we were told were in great trouble in the bottom of a valley.

We were told that a Chinook with a footbridge would pick us up and take us there and we were to then guide in the footbridge across a stream to get the men in trouble out. We landed with the Chinook at the top of a long narrow descending valley that I could see from the air as we flew into the top of the valley. We got out and the Chinook flew off down the valley to await our arrival.

Looking around I did not know the men I landed with. I think they were all new to the Company and the Sergeant looked a little unsure of the next step and I had been there about ten months by then. It was a rough area and I suggested to him on the side that half of us might want to remain up at the LZ to hold it, as from what I had seen from the air, it looked to be the only extraction point. He asked me in front of the other men if I would go down and guide it in while they held the LZ.

At the time, I did not know that I had the beginnings of what would years later turn out to be a big brain tumor. So I headed off down the valley without contesting his request. Got down about a half mile and started taking a lot of incoming fire at me. I got scared and jumped down from the pathway along the wood line into the tall marsh grass that covered the valley floor. But once in there, I found that by my movement in the grass was pinpointing my position. I got so scared from all the rounds striking around me that the heat generated from fear off my face fogged my glasses up and I could not see.

Knowing I could not stay there I crawled back up onto the pathway. I wanted to run back up to the LZ but knew that the Chinook would be waiting for the arrival of those whom were to guide in the footbridge from below. I ran down the valley for awhile until I put a few bends in the trail behind me. I may have gone down another half mile and as I came to where I thought the Chinook and stream might be all I saw was high scrub brush. My ears were all plugged from running, fear and sweat.

As I came around a last bend in the trail, I almost ran into a high ranking American Officer. He may have been around fifty and was a Major or Lt. Colonel. I only said four words to him "their shooting at me". He said that the Chinook had been taking heavy ground fire up at it and had to pull out and that the mission had been cancelled. That I needed to go back up the valley and that it the Chinook would be up there waiting for me.

I don't remember going up the valley. Only as I got very near the top, one or two of the men had started down to locate me. We went the last few hundred feet to the Chinook and all were on board. I think I remember that the Sergeant would not make eye contact but I may have been in shock.

The Chinook flew us a few miles away in the late afternoon and put us down in a clearing and told us to

go into the woods where we would find American forces. We found in the woods about six American Tanks whom might have been a recon unit. We slept the night inside their circle and then the following day rode on them all day east to Saigon where we connected up with our Company at a big base just north of Saigon. And from there we went by convey to our base camp about ninety miles north.

While hospitalized in 1988 for three months for the removal of the brain tumor, I had the chance to go over a number of actions in Vietnam. I figured out that the Officer that I met down there must have flown in on a small two man helicopter. He was completely dry and I had been soaked in the humid heat. I never saw nor asked where he came from. I had just been glad to be told to get out of the valley.

So since that day in the bottom of the valley, no one ever said one word to me about the mission. I started talking about it to my family about 2004-2006. In late December of 1966 I had passed out the last day or two down near Saigon before flying home. We were being given awards. When I awoke in the shade of a tree a young LT sitting beside me on the ground gave me a Army Commendation Metal and a few Campaign Ribbons. He said the General was supposed to have awarded me a separate metal and that it would be awarded Stateside. Never heard about in the three months I had left in the Army. Was discharged because of a back injury. The 1st Engineers are just these last few weeks now looking into it at my request. The only proof that I've ever had was a short response in 2009 from my Company Captain back then saying he was the one who said he had flown into the valley. That he was not aware of the metal. In my first call with him he said he flew down in a Chinook to warn me (but it made no sense as I was not offered a ride out). In my second call in 2009 he said it was in a two man helicopter. But that did not explain the discrepancy of rank I saw. In the spring of 2012, he said in a email response to my email that it might have been a Officer from a nearby Infantry unit.

My reason for writing you was to see if there might have been any possible record in your systems showing the event. I figure that the Chinook crew with pilots and the two man helicopter pilot with his passenger were the only ones aware that I had gone into the valley by myself. But with the vast number of helicopter operations throughout the war there may be no record.

Pressure on the brain both pre and post op had kept me for years from having an interest in looking at this. During that time it affected my behavior. But both my daughters and ex wife have been supportive of me over the years. The VA has awarded me a disability for heart problems associated with Agent Orange and PTSD.

Sincerely,

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