



WHEN WE WERE SOLDIERS

Personal Stories of Our Vietnam Veterans

September 20-November 9

RON MOYER

Cool Under Fire

I quit school in 1965 and joined the army. I did my basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. Later, after boot camp, I went to Fort Rucker in Alabama, where I went to aviation school and had extensive jungle training. They had mock Viet Cong villages to train the pilots, although I wasn't a chopper pilot. I was one of those guys that got caught up in President Johnson's build-up. I went over to Vietnam in November of 1965, where I eventually made crew chief and door gunner on a chopper. When the helicopter was on the ground at base, I was responsible for its mechanical soundness, and when it was in the air the pilots were in charge. I was first sent to Pleiku in the central highlands of Vietnam, where the army assigned me to the 52nd aviation battalion. I was at Pleiku for 7 months. The whole base was 26 miles in diameter. Me and a couple of guys got in a truck one day, out of boredom, and slowly drove around the perimeter. It took us almost all day. My unit—a flight platoon, they called it—had about 50 guys. Eventually the 282nd joined up with us and we were all transferred to Da Nang air base.

My duties were pretty clear. I maintained the aircraft on the ground and when it left the base I went with it as the crew chief and door gunner. Sometimes we did "ash and trash" runs, where we flew somewhere to pick up bread for the mess hall, but usually when the chopper left base it was on some type of combat mission. We did a lot of patrolling the Cambodian border, where there were infiltrators. Other times we dropped troops into LZs (landing zones), which could be either hot or cold, depending on the situation. If some of our troops were already on the ground, they'd pop smoke to let you know if the LZ was hot or cold. Red was bad, and yellow was good. Sometimes we flew what they called control and command missions. That was when we didn't have any troops on the ground and our helicopter would land in a place where we would later put in troops and see if it was hot or not and pop smoke. We took fire lots and lots of times. We put duct tape over the holes in the chopper. When you're in a huey, you often don't know you're taking hits. You have your helmet on and it's loud.

Usually we assisted the 4th and the 25th army infantry. Other units, like the army's 1st cavalry, had their own choppers. One time we went to an area to drop off supplies for a Special Forces platoon. The LZ was pretty hot, with AK-47 rounds cracking overhead. My pilot called for the gunner after we unloaded, but he wasn't answering and when we looked he wasn't there. Disappeared. Turns out he had to go to the bathroom! Bullets flying and the man had to go. Now there's evidence to the old saying that when a man has got to go, he's got to go.

Sometimes it was even laugh-out-loud funny. We once had a colonel on board who was going to give a speech. We're flying along heading for the place where he's going to give his speech and you could tell he hadn't been on a chopper very much. He'd placed his hat loosely on the floor beside him and pretty soon that flies out the open door at a couple of thousand feet, and a few moments later the speech he was going to deliver follows the hat. There were lots of good officers, but there were also lots of dingbats, like this guy. He was so mad at his speech



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flying out the door that I thought he might jump out after it. Well, maybe his family would have missed him.

Sometimes it was funny in a different sort of way, like when we strayed across the Cambodian border by accident and got chased back across by a Cambodian jet fighter. He told us in broken English over the radio to either turn around or get shot. As his jet roared past us at four hundred knots he flipped us the bird. During my first tour of duty in 1965, there weren't any Rules of Engagement (ROEs) in Vietnam, and if I saw a muzzle flash from the ground, I could shoot back without any questions asked, which seemed prudent to me. When I was back for my second tour in 1970, everything had changed. One day along the border our chopper took three shots from an AK-47 on the ground and the pilot asked, "Why didn't you fire back?" I said, "I need your permission now with the new ROEs before I can fire back." This made him angry so I took out my little .38 side-arm and fired three times in the direction of where the shots had come from on the ground. The pilot said, "That's it?" And I said, "Yup, that's it." I didn't have to ask his permission to shoot the big M-60 after that.

Other times, many times, it wasn't funny at all. I was a pretty cool customer when I was on combat duty in Vietnam, but one time I was really scared. We received a call to pick up an Air Force pilot that had been shot down somewhere north of us. We get to the area where he's supposed to be and one of us spied a pair of legs in a ditch. We found a spot to land and my gunner and I jumped out of the chopper to get him. We didn't take any weapons with us, which I suppose in hindsight wasn't a good thing to forget, because on the way out, after we had grabbed the pilot, we were surrounded by VC. All I could think about was the .45 under my seat in the chopper and the M-60, which I sure could have used about then. How we got back to the helicopter alive is beyond me, but we did.

My first tour ended in November of 1966, but I found the stateside duty boring and not very fulfilling. I felt more at home when I was in Vietnam. It was, and still is, I suppose, a beautiful country. And where else can an eighteen or twenty year old kid be given a powerful gun and told to go kill an enemy that is trying to change our way of life? I felt special being there. So I volunteered to go back to the war. I arrived the second time in September of 1970. I went to a place called Kontum. I did mostly maintenance on aircraft and was also made a technical inspector. I still went out and flew a little bit, but it turned out I liked my first tour of duty better than my second one. The first one had a lot more action. I can't say I liked combat, but I can say that it wasn't boring. I don't think I ever lost my cool in combat, to tell the truth. I was scared, but you had to do what you had to do. I try not to talk about too many of the gory things. There were good days and bad days. I lost two choppers over there. The first one was when I had been in-country about 3 months. We were heading out toward the Ho Chi Minh trail near the Cambodian border and we took some pretty heavy ground fire. The VC were definitely becoming better shots. A bunch of bullets hit the engine; engines didn't take too good to bullets. We came down pretty fast and hit some trees. We took small arms fire all the way to



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the ground. Thank God no one was seriously injured. We landed in a place that was in the highlands, sort of open grass savannahs, with copses of bushes and trees scattered about. Maybe a few small farms, I don't remember. The most important thing to do when a chopper crashes is to get away from it, as the VC will come looking for you. All four of us—the two pilots and the other door gunner and I—stumbled a couple of hundred yards away, where we were picked up by another chopper. I was nineteen years old at the time and I wasn't particularly scared.

The second time I lost my chopper was about two months after this first incident. We were up on the Cambodian border—stuff always happened, it seemed, near the border—and we started taking fire. We were flying pretty low, less than a hundred feet above the trees, roaring along on a mission which I forget the purpose of. Sometimes you're just going along minding your own business and they start shooting so you have to shoot back. I don't remember if we had some prisoners we had just unloaded; maybe it was Vietnamese civilians. I didn't have a problem with the Vietnamese, as long as they weren't shooting at me. Some of them were very nice people. It was a shame the war was going on over there. Anyway, we took heavy fire from down below us in the trees and we dropped like a rock. The rounds hit on the left side of the chopper and wounded one of the pilots and the door gunner, but they were able to move and we destroyed the chopper as best we could and then got as far away from it as possible. We were on the ground for something like seven hours before one of our choppers picked us up. I'd probably call that one of the bad days in Vietnam.