

## Helicopter Pilot's Vietnam Experiences

After arriving in Vietnam, I was shipped to Bein Hoa on August 20, 1969 and got my assignment for Company C of the 229<sup>th</sup> Aviation Battalion, First Cavalry Division in Tay Ninh.



**229<sup>th</sup> Aviation Battalion, First Cavalry Division at Bein Hoa**

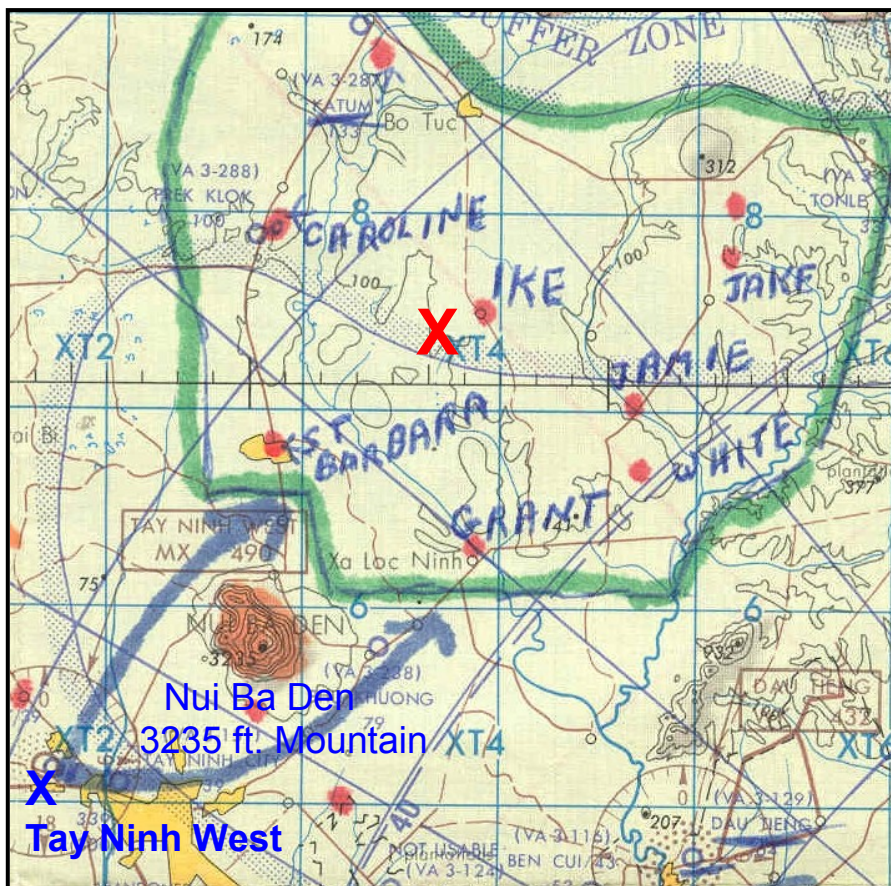


**Company C of the 229<sup>th</sup> Aviation Battalion, First Cavalry Division at Tay Ninh West**



On Tuesday September 2, 1969, we were on a command and control flight operating out of Fire Support Base IKE. It was my first flight as co-pilot and FNG. There was a unit of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division in contact with the enemy. The commanding officer wanted to take a look at the situation from the air. The clouds were at 1,500 feet; so, it meant we would be flying in the kill zone at 1,200 to 1,300 feet. We flew over the area and started taking fire. We flew out of the fire and circled around. The commanding officer wanted to pin point the location of the enemy. Again we started taking fire. We were in the fire for several seconds, when the instrument panel lit up with a bright light and there was a loud explosion. My right leg behind the knee started burning with pain. A 30 caliber round had hit the bottom of my armored seat and the round had splattered out into my leg. The aircraft commander looked at me with great big eyes that were full of fear. I could not say anything and could only point at my leg that was injured.

The aircraft commander started calling May Day over the radio. I can still see the jungle below and thinking, Lord, don't let the helicopter crash there because I can't run. We returned to FSB IKE where I was loaded into another helicopter after a brief examination by a medic. Before we lifted off the commanding officer gave a thumbs up and I returned the thumbs up from the stretcher.



**The Area of Operation**

The X in the middle is approximately where I was hit and the arrows are the flight paths. After a short flight back to Tay Ninh West, I was taken into the hospital. My leg was given an examination. While I was waiting on a stretcher, I looked over at the person next to me. It was a North Vietnamese that had an injury. I thought how strange. One minute we are trying to kill one another and the next minute we are trying to save them. He seemed just as perplexed.

The medical personnel could see the fragment on the x-ray; but, could not locate it physically. I was given a local anesthetic that was far worse than the original injury. After a great deal of digging for the shrapnel, the doctor said that they could not find it and that I would have to leave the wound open to dry heal for about two weeks.

The hospital did not have a blast barrier around it. A blast barrier consisted of 55 gallon drums filled with sand and had sand bag stacked on top of them. A series of drums and sand bags encircled the entire building or hooch. Tay Ninh West was receiving mortar and rocket attacks frequently. I stayed there for two nights and realizing that I was not going to be shipped out, I requested that I return to Company C, 229<sup>th</sup> Aviation Battalion, First Cavalry Division because the hooch in my company did have a have a blast barrier around it plus a bunker. I felt safer there.



**In this picture you can see the blast barrier of my hooch**

I had to walk around the company area with a hole in my leg for two weeks. After which, I reported back to the hospital. Again, I was given a local anesthetic that was far worse than the original injury. The burning was intense. The doctor or medic began to cut out the dead tissue and there were moments of severe pain. The wound was closed and I returned to Company C.

There were several rocket attacks, and feeling insecure I proceeded to cut a square out of the floor in the hooch and dig a fox hole so I would not have to run to the bunker. There was much ridicule of me for being so paranoid by my fellow officers.

I was so paranoid that I cut up the flight suit that I was injured in and made a scarf that would cover my neck and chin so if we crashed, I would not receive burns to my neck and lower face. After several combat missions, I accepted that I was going to be killed and stopped wearing the nomex scarf.

On November 10, 1969, I was assigned a maintenance fight to Vung Tau with WO Neil Blume (Beeper) Aircraft Commander. The company received a mortar attack on November 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> and the rounds fell at the front of the hooch and at the rear of the hooch. I was told the only place for those in the hooch was to jump down into my fox hole. They did not laugh at me after I returned from Vung Tau. In fact in the next hooch to ours, two Warrant Officers cut their entire floor out of their room and sunk their entire beds down into the hole. The commanding officer disapproved this move and made them repair the hooch.





**Mortar Attack**



**My Fox Hole Completed October 7th**



From September 1969 to March 1970, while I was recovering from my wound, the company commander came to me and offered to me a teaching position at the Cao Dai compound. He said they need to hear English being spoken. I accepted. This meant that I would travel to the Cao Dai compound two or three times a week. Cao Daism is a religion that is made up of Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity.



**Cao Dai Temple**



**School at the Cao Dai Temple**



The school was located on the Southwest corner of the compound and is approximately four miles from Tay Ninh West. The road to the compound went through the town of Tay Ninh and the way there was unsecured. The students were about twelve years old. I remember how they had trouble pronouncing words. They seemed very appreciative of my willingness to give instruction.

On October 31, 1970, Mr. Pham Hoang Chau asked if the company I was in would provide a light generator for a Boy Scout event that he was hosting. The event was to take place at a location not in the Cao Dai compound. The event was near the compound, but North of the main road and next to a rubber tree plantation. I asked the company commander if it would be OK. He said only if I went with the light generator. Three specialists and I hooked the light generator up to the jeep and headed for the event for an all night stay. We turned left off the main road leading to the Cao Dai compound and went down a dirt street which led to the event. The event was protected by five to eight South Vietnamese army infantry. We set up the light generator and milled around for the night. The nearest help was four miles away and we had no way of contacting them if anything happened.



**Boy Scout Event**

There was a street vendor outside the gate and I decided to go out and see what he had. He had some Vietnamese beer. Not wanting to drink the water, I bought one. I looked around and started back inside. It was at this point that I was approach by a soldier in a funny green outfit. He asked me to buy him a beer. I declined and proceed inside. A few minutes later I saw the South Vietnamese infantry men leading the individual across the ground. The man turned out to be a North Vietnamese soldier. There were no other events that night; however, we did not get any sleep.

Around the same time as the Boy Scout event, we were heading to the Cao Dai compound for an English session. We were three miles out from Tay Ninh West. As we rounded a curve, we hit a dog. Almost instantly there was a mob of South Vietnamese around the jeep. They were screaming at us. We were helpless and I thought we were going to be killed. Then through the crowd came a thin Vietnamese man saying, "No sweat GI, we have for supper." The crowd disbanded and the man walked off carrying the dead dog and we proceeded on our way.



**Approximate Location of the Dog Event**

I got to know the teacher, Mr. Pham Hoang Chau, of the class very well. I have often wondered what became of him when the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam. He gave me a painting of the Cao Dai Temple by Mr. An on April 1, 1970 while on a farewell visit back to the school.



**Cao Dai Temple Painting**



In order to accommodate the trips to the Cao Dai Temple, I volunteered for the Nighthawk missions that required flying at 500 feet at night with the navigation lights and anti-collision lights off. An operator of a radar site would guide the helicopter around a box or grid of a particular area which was clear of US troops. The helicopter was fitted with a Starlight scope and a mini-gun. The Starlight scope was used to spot camp fires and if one was spotted the mini-gun would open fire. The mini-gun when fired looked like a bright red stream of water from a hose spraying onto the ground and splashing up. Lt. Dunn used to fly with the navigation light on inviting the enemy to shoot at us. On one occasion, Lt. Dunn hovered over a field of elephant grass with the landing light on looking for a combatant. Nighthawk was fitted with 50 caliber machine gun as well. We almost shot ourselves down when it was fired when a round ricocheted off the ground.

Also, I volunteered for the flare missions. I was flying as "Peter Pilot" and we almost had a collision with a fighter jet. The unit in contact with the enemy had called in an air strike. I saw the jet roll in on the target and then to my dismay I saw the jet rapidly climbing right at us. There was not enough time to say anything to anyone. Obviously we missed.

On another occasion, there was a unit in contact with the enemy. We were dropping flares on a regular basis to provide luminance for the troops. The fighting must have been pretty bad because the commander called Puff the Magic Dragon. This was a DC-3 equipped with several mini-guns. The DC-3 also flew without navigation lights and anti-collision lights. We were not sure when Puff would be on location. As the flares lighted the sky and ground, I saw a large sleek silvery object pass over us. It was Puff and I did not want to be between Puff and the ground. We immediately left the area. The area lit up with what seemed like a red water fall of lead from the sky.

I was having trouble tying my boots one morning. I was cursing the shoe laces. After finishing lacing my boots I walked out the door of my hooch. At that time I heard a rocket come over and it exploded between the mess hall and the first officers' housing. If I had not had trouble tying my boots I would have been at the location where the rocket hit.



**Rocket Attack**



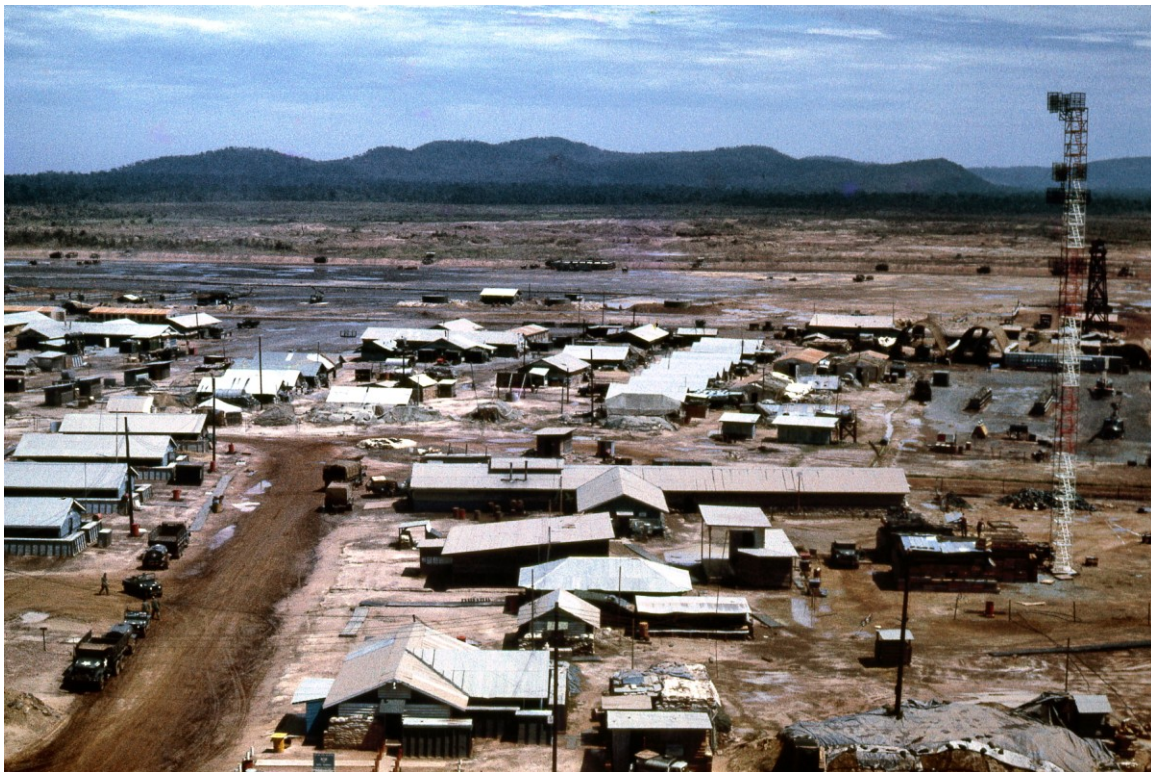
There were many things I learned about myself and I took away many tools of life from the time I spent at Company C of the 229<sup>th</sup> Aviation Battalion. "Steady on the stick" is the one thing that I remember from my time as Peter Pilot. When someone is shooting at you, don't spill your lift by jerking the cyclic around. It can be applied in life in general. I have said it to many people to help them get through the challenges of life.

On another night mission, a U.S. sniper was being picked up from a mission by another helicopter and had fallen off the sling. We were asked to participate in the search for him. I remember calling over the radio for him. There was one moment where I thought he responded. We continued to circle the area calling on the radio with no response.

On February 20, 1970, I made Aircraft Commander. Sometime around that time, we had been at a fire support base that had been attacked and the Viet Cong had hit the ammonization area where there were some rolls of 105 MM Howitzer cannon flechets. The door gunner had picked some up and I thought he was going to use them as nails. We flew back to Tay Ninh and as we passed over the city I looked back. The door gunner was throwing the flechets out of the helicopter. This was over the area where I taught school. I was hoping that no one was killed.

On March 10<sup>th</sup>, Captain Bill Lorimer was killed. My room in Tay Ninh was next to his. I remember him as being a very good person. I had flown the night before and when the word came, I was shocked and in disbelief.

On March 22, 1970, I was transferred to the Company B, 229<sup>th</sup> Aviation Battalion in Dau Tieng, Killer Spade.



**Dau Tieng**

Company B was a less structure than Company C in relation to the living quarters. I moved into the hooch that had a room below ground grade. Shortly afterwards we had a big rain storm and the room was under water so I had to move back above ground. The room was flooded for the remainder of my time at Dau Tieng.



There were a couple of officers that had buried a shipping cargo container. I always envied them because that seemed to be the safest place to be. I held that feeling until someone threw a smoke grenade into the underground container. Plus they had to have an air conditioner to keep the container cool.

The one event that I remember is we had been on a night mission and returned for fuel. While at the fuel depot, the Viet Cong started lobbing mortars in on us. Without thinking, I gave a twist of the throttle and pulled pitch. The crew chief had to jump in the helicopter and hang on for his life. We circled over head until the area was clear.

On May 1<sup>st</sup>, we went into Cambodia. On one occasion, we had landed in an LZ in Cambodia to pick up some bodies. There were three young men lying on the ground with ponchos covering the bodies because the company had run out of body bags. There was a Chaplain kneeling over them. The rotor wash blew one of the ponchos off the head of one of the bodies. It was a red headed kid. The rotor wash blew his red hair around like he was still alive. I knew he was not. The Chaplain looked up at me. In his eyes, I saw a question of why and who would be next.

On May 2, 1970, Michael Varnado and Daniel Maslowski were shot down in Cambodia. Not knowing the whole story at the time, they were shot down by enemy radar guided .60 caliber anti-aircraft (AAA) machine gun fire. I flew up to Memot to see if I could find anyone or see anything. Looking back on that flight, I wished that I could have spotted them. Mike died as a POW.



**Memot Cambodia**



On Tuesday May 26<sup>th</sup>, we were in Cambodia above the fish hook. There was mostly jungle with a few open fields. The First Cavalry Division had established a fire support base in one of the clearings. One company had found a weapons cache in the Cambodian jungle that was outside of artillery fire. The air force had dropped a daisy cutter to clear a landing zone (LZ) in the triple-canopy jungle.

It had not cleared the LZ completely of the trees. The lower one third of a tree remained in the middle of the LZ. The LZ was a one ship hover down. This meant we could not land on the ground; but, instead we had to hover down a 200 foot clearing in the jungle that was barely large enough to accommodate the helicopter to within 14 feet of the ground. Three helicopters had inserted troops, but the fourth helicopter received fire from the North Vietnamese. It was damaged and returned to the fire support base. It was not able to fly after that.



**Daisy Cutter taken in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon)**

I was next and approached the LZ on a western heading trying to avoid enemy fire. As I cleared the top of the trees and started to hover down the clearing, we started taking fire. The crew chief screamed that he was hit. I remember pressing the intercom/transmit switch on the cyclic too hard and saying we were going down. The rest of the unit heard over the radio that I was going down which meant that I was crashing. I was not. I was doing this landing blind on the left side of the helicopter because the crew chief could not provide clearance. I brought the helicopter to a hover and the personnel we were carrying jumped out of the helicopter.



Once clear of the trees the copilot and gunner went to the aid of the crew chief. I called over the radio to tell the rest of the unit that I was flying to Dau Tieng to get help. Someone in the unit came back on the radio and said, "No, land at the fire base in Cambodia." I complied. The crew chief had taken a wound in the arm that had traveled to his shoulder and exited his body.

The commander had one more sortie to insert and since my aircraft was air worthy, I received the crew chief from the previously damaged aircraft and troops that were going to be inserted. We flew out to the west of the fire support to the LZ. There was no doubt in my mind that the LZ was very hot. I could see the hover down from two miles out. Knowing what had happened the last time that I had performed a West approach on the previous landing to the LZ. I opted for a South approach to the LZ. As I circled in to establish an approach to the South, we started taking fire.

The crew chief's M-60 jammed. He started firing 40 mm grenades. I knew this was a suicide mission and that I was dead. Again I hovered down the LZ and stopped above the 14 foot tree. We had a dog team on board and the dog was reluctant to jump. We hovered there for what seemed like minutes. The ground soldier kept pointing up at the helicopter with their hands. I did not know what they were trying to tell me. Finally the dog jumped from the helicopter. I pulled collective and we ascended over the trees. I thought we had made it when the radio came alive from the command & control ship with the message that the last helicopter had been hit and was streaming fuel. There was no place to land which meant that we had to make it back to the fire support base. I looked at the fuel gauge and it was rapidly approaching zero.

The fire support base had several fires in the brush and I knew if we landed there we would explode. Between crashing into the jungle and exploding, I decided to land at the fire support base if we had sufficient fuel. I chose an area as far as possible from any of the fires. We landed and I shut the engine. All of the crew exited the aircraft.

There was no fuel left in the tank. Not more than several drops came out of the hole in the bottom of the helicopter. I could not tell whether we had received the damage from enemy fire or whether the tree in the LZ had impaled the helicopter. At any rate that was what the ground troops at the LZ were trying to tell me. I can imagine the horror they felt with jet fuel spilling out on to them and tracer rounds being fired from both sides.

Later another helicopter was shot down on a re-supply mission in the LZ rendering it unusable. The troops and the crew member had to fight their way to a sand bar on a river for the final extraction.



On or about July 17<sup>th</sup>, we moved up to Quan Loi.



**Quan Loi**

Another dumb thing I did while stationed at Quan Loi, we were sent on a sniffer mission one day. While flying the pattern east of Quan Loi the door gunner opened fire. I inquired why he did it. He said there was a deer standing in a field and that he had hit it. Feeling bad the deer was injured, I flew back so he could finish the job. I hovered over the deer and the gunner pumped several more rounds into the deer. I began to fly off and thought, what a waste. So I had the Cobra prep the LZ and we did a one ship assault and landed next to the deer. The crew chief, gunner, and the sniffer operator got out of the helicopter and tried to lift the deer into the helicopter. The mouth of the deer was open and every time they tried to get the deer in, the mouth would catch the lip of the door and hang there. Finally, I climbed out of the helicopter and lifted the head so they could slide the deer into the aircraft. I climbed back into the helicopter and did an extraction of the dead deer. The cobra rolled in and worked the tree line over.

We flew the deer back to the company and the cook prepared the meat. That night the company had a party at the swimming pool located at a French villa in the Quan Loi compound. I remember the meat was not that good. The villa had a pool that had a diving board that was about twenty feet high. I remember diving off the board and hitting the water so hard that it gave me a headache for several minutes. Learning from that instance, I jumped from the board feet first for the remainder of the event.





**Cobra and Huey at the East end of Quan Loi**

The dirt was very unique at Quan Loi. It had a reddish color and could be like talcum powder when it was dry and slick as grease when it was wet as you can see in the picture above.

I listened to AFVN FM radio. One day, Fang (I cannot remember his real name), came in over the stereo radio. He was flying 314. I can remember his humor and quick wit. Fang and Double Jack were cutting up on the radio. At one point Double Jack said he was sorry and Fang quickly replied, 'I know you are.'

On Wednesday July 22, 1970, CWO Dan Turcotte, WO Howard Mehringer, SGT J. L. Murrieta, and SP4 Larry Johnson had an engine failure and crashed into the Song Be River. Dan and Larry drowned. Dan was found the day of the crash; but, Larry was not found and a search for his body went on for several days after the crash.

On July 23<sup>rd</sup>, my crew participated in the search team for the survivors or victims of the crash. The details have long since faded; however, I remember being at the Fire Support Base Granite the day after the crash. The fire support base was at the intersection of the Song Be River and a road going basically from An Loc to Song Be. From the crossing point of the road on the river, there were a large amount of rocks 500 to 1000 meters down the river. We hovered down the river looking for anyone that might have survived or to recover any bodies. One boat had sheared the pin on the propeller on some rocks and needed assistance. We hovered next to the boat and they threw us a rope. We pulled the boat back up river to the road crossing. I am not sure if the boat was usable after that pull because of the rocks. Nothing was found that day.

On July 25<sup>th</sup>, we were on a mission to the East of Quan Loi. I remember it was a clear day with a few clouds. On these days, I can't remember the other pilot or the crew members that were flying with me. Newell (Lurch) and Peterson were the pilots that I flew with often. I think I remember that the helicopter had the doors for the aircraft commander and pilot removed. The rubber trees and jungle were extra green with the Song Be River in front of the helicopter. We were on a East Northeast heading from Quan Loi at 2000 feet when we passed over the river about a kilometer below where the aircraft had crashed.





**Song Be River and the Search Location**

I was looking through the lower bubble on the aircraft commander's side of the helicopter and I saw a small white dot in the river. I took the controls of the helicopter from the first pilot. Upon executing a left turn around the point, I realized it was a body and called back to operations at Quan Loi to report the event. Not waiting for backup, I lowered the collective and made a landing to a hover on the river over the body. I remember having to dip the skids into the water in order to provide the crew enough leverage to get the body into the helicopter.

The body was very bloated and grayish blue in color. Then the word came, it was SP4 Johnson. By the time we had the body on board another helicopter arrived and was circling which was reassuring to me. The other helicopter could not have done much if there had been enemy fire from the tree line. I remember the flight back to Quan Loi was very quiet over the intercom. I wish we had the pilot's doors for the aircraft because of the extra turbulences inside the helicopter due to the lack of the doors were whipping the fluids around all the crew. No one spoke a word. Upon arriving back on the Southeastern apron of Quan Loi, the commanding officer and several others approached the helicopter and removed the body. We proceeded on our mission.

On July 25th, we were doing an extraction. I had gone through three aircraft that day and finally found one that did not have any deficiencies. The only thing wrong with the aircraft was the FM radio would not transmit which was the most important radio. This was a combined company flight and there were a number of helicopters. Somehow or another I ended up as the second helicopter, Yellow 2 I think. Yellow 1 was called away and I was in the lead. The commander ordered me to hold. Knowing the large flight would be hard to maneuver; I proceeded to do a 2 minute hold which took us back toward the area around Bu Gia Map. CW2 Stan McGraw started yelling over the FM radio, "He is taking us back over the enemy." I could not talk to them and let them know my intentions because the FM transmitter was out. He was as short in country as I was.

On July 27<sup>th</sup>, I decided to take a Huey up to 14,500 feet to feel what 32 degrees felt like and leave the country of Vietnam behind even if it was only for a few minutes.

On August 12<sup>th</sup>, I left Ouan Loi to start my DEROS back to the states. As we departed Bein Hoa, the airliner flew at 2,500 feet over the area that a helicopter had taken fire earlier. I had a bad case of ring around the collar. Finally the country of Vietnam slipped below the aircraft and I was finally safe; however, not free.

Most of all I learned patience. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army were masters of patience. They would wait until the opportunity was right for their advantage. With all the technology we had at the time, the bicycle was the tool that helped the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong beat us.

The sense of adventure has been replaced with a foreboding reality that even now, forty years later, I still cannot describe. No longer do I have the boyish outlook on life.

In honor and remembrance of:

Captain Gerald Swayze	12/30/1969	15W-112
Captain William Lorimer	03/10/1970	13W-105
WO Michael Varnado	Crashed 05/02/1970	11W-089 Died 09/21/70 as a POW
WO James Bullock	06/11/1970	09W-042
WO Leslie Tatarski	06/12/1970	09W-049
WO Dan Turcotte	07/22/1970	08W-045
CW2 Ronald Vanlandingham	10/31/1972	01W-088

And the flight crews that were lost from the war in Vietnam.

Particular honor goes to CW2 Joseph Schaefer. He and his family were the only ones that gave books and other material to the Cao Dai School. On January 10, 2005, he was killed when the helicopter he was flying crashed into the Potomac River.

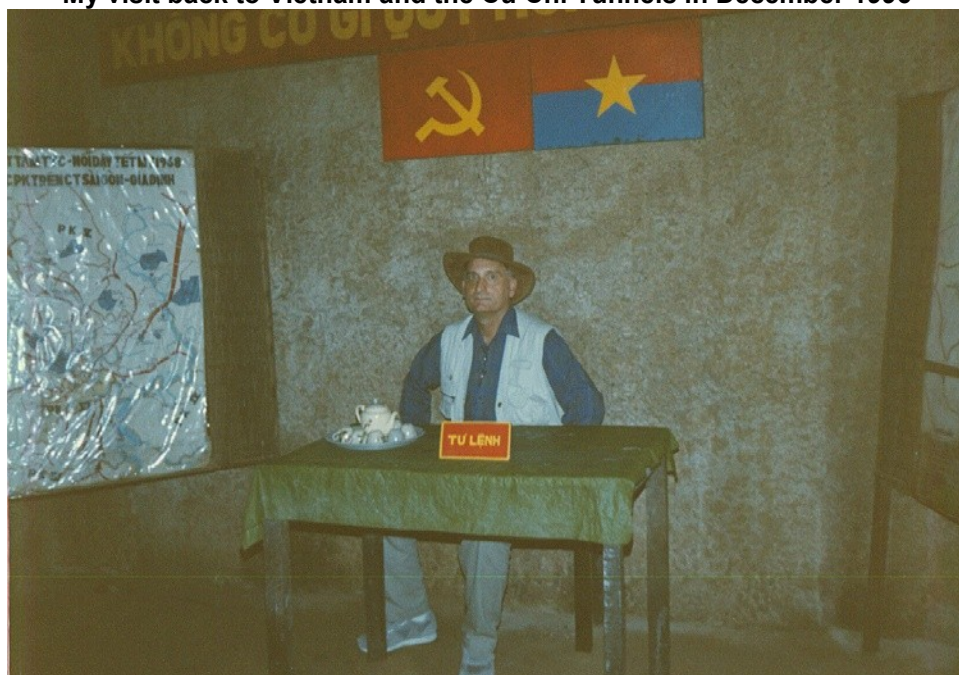


On the sidewalk I helped to construct in October 1969





My visit back to Vietnam and the Cu Chi Tunnels in December 1996



Carlton B. McKoy  
Chief Warrant Officer 2