

My Fun Ride in Vietnam

By Chuck Awe

I cannot remember why, but for some reason I was in headquarters base camp (Evans?). I was hitching a ride back to LZ Pony(?) (our field camp near Khe Sanh) and had been asked to bring the company mail along. The ride was an interesting one from the start. The only occupants were the pilot, co-pilot, door gunner and me. The door gunner suggested that I should probably buckle-up. (A LRRP in a helicopter with a seat belt on?) I had never been asked to do that before, but since he seemed insistent, I complied, and we were off.

The flight was low level with the co-pilots (I found out later neither was actually a pilot) buzzing water buffalos and farmers. They seemed to be having a rather good time of it. When we got to the LZ they successfully landed and refueled. They then went to land in the helicopter landing area. Since the LZ was still being established there was high grass all over the place. They attempted to land three times, and on the third time their tail prop hit something and broke off. We all know that the purpose of that tail prop is to counteract the torque generated by the main prop. With the tail prop gone the body of the chopper began rotating clockwise. Since we were essentially spinning and bouncing on the ground, I felt relatively safe and had decided to just enjoy the ride.

It reminded me of the old Tilt-a-Whirl at the Minnesota state fair. However, the chopper was moving around. It had approached a tree which the main prop struck, throwing the chopper onto its left side. Frags, weapons, the mail and anything else on the floor of the chopper fell on the door gunner. I was happily hanging there with my seat belt on. That is when the door gunner said "She's gonna blow." Needless to say, I needed no additional encouragement and was up and out of that chopper, looking back on it from about 75 feet away, before anyone else was out. The co-pilots seemed to have the most difficulty getting out. I do not think those double across the chest seat belts are designed to be released with the occupants hanging sideways.

Well, everyone got out ok, but it did burn. Our LRRP camp was just over the hill from where the chopper crashed and when I got there Top asked me, "Awe, where's the mail?" I merely pointed to the black smoke rolling into the air from the other side of the hill and said, "That's the chopper I came in on." When I went back the next day, all that was left was the engine and weapon barrels. I picked up the barrel of my M-16 and turned it in. Though it was, for the most part, a fun ride, I do not think the guys ever forgave me for not saving the mail. Priorities, you know!

By Chuck Awe