

Short Rope

By Chris Burgess

Wow! Today was a pretty busy day. We first off got a recon team in contact. We were scrambled to extract them but after I got there, someone had been injured, so the Med-evac bird took the people out.

A few minutes later, another recon team called and said they were in trouble! Again, we scrambled for this and I was the first there. The area was very thick jungle with no places to land. So, the decision was made for them to come out on ropes. One of our low Scout birds picked the best area for pick-up. The people popped a smoke and I hovered into the treetops.

Out my right lower chin bubble, I could see a dead VC and blood everywhere. This was the first VC I had actually seen dead out in the AO (area of operation). The recon team had killed three at that spot. My crew chief and gunner lowered the ropes, but they were only 25 feet long. I was at the tops of the trees at 40 feet.

They said I would have to come lower, so that is what I did. My rotor started hitting the bamboo and chopping away on my right, then on my left. All the way around! I chopped my way down to about 30 feet. The rotor still seemed OK. I wasn't too concerned about it; I was worried about the guys getting shot at just below me. My gunners said I would have to come down another 3 feet at least. I said OK.....! I started to lower deeper into the trees. My gunner said to move the tail right a foot. I did and hit the tail rotor against a hard piece of bamboo. That was the bad one.

My ship began to shake a little now. I wasn't sure we were still in flyable shape but we were still flying!! I decided I would have to pull out and go for longer ropes. I was able to get one man. He came out OK and no problems. He later said he was never so glad to be pulled out in his life.

There were two other birds already in route with 120-foot ropes. So, they had no problem. They did hurt the guys getting them out because they were drug through some trees. Oh Well. Later this evening, I overheard the Commander.

He said, and I quote "Mr. Burgess today did not fxxx-up! He did his damndest to get as low as he could with the short ropes he had. I watched him put the man down and he did it like a mother putting her baby to bed and it was an outstanding job" How do you like that! I thought he would be mad because of my hitting the trees, but he said it was justified because of the men on the ground getting shot at. That was a day to remember.

Addendum 38 years later

It was just about as I wrote home. I seem to remember that the one guy that was able to tie on was a "surprise". I did not think anyone was able to get the ropes. When we started to pull out, my crew chief yelled, "We got one on". As soon as I realized we had one guy, I did a straight up pull up because I was afraid, I was dragging him through the trees. I remember he said he lost his rifle on the way up through but he did tell me after I got him back to Saber Pad (Quan Loi) that it was the "best ride he ever had".

Still today I worried that the guys still on the ground were now one man short. That is not exactly the way to get the team out. You want to get everybody at once, I'm sure you know that. If you find the guy that was on the end of my rope, tell him for me that I wished I got everyone. I was thankful to get HIM but have always wondered if the rest got out OK. There were other ships inbound with longer ropes. I am pretty sure it all worked out in the end, at least I sure hope so.

I was with B Troop 1/9 Air Cav from 14 Dec 68 to 26 Nov 69. I inserted and "hot" extracted many teams. I pulled a team out on Christmas Eve 1968 near Quan Loi. They were in contact and it was after dark. I remember approaching the LZ that was marked with a flare. I seem to remember the bad part was the flare gave out when we were on final approach. Of course that just about makes us "blind". I think this was my first "hot" extraction and when the gunners opened up, they did their little "trick" of letting the expended hot shells from the left gunner's M-60 bounce over my "neck". I was in the left seat. I learned that night to put my collar up "next time". I think Christmas Eve was supposed to be a cease fire.

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