

Whirlybirds



My First CA

When I was a kid I watched a syndicated television show called “WHIRLYBIRDS”. This was two guys who owned a helicopter and every week they would come to the rescue of someone in trouble, help the police or park service, etc. I thought I would love to ride around in a helicopter.

When I was about twelve, my dad an uncle and a friend went to the Antique Automobile show in Hershey, PA. My dad and my uncle Fred both had Model A fords, and the show was important to them to be able to pick up parts and to show their vehicles. Also across the road from the show was an airport, they gave helicopter rides, so you could see the acres of cars, stadium and the Hershey Chocolate factory from the air. My uncle took me and my friend on the helicopter ride, and it was great, I finally felt what it was like to be like the “Whirlybirds”.

Then came the army, I knew in NAM they moved troops by helicopter, I thought, “Gee, that would be great, just like the “Whirlybirds””. Guess what, no it wasn’t. When I went on the helicopter ride in Hershey, we sat on seats in the “chopper”; in NAM we sat on the edge of the door opening with our feet dangling high above the ground. How did I do that? It’s a question I keep

asking myself, I'm afraid of heights, how did I do that?



I remember hearing, "We're going on a CA!" I thought, that sounds neat, I wasn't realizing it was a combat assault. We went on many, I don't the final count, but I do know I went on over 25, because I got the U.S. Army Air Medal, you need at least 25 to qualify. Some of them into "Hot" LZ's, not fun. I recall getting near the landing zone and the co-pilot said to us sitting the back "We're going into a hot LZ, the first wave received small weapons fire, we expect the same thing. We're not setting down, when we get close, jump out!" I was sitting next to the door gunner. I remember once we started our descent, he opened up fire; there were gunships flying next to us, "mini-guns" firing, then rockets, just like in the movies. Yea just like in the movies, but this was for real, not a movie. When we got somewhat close the ground, I felt the door gunner's hand on my shoulder; he started to push me out the door. I thought, hey wait a minute, we aren't close enough yet. I guess we were, because off I went, trying to land on my feet, but not successful, my "ruck sack" started coming over the top of my head, and down I went.



Finally I was on the ground, trying to regain my feet so I could get away from the chopper, that wasn't much of a problem, he was already moving away from me and gaining altitude. I tried to get to the remainder of the guys, those who just came in with me on my wave, and those already on the ground. So this was a "CA", it wasn't like the "whirlybirds" at all. In fact it wasn't even close, this was scary.

We had casualties, from the first wave being ambushed, the medics were working on a couple of guys and they seemed stable. I heard someone yelling "We need a dust-off!" What to heck was that? Then I realized they needed a "medivac" to get the wounded out of there, but we couldn't, we were pinned down by fire from the "wood line", plus there was another, final wave of choppers that had to bring in the remainder of our unit. All of a sudden we stopped receiving enemy fire, they stopped. Had they run out of ammo? Did they have too many casualties, like we did? I didn't really care why they stopped, I was just glad it stopped.

Suddenly it was almost quiet, slowly we moved around to get in better position in case it started again, taking care of the wounded, and we waited. Again off in the distance we heard the choppers, it was the next, and final wave. Would it all start again? I was hoping it wouldn't, but we ready in case that it did. In came the choppers, the gunships were already firing from the air, we started firing our weapons from the ground. I couldn't tell if we were getting shot at or not, I couldn't

see anything, I didn't see anything before, what to heck am I shooting at? I didn't know, but I kept firing. Our buddies in the next group were on the ground, we were back at full strength. After a few minutes, we stopped firing our weapons, and I didn't hear anything coming back at us. Slowly we realized they had broken contact, but why? Again, I didn't care, I was just glad that I wasn't getting shot at.

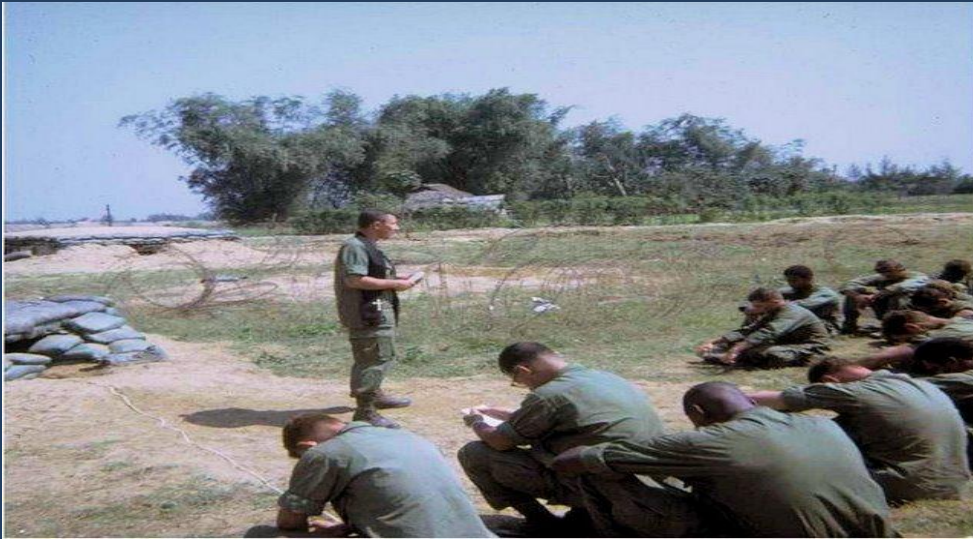
We called in for the dust-off, it seemed like a long time, I bet even longer to those that needed it. We popped smoke, the medivac landed, the wounded were loaded on the chopper, and off they went, back to the world? I don't remember who they were, their names, or if they returned to the unit, it was early in my tour, there would be many more CA's to follow.



Sky Pilot

What is a sky pilot? No it's not the song by Eric Burdon & The Animals. The "Sky Pilot" is the Chaplain, we didn't see him very often, but when he came out to the field, it was special. He came in on LOH, a "Light Observation Helicopter",

just him and the pilot. He'd be dropped off, and then picked up when he had finished his purpose for going into the field.



I was never a very spiritual person; usually I'd rather sleep on a Sunday morning back in the world instead of getting up and going to church. In NAM I guess my attitude changed, I went to services when the chaplain came out to the field. He only had a little cassette recorder with his hymns on it, a bible, and minimum necessities to take communion. It felt good to go, I felt better after, I thank him for coming to see us, it was important to us. I don't know if it helped me make it through NAM by divine intervention, but it helped my cope, and gave me some piece of mind. I thank the "Sky pilot".

Chinooks



We called them something else, but I learned to respect what they did, we rode them, they brought us supplies, they were the “work horses” in NAM. The one’s we worked with most were “Boxcars”, they had a pair of dice showing two sixes painted on them, know by boxcars in craps. They were amazing dual helicopter blades, front and rear, two turbine engines, one on each side of the real tower, a machine gunner in the windows up front. They had an electric hook hanging from the bottom; this could “sling” supplies in a net, or even two nets. It could tether a piece of artillery and drop it in place, or even carry a “water buffalo” to and from the firebase to the rear. They had a ramp that lowered so you could either load troops, supplies, even a vehicle like a jeep or something inside. Jump seats lining the inside of fuselage, or you sat on the floor.

They were amazing, and often overlooked for what they did, I never say anything like this on “whirlybirds”. For those that served on them, you did a great job. I fondly remember the Chinooks!

Gunships



I mentioned gunships when talking about the CA experience, but they did much more than cover for us while we went into a LZ. They also supported us when we would make contact in a firefight. With their door gunners firing, their mini-guns blazing, and firing those rockets to make the bad guys keep their heads down. They

allowed us to move around on the ground, move in on any enemy position, assault across a river, and many more things.

The kind of gunships we were most familiar with was the “Sharks”, these were “huey” helicopters converted into gunships. They had fierce looking teeth painted on their nose to look like a shark. We used and needed them many times during my year there. I again can’t thank them enough, we were really in trouble times, and they saved our butts.

There was another type of gunship called a “Cobra”, like the picture above. That’s me standing next to one at a helicopter pad in Chu Lai. These were designed specifically for the purpose of being a gunship. They again had rocket pods, and mini-guns, but they had a narrow fuselage, which was a smaller target for the enemy. The pilot and the co-pilot sat in-line, one behind the other, just like in a jet. We didn’t work with them much, only when we were in the AO near Chu Lai.

Flying Crane



One of the most impressive ‘whirlybirds’ I saw in name was the flying crane. I was on LZ San Juan Hill, we needed a chopper pad for the firebase, and we needed a bulldozer to flatten a large enough area to make the pad. The feat was done by a flying crane, full size bulldozer brought in from Duc Pho, or Chu Lai, I don’t know which. The blade was brought separately, I think by a Chinook

helicopter. We were told in advance to nail down everything we could that would blow away, and now I know why, the wind caused by those huge blades was unbelievable. It came in dropped it right where they wanted, and when the pad was finished it came back to pick it up. I was never more impressed.



So those are my tales about the 'whirlybirds', from a boyhood fascination, to an adult experience that will never be forgotten. We were lucky to have them, and I respect what they did.

This article is dedicated to my good friend WO Robert L. George, he was a helicopter gunship pilot in name, awarded the Silver Star, and flying cross. This is in his memory; he has passed on, and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.