# “I was only a kid” said the Vietnam helicopter pilot

## Description

The day began with just bringing back a cleaned up laptop that had captured a virus to a friend. He then said he was taking me to lunch.

But before it began, as we drove to “a place you (meaning me) never have been before,” we pulled up to restaurant where I had been, for lunch, one time before in my life, that lunch being with Jim Helinger, Sr, the man who I have often documented as the one who flew gliders. More importantly, the reason this helicopter pilot and I met, was Jim met him one morning about 4 years ago, in an IHOP parking lot, with Jim opening the discussion with “You put us out of work!” After the helo pilot assessed the Glider Pilots Association bumper sticker on Jim Sr’s car, he acknowledged his part in the accusation. Jim called me as soon as he got home, and a few days later I met Don. Don had the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association bumper sticker, which was the clue Jim Sr needed to open the conversation.

That meal began like most other meals we had had together, a little bantering and discussions of the current things going on in our lives and politics, but later, something special happened.

default watermark

He went back to his story of being a 17 year old boy, in Germany, assigned to the 82nd Division, and after doing something kind of stupid in a exercise drop, was assigned to being a courier. It was on one of his drives to anther post he saw a M.A.S.H. type Bell 47 helo and was asked if he’d like a ride. He said yes. The rest, as we say, became history.

Like Jim Sr, actual combat experience is addressed only in generalized components, but sometimes, once in a while, a story comes forth in detail, and I was able to hear one that day.

Some Special Forces or maybe LRRP troops, about 30 of them needed extraction now, with the bad guys hot on their heels. A “5 Ship” was sent, with Don (now 19 years old and an aircraft commander) flying his normal position in the number 5 slot. There was room for one helo at a time on the LZ.

Image not found or type unknown

Robin Hoods Unit Insigina (173rd AHC) in Vietnam

#1 got in and out, 2 got in and out, #3 got shot down and #4 extracted crew #3, but no troops. Don went in. The rest of the troops piled on board, as it was the last chance they had to not get overrun. Up to this point the tenor of his voice was pretty matter of fact sounding, but after this it changed and his eyes began tearing up.

“We had 17 of us in the Huey. I couldn’t even get off the ground. The crew chief through his M-60 and ammo out the door, then the Engineer did the same thing.” He then recounted how he knew he couldn’t leave them, any of them, yet they had to get out of there and now. He said he told everyone, I don’t care if you get naked, get rid of anything you can! And they proceeded to toss weapons and

ammo and equipment, including his over chicken plates out of the bird, and anything they could jettison of the helo components, like the side armor on the seats for the pilots, too.

He got some lift…and he could get a few feet up to translate to forward flight. He asked me if I knew what rice paddies were. I did, having spent time on Okinawa and visits to Japan. He said he'd have to land in some spots, let a few people off, fly over the dikes between the paddies, then let them get back on, just to make headway, away from danger and out of the jungle.

Next came an important set of details: At most, he could get about 10 feet of altitude. IN the jungle, he couldn't see his path out, so two of the gunships from his unit flew top cover, but more importantly, as his eyes, directing him left, right, or turn around and go back (in dead end circumstances).

He finally got to the airfield, but could only land with forward speed, like a plane, but on the skids. Once more, his voice was trembling, as he told me how scared he was that the guys in back, out the doors, standing on the skids might lose their feet, because he had no option but to come home that way, indicating he was talking to his crew chief to make sure no one's feet were below the skids. I'm sure it wasn't done in a conversational tone.

Finally, they were safe on the ground. All 17 passengers made it to the base. The engine on the bird was toast, the skids damaged from the landing. In a dark humor sort of way, the comment "screwed up another bird" admonition was actually praise for a mission accomplished attaboy.

default watermark

The last line of the story was "we were just kids." Then we sat in silence for several moments. There was nothing to say, just to acknowledge a part of personal history without comment.

This man regularly, after the bi-weekly breakfasts with other vets, all the way back to WWII: "I'm not a hero."

Member of the 173rd Assault Helicopter Company of the 8th Infantry Division, shot down three times, 4 hours short of the record for combat flight hours in a year tour, flying "Slicks" into and out of Hot LZs, flying behind a bird (in another mission), that was shot down in front of him and the crew chief (Gary Wetzel, (his own account here)) of the downed Huey was badly wounded, but, with the injuries from the crash causing that damage, crawled between the wreckage, getting his M-60 and ammo, and had to help fight off the enemy with the infantry in a major battle, was awarded the MoH, and did what he told me in the story above, I'm not buying it. He is, and his comrades in that conflict who would not leave anyone behind, but would strain their young minds to solve such problems under life and death circumstances, a hero.

VHPA has some posted stories here, if you'd enjoy the reading opportunity.

**Category**

1. Military

**Date Created**
October 7, 2012
**Author**
admin