

War Story : Alternate Duty

by Steve Glines

They say that air traffic control is stressful work and I guess it is for some people. It did require a lot of concentration but that never bothered me much. I could keep the position, bearing and altitude of a couple of dozen aircraft in my head without much trouble and I learned to look at a radar screen and instantly know if someone was out of place. I never lost a plane or a crewman because of a control mix-up. The pressure got to a lot of guys so the Army put a limit of ten hours a month in the tower - except, of course, when there was shit flying. That meant that they assigned us a lot of alternate duty.

One of my assignments was to learn how to fly. I qualified in an old De Havland Beaver that was assigned to the 125th ATC Company. The Army has a habit of cramming a lot of learning into a very short time and I got my wings in two weeks. They also made me an “acting Warrant Officer” so I could “legally” fly that thing. I got my wings at Da Nang and was ordered to Saigon to pick up another Beaver. I brought some of my crew with me because word was that the plane was a piece of crap. It was.

The airframe had over 70,000 hours on it and you could see the oil dripping from the crankcase as it sat on the tarmac. I was ordered to get the thing flying in one week because, guess what, I was now paymaster for the I-Corp area. One of my alternate duties was to deliver Army script to 80,000 grunts every two weeks to the northern quarter of Vietnam. The pay packets, pre-sorted and arranged by airfield delivery were sitting in a guarded locker next to the aircraft.

We barely got the plane in the air and whatever room wasn't taken up by script and my guys was filled with pallets of oil that had to be continuously poured into a funnel as we flew. It took us two days and 160 quarts of oil to get back to Hue from Saigon. I did that trip a few more times before our Beaver bit the dust. The engine crankcase split open and the engine seized in flight and burst into flames. I had a rough landing on the fringe at the end of my runway.

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The worst part was reporting that I had just lost \$20,000,000 in script. When the Colonel who conducted the inquiry asked me if the loss was due to enemy action I said, "Of course." He smiled and walked away.

After that I learned to fly a Huey and borrowed one when I had to make the paymaster rounds. I found out that if you fly a Huey above 6,000 feet the VC won't shoot at you. Of course 6 or maybe 7,000 feet is as high as a fully loaded Huey will go and eventually you have to come down. I learned to make a high speed, almost crash landings. I used to practice what they called a hot field landing even if I wasn't being shot at. I hate being shot at.

Being Paymaster for I-Corp had it good sides and it's bad sides. The good side was that everyone was happy to see you. The bad side was that it was really crappy duty. We were, technically, non-combatants so we were *ordered* to travel unarmed. That was total BS. I carried my Grease-Gun, a Vietnamese issued M-16 and my M-14. Another down side to being the Army paymaster was that the Marines and the Navy decided that I could deliver their script too. I was in the Army but what am I supposed to say to a Marine General that wanted a ride, with his pay packets, into a hot LZ. Screw you? I don't think so.

Like most Generals this guy thought he was immune from being shot at and strutted around like nothing's going to happen to him. I remember a grunt mumbling that he could put a round right through that asshole's eyes and everyone would cheer for the VC. Anyway I became a big hit with the Marines but I'll tell you about that later.

Anyway We flew up to Khe Sanh with this General and dropped him off. A week later he called up and wanted us to come get him. Now my paymaster duties were every two weeks so I wasn't scheduled to fly that week. But I figure being a chauffeur for a General has got to be worth something even if he is a Marine so I called up my buddies and said lets go get this dude. Hey I'm the tower chief in Hue so I can do a lot of favors so I get my ride. I didn't just borrow some broken down Huey, no this time I get a Marine

chopper from Phu Bai (a Marine Base 7 miles south of the Hue airfield) with a flight crew.

The crew chief had been injured somehow so the bird was short a door gunner. I took that job and let the pilots do theirs. Just as we were on final to Khe Sanh we got clobbered. I'm blasting everything I can see from the starboard door when we got hit by an RPG, I think, from the port side or at least shrapnel from one. It blew off the engine cover and caused the fuel hose to start spraying burning JP4 all over the place. To say we crash landed is polite. We hit the ground so hard that we broke both struts and the blades broke on impact and went flying.

I had been standing in the door when we hit the ground and somehow I ended up sitting in one of the jump seats. I was unhurt but everyone else in the chopper had been knocked unconscious. The fuel line had sprayed a flaming circle around the hulk that must have looked pretty impressive but wasn't really. Still I knew it was only a matter of time before the thing would be fully engulfed so I grabbed a Kid who had been ordered to Khe Sanh and was just hitching a ride, threw him over my shoulders and ran out of the chopper, jumped through the ring of fire and deposited the kid on the ground far enough from the chopper where he'd be safe. I went back in two more times and pulled the pilot and co-pilot out before the fire really hit the fuel tank and the thing pretty much blew up.

The moral of the story is if you are going to crash do it in front of a General because you'll get a medal out of it. I got a Bronze Star. Pretty stupid if you ask me but who am I going to complain to. There are thousands of dead kids out there that did a lot more than I did but there wasn't a General around to see it. It's pretty fucked up if you ask me.

Besides a worthless medal I got the keys to a warehouse filled with 100 pallets of K-Bar knives. Apparently the K-Bar had become illegal according to international law so they couldn't be distributed. The General kind of hinted that he had a problem in this warehouse that he'd like solved when he handed me the keys. I took some unauthorized alternate duty time with my boys. We put the honing

stones back into the leather scabbards of the K-Bar knives and filled the back of my Duce-and-a-half with a couple of pallets then drove to Phu Bai and sold them to Marines off the back of the truck. Word got out and we sold all 60,000 K-Bars in about two months. We made some good money.

