

## THE VETS

As he levelled the helicopter off at 3,000 feet above the choppy South China Sea, the pilot marvelled as he always did at the way it managed to stay in the air. The cyclic control stick twitched in his right hand, the collective pitch control lever vibrated in his left, and his feet made small adjustments to the directional control pedals as he headed out to the waiting ship some six miles away in the Gulf of Tonkin. All four of his limbs were needed to keep the helicopter in the air, though he had been flying for so long that he was no longer aware of them as individual movements. He was part of the machine: his nerves and tendons ran from the rotor blades throbbing above his head to the skids below him. He could feel the blades cutting through the night air and the tail rotor fighting against the torque the blades produced, and when he swung the helicopter to the left to make a course correction it was flesh and blood that turned and not metal; he saw only the sea and the sky, not the Plexiglas windows. He scanned his instrument panel, taking in the information from the myriad dials and gauges without reading them in the same way that his skin recorded the chill in the air and his nose picked up the smell of the fuel that had slopped over the fuel tank filler while they were preparing the helicopter at a Special Forces airfield outside Da Nang.

The pilot was alone in the cockpit and the second set of controls in front of the co-pilot's seat moved as if guided by ghostly hands and feet, mirroring his own actions. During his year-long tour of duty with 1st Cav, he'd never flown solo on a mission, but Air America did things differently and he hadn't been surprised when he'd been told that he'd be flying alone.

He clicked the microphone trigger switch on his cyclic control stick and identified himself to the target ship which was still some two miles away, bobbing in the sea like a toy boat. He had no problems communicating with the ship on the prearranged VHF frequency and he decreased power to the 1,100 shp Lycoming T53-L-11 turboshaft engine as he made his approach.

It was dusk and there was enough light to see by, but just to be on the safe side he thumbed the switch on the collective pitch control lever which turned on the search-light mounted under the front of the Huey to give him a better view of the deck of the ship as it bucked and tossed in the waves. A guy with a torch in either hand guided him down until he was hovering just six feet above the heaving deck and then the pilot chose his moment, cut the power and dropped, pulling back the cyclic, and dropping the collective at the last moment to cushion the impact as best he could. The guy drew his hand across his throat telling the pilot to cut his engine but he'd already done it and slammed on the rotor brake. More men rushed forward to tie the Huey down as the pilot removed his flight helmet and put it on the co-pilot's seat.

A man with a blond crew cut, wearing civilian clothes, appeared from somewhere, took the pilot by the upper arm, and guided him below deck to a tiny steel-lined cabin containing a folding bunk and a wooden chair on which was a green file and a plastic mapcase.

"That's your flight plan," said the man. "Anything else you want?" He hadn't introduced himself, nor did he ask to see any identification from the pilot.

"Just water," said the pilot.

He sat down on the bed and studied the maps and papers. A few minutes later the man with the crew cut came back with a glass of water which he handed to the pilot without a word before leaving and closing the door behind him. The pilot took a mouthful of the cold water and then placed the glass on the floor. He looked at the solid gold Rolex on his wrist. It was just before eight o'clock and according to the flight plan he was due to take off at 2200 hours. The course he was to fly was marked on the map in red, north-west up to the coast near Quang Tri, then due west across Vietnam to the border with Laos. He was to follow the border up twenty clicks and then cut into Laos towards a town which was marked as Muang Xepon. There were no details as to how he was to find the LZ but that was nothing unusual. When you flew for Air America almost everything was on a need-to-know basis. That would explain the missing co-pilot. Presumably one of the passengers would be sitting in the co-pilot's station to help guide him in. The flight would be 275 clicks, 550

klicks there and back, and he'd be carrying four passengers and a small cargo. The standard Huey had a range of about 540 klicks with its 200-gallon capacity but the UH-1E had been fitted with extra fuel tanks and it now had a range closer to 700 klicks. The pilot would have preferred to have refuelled at a Special Forces camp closer to the border but whoever had planned the mission obviously didn't want the chopper on the ground between the ship and its final destination. The take-off would be tricky, but once they'd burned off a few gallons they'd have no problems. It would be a milk run. After the drop in Laos they'd be returning to the ship. The pilot took off his leather shoulder holster and slid out his .25 calibre handgun, checked that it was fully loaded and that the safety was on and put it on the chair. He read through the papers, rechecked the maps, and then lay down on the bunk and stared up at the ceiling, relaxed but not asleep. He pictured an ice cube in his mind, a square block which he allowed gradually to melt until nothing remained but a pool of water which slowly evaporated. His breathing slowed and his pulse rate dropped and his mind was empty. He stayed that way until a sharp knock on the door announced that it was time to go.

The man with the crew cut took him back to the Huey where the restraining ropes were being untied. The pilot carried out his pre-flight checks then strapped himself in to the high-backed armoured seat before checking the positions of the circuit breakers and switches. Satisfied, he looked back over his shoulder to see if there was any sign of his passengers.

Four men were walking towards the Huey. All were dressed in tiger-stripe fatigues and bush hats and had camouflage streaks of green and brown across their faces which blended so well into the material of their uniforms that he couldn't see where skin ended and material began. They walked two abreast, the men in front carrying rifles at the ready, the two behind with their weapons shouldered as they manhandled a heavy metal chest between them. As they got closer the pilot could see the weapons they were carrying. One of the men in front, the thinner of the two, carried a Commando submachine-gun, a variation of the standard M16 infantry rifle, and the man on his right held a Kalashnikov AK-47, the Soviet assault rifle which had become the weapon of choice of the Viet Cong. The pilot wasn't surprised to see the AK-47 in the hands of a Special Forces soldier. They tended to use whatever gear they were comfortable with, and there were obvious advantages of operating with VC equipment in enemy territory. The man who was carrying his end of the chest with his left hand had an M16 slung over his shoulder and what looked to be a sawn-off shotgun hanging from his belt. His companion on the other end of the chest had an M16 and a radio on his back. Apart from the weaponry, there was little to tell the four men apart: all were lean and wiry, all were clean-shaven with no hair showing under the floppy brush hats and all moved with a fluid grace that brought to mind images of lions on the prowl.

The man with the Commando walked around the Huey and pulled himself in to the co-pilot's seat and nodded as the pilot handed him a flight helmet. The other three man-handled the chest through the doorway, grunting as they slid it along the metal floor. They climbed in and pulled the sliding door shut behind them.

The pilot pushed in the igniter circuit breaker and prepared to start the turbine. Before he squeezed the trigger switch he became aware of a knocking sound coming from somewhere within the Huey, a tapping that he felt rather than heard. It was like Morse code. Dit-dit-dit-daa. Dit-dit-dit-daa. Three short taps and a long one. The Morse code signal for V, and also the first notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, being repeated over and over again. He twisted around but he couldn't see where it was coming from. He shrugged and settled back in his seat. As he gave his instruments a quick visual scan he saw that the noise was coming from the man in the co-pilot's seat. His right hand held the Commando barrel up between his legs while his left hand was against the bulkhead. He was tapping, three times with the tips of his fingers, the fourth with the flat of his hand. A sign of nerves, Doherty reckoned, but once he started the T53 turboshaft engine the tapping sounds were lost.

The pilot waited for the exhaust-gas temperature gauge to settle into the green before opening the throttle. He pulled on the collective, increasing the power to the whirling blades and lifting the Huey off the deck before nudging it forward with a push on the cyclic. The Huey was sluggish, loaded down as it was with the extra fuel, and the pilot took it up slowly

to 3,000 feet. It was a cloudless night and a full moon hung in the sky and the pilot could see clear to the horizon.

Forty minutes later they flew over a narrow strip of beach and above the jungle which shone blackly in the moonlight. The pilot took the Huey up another thousand feet. The thinner air meant he'd burn fuel up faster but they had plenty in reserve. He followed the course on the map he'd been given, climbing way above the mountain ranges where VC snipers were prone to take pot-shots at passing helicopters, no matter how high they were. There was no indication of where Vietnam ended and Laos began but the pilot knew that two hours after leaving the ship he'd crossed over whatever border existed. The knife-edged ridges far below were no different from the mountain ranges in the west of Vietnam and he knew that the Viet Cong criss-crossed the border as if it didn't exist. The map meant nothing, in the air or on the ground.

The pilot felt a touch on his arm and turned to see the man in the co-pilot's seat mouthing to him. He reached over and showed him how to operate the microphone trigger switch on the cyclic.

"Can you take it down?" he said, the voice crackling in the pilot's ear.

"Sure," he said, dropping the collective pitch and nosing the Huey down with the cyclic. He levelled off a thousand feet or so above the jungle while the passenger peered out of the window.

"What are you looking for?" asked the pilot.

"A river," said the man. "A river shaped like a heart. It's within fifteen clicks of that range." He pointed to a steep rocky outcrop which speared through the jungle like an accusing finger.

"It's not on the map," said the pilot.

The man ignored him and kept looking out of the side window. "Lower," he said.

The pilot eased the Huey down until it was about 200 feet above the treetops.

"There she is," said the man, pointing.

"Got it," said the pilot, turning the Huey towards the thin ribbon of water. It did look like an oddly stretched heart, as if the river had lost its sense of direction for a few miles and almost turned in a circle before realising its mistake.

"Go as low as you can," said the passenger. "There's a clearing about one click from the base of the heart."

As the pilot guided the Huey down he saw a light flash on the ground, then another.

"See the lights?" said the passenger.

"I see them," replied the pilot.

"Land between them."

The pilot put the Huey in a hover about ten feet above the thick grass of the clearing while he checked for obstructions as best he could. Seeing none, he reduced the power and put the skids softly on the ground. There was no sign of whoever had been holding the flashlights that had guided them in.

The passenger clicked the intercom on. "We'll be gone for about five minutes, not much longer. Keep the blades turning in case we have to leave in a hurry."

The passenger pulled off his flight helmet. He left it on the floor as he climbed out of the Huey. His hair was blond, cut close to his skull, and it gleamed in the moonlight. The pilot felt the Huey shudder as the cargo door was opened and he turned to watch the men haul the chest out. The four men moved cautiously towards the treeline as the rotor blades beat the air above their heads. They bent down like grunts always did, fearful that the blades would take off their heads, even though there was more than enough room. You'd have to be a basketball player leaping in the air to stand a chance of being hit by the main rotor. The tail rotor was a different matter; the pilot had seen two grunts killed by running the wrong way when leaving a Huey. The rotor was a fraction of the size of the one on top but it was the perfect height for taking off a man's head.

The four men disappeared into the undergrowth leaving the pilot feeling suddenly alone. He shivered and leant back in his seat, filling his mind with the melting ice cube. If there

was a VC out in the jungle with his name on a bullet there was nothing he could do about it. He blocked out thoughts of what might be and concentrated on the cold, wet, ice.

A firefly sparked to his left, a red dot that glowed briefly and then was gone. Ice. Melting ice. Another spark, then another. He ignored them. A fourth appeared but this didn't disappear, it moved in a straight line, blinking on and off. The pilot realised with a jolt that it wasn't a flying insect but a light in the far distance, the blinking effect caused by it passing behind trees. He killed the lights on his instrument panel and widened his eyes, trying to calculate the distance between him and the lights as they came down the hill. One klick? Maybe two? Maybe closer. He swung around and looked anxiously at the vegetation at the edge of the clearing. There was no sign of the men. He put his hand on the butt of the gun in his shoulder holster, the metal warm to the touch. He could fire a warning shot, but that was just as likely to attract the attention of whoever was on the hillside as it was to bring the Special Forces guys back. But he had no other way of getting in touch with them, they hadn't told him the frequency their radio operated on. He took his hand off the gun and rubbed his face. The lights were getting closer. There were three of them. As he watched, the lights disappeared one by one.

The rule was that the pilot stayed with the slick, but he couldn't face sitting in the Huey waiting for whoever it was to arrive. He had to do something. He had to warn them and get the hell out. He peered up the hillside. No more lights. He could picture them moving in the darkness, crouching low with AK-47s in their hands, black pyjamas and wide, conical hats. He shuddered.

He slapped the cyclic stick in frustration and swore before climbing down from the Huey and running towards the area where he'd last seen the men take the chest. He hated the jungle with a vengeance. The only time he felt comfortable with it was when he was looking down on it from a great height. Long, scratchy things clawed at his shirt as if they were alive, and damp fronds wrapped themselves around his face as if they wanted to squeeze the life out of him. Something squelched under his foot but it was too dark to see what it was. He stopped and listened but all he could hear was the whup-whup of the Huey behind him. He pushed on through the undergrowth, feeling his way with his gloved hands in front of his face. He heard water only seconds before he splashed into a stream which came up to his knees. It was slow-moving and no danger but it was uncomfortable. He thought of leeches and river snakes and waded through quickly, slipping once on a wet rock.

In the distance he saw a yellowish glow and he moved towards it, praying that it was the Special Forces team and not another group of Viet Cong. He slowed down as he came closer to the light, and peered around a massive tree trunk around which wound thick veins, like varicose veins on an old woman's leg. He saw the young man with the Commando and was just about to shout to attract his attention when something stopped him. The Commando was levelled at a group of what the pilot guessed were Laotian mercenaries, dark-skinned men with high cheekbones and narrow eyes, some with AK-47s, others with wicked-looking machetes. There were about a dozen, some of them little more than children carrying weapons that were almost as big as they were. The three other Special Forces men were facing the mercenaries, spaced so that they couldn't be cut down with one burst of automatic fire.

In between the two groups were three hemp sacks lined up on the ground next to a small campfire which was clearly the source of the glow he had seen when he entered the jungle. One of the Laotians was kneeling by the middle sack and cutting a small hole in it with a curved knife. He dug the blade into the sack and it came out with white powder on the end. He carefully carried it over to the man with the Commando, one hand held under the knife to catch any spillage. The American licked the tip. He nodded to the other Special Forces men, a white smile breaking through the painted face.

The pilot couldn't take his eyes off the scene that was being played out in front of him, even though he knew the danger from the men on the hill was growing by the minute. The Laotian sheathed his knife and walked over to the chest standing about six feet or so in front of the two men who'd carried it. They stepped back, their guns in the ready position, as the mercenary leaned down to open it. Two more of the mercenaries moved forward to stand

either side of him. From where he was standing behind the tree, the pilot couldn't see what was in the chest. He slowly went down on all fours and crept along the damp jungle floor, moving slowly and taking great care where he put his hands, until he reached a tree with thick, rubbery leaves. He hugged its trunk and peered around. He now was looking at the backs of the Laotians, and through their legs he could see inside the open chest. Blocks of metal gleamed in the light of the flickering fire. The mercenary who had opened the sack bent down and picked up one of the blocks. He had to use both hands, and even from thirty feet away the pilot knew it could only be gold. He knew he was seeing something more than a simple "need-to-know" CIA operation. The Special Forces men were about to swap the gold for drugs and the Huey was to fly the drugs back to the ship. The pilot was confused. He'd heard of Air America planes being used to ferry drugs around for the Thai drug barons as a way of getting them to help in the fight against the VC, but what he was seeing was something different. The Americans were paying for the drugs, with gold; it wasn't a case of doing a favour for the Laotians or supplying them with cash or arms. This was a straightforward drug deal he was witnessing.

For the first time he became aware of another group of Laotians standing further behind and to the right of the mercenaries on the edge of the circle of warm light cast by the fire. The group was composed of women and very small children. One of the women held a baby in her arms and she was making small shushing noises to keep it from crying. Whereas the men were dressed in khaki combat fatigues, the women and children wore brightly coloured clothes made from red, green, yellow and blue striped material, the girls in skirts, the small boys in leggings. The women had their hair tied back and were wearing strips of cloth wound around their heads like badly tied turbans.

The pilot wanted to shout a warning to the Americans, to tell them that they had to go, but he was unsure how they'd react to him being there. The decision was made for him when the American with the Commando fired at the three Laotians standing by the chest, cutting them down before they had a chance to raise their weapons. The three other Americans fired almost immediately afterwards and bullets ripped through the foliage near where the pilot was standing. Those mercenaries who weren't killed outright were screaming in pain, flowers of blood spreading across their fatigues. The women and children made as if to move forward to help their men but one of the women, old with shrivelled skin and no teeth, shouted to them and waved them back. The pilot reached for the automatic pistol in his shoulder holster but didn't draw it out. What could he do? Shoot the American's? Plead with them to stop the slaughter? Tell them he'd report them when they got back to the ship? None of the choices was viable. He let the butt slide from his sweating fingers. The women and children turned and ran, stumbling and tripping in their panic. The four Americans fired together, raking the Laotians with a hail of bullets, the individual weapons making separate identifiable sounds but the end result was the same; women and children falling to the ground and dying.

A gasp escaped involuntarily from the pilot's mouth and he tasted bitter vomit at the back of his throat. His ears were hurting from the sound of the guns and even when the firing stopped they were still ringing, making it hard to think. The humid night air was thick with the smell of cordite and hot metal. The two men who'd carried the chest from the Huey ran over to it and closed the lid. The guy with the Commando shouted something and one of the men went to the dead Laotian with the knife and kicked him over on to his back, searching the ground until he found the gold bar he'd picked up before he died. The bar was returned to the chest, one of them looked in the pilot's direction. He pointed and the pilot flinched as if he'd been fired at. While watching the massacre he'd stepped away from the tree without realising it and now he could clearly be seen in the firelight. His feet felt as if they were rooted to the ground. The man with the Commando stepped forward, walking slowly with the barrel of his gun lowered. He stopped when he was about thirty feet away from the pilot, his face in darkness because the fire was behind him. The pilot couldn't see his face but he could feel the man's eyes boring into him. He could hear the blood pounding through his veins and feel the sweat clinging to his forehead. He knew he had never been so close to death and that everything depended on how he reacted. He dropped his hands to his

sides and gave a half shrug as if nothing mattered. The man with the Commando stood stock still, his feet planted shoulder width apart, his left side slightly closer to the pilot than his right, the perfect shooting position. The barrel of the gun was still pointed at the ground. The pilot widened his smile. He knew that his face was clearly visible in the firelight, that they could see his every expression.

The man's upper body appeared to relax as if he'd come to a decision and the pilot let out a sigh of relief. He was about to step forward when the Commando swung. The pilot dived without thinking, throwing himself to his left and rolling on the ground before scrambling away into the undergrowth. He didn't look back so he didn't see the muzzle flashes but he felt the air crack as bullets passed within inches of his head. He ran by instinct, dodging trees before they loomed out of the darkness, avoiding vines on the ground without seeing them, jumping the stream without getting wet, as if his subconscious mind had recorded every step of his journey through the jungle and was now replaying it in reverse because it knew that if it made one wrong move he'd be dead. His breath came in ragged bursts and his arms pumped up and down as he ran, his eyes wide with fear, his muscles screaming in agony as his feet pounded on the jungle floor.

He burst out of the jungle into the clearing and ran headlong towards the Huey, throwing himself into the pilot's seat and pulling on the collective before he'd even sat down. The turbine whined and the blades speeded up until they were a blurred circle above his head. Relieved of the weight of its four passengers and cargo it soared almost vertically out of the clearing. From the corner of his eye he saw the four Special Forces men tear out of the undergrowth and point their guns at him. Red dots streamed past the Huey and up into the night and he heard a series of bangs behind him, thuds of metal against metal. He waggled his directional pedals frantically, jerking the slick from left to right to make himself less of a target, all the time increasing the power to the rotors to give it extra lift.

It was only when the altimeter showed 2,000 feet that he relaxed. He put the Huey into a hover while he considered his next move. He pushed the right pedal and nudged the cyclic to the right and pointed the nose of the Huey east, towards Vietnam. A thousand thoughts crowded into his head, all seeking attention, but they were dulled by the conflicting emotions he felt: horror at what he'd seen, guilt for not doing anything to stop it, anger at the men behind the massacre, terror at being hunted, fear of what would happen to him when he got back to the ship. If he got back. He took deep breaths and tried to focus his thoughts, to bring some sort of order to his bewildered mind. When it happened it happened suddenly, without him knowing, the way water freezes, turning from liquid to solid so quickly that there is no borderline between the two states. One moment he was in total confusion, the next he knew with perfect clarity what he would do.

He pushed the cyclic to the left and pressed the left foot pedal, swinging the Huey round and losing height because he didn't increase power, until the helicopter was pointing in the opposite direction, due west. He hovered for a moment, steadying his breathing, concentrating on the block of ice in his mind, feeling the helicopter react to the small, almost imperceptible, movements of his hands and feet, absorbing the data from the instruments. He sighed, a deep mournful emptying of his lungs, then pulled on the collective and pushed the cyclic forward. The turbine roared and the Huey jumped forward as if eager to go. Within minutes the pilot had the Huey up to its maximum speed of 138 mph, flying low and level, just above the treetops, as the ice block slowly melted to cool, clear water.