

SPECIAL EDITION
August 2005



A Memorial to the American Experience
in
Vietnam
“All Included—None Excluded”

Revetments

The Official Journal of The Tan Son Nhut Association

THE RAZORBACKS *United States Army* **120th Assault Helicopter Company** **Tan Son Nhut Air Base**



Wars should be fought by those that are middle aged. Or at least the powers to be should not muster anyone that is younger than 40. Maybe if wars were fought by the older citizens there would be less wars. But then, maybe it wouldn't make any difference.

In Vietnam the average age of the combatant casualty was 22. Much too young. Twenty-two year olds should be working, or in school - learning how to manage life.

Anyone that has read anything about the war in Vietnam knows about the Tet Offensive (as it's called.) February 1, 1968 at approximately 3:30 AM the young warriors of Tan Son Nhut Air Base were awakened by violent explosions and machine gun fire. All hell broke loose. The 377th Security Police, 815 strong had already been alerted that something might happen at the start of Tet.

Army Specialist Fourth Class Bill Stribling, at age 25, was older than most men that he served with. Bill was with the 120th Assault Helicopter Company at Hotel-3, Tan Son Nhut Air Base, as a gunner on the UH-1 helicopter. Like most helicopter gunners he started off as a machine gunner in the infantry, but when he saw the gunners on Huey gunships wearing clean fatigues and had all the bottles of water they needed, he decided to make a change. He volunteered to fly as a gunner on the Huey gunships - he joined the ranks of the Razorbacks and was assigned to Tan Son Nhut.

At the explosive start of Tet Bill quickly dressed, jumped into a ¾ ton truck with others and headed for the helipad at Hotel-3. There were eight armed gunships on the air base. The firepower of these gunships were instrumental in holding back the VC and NVA.

One of the men in those gunships, Captain Chad C. Payne, a fire team leader, said, 'I received fire everywhere I turned. My ships received seven hits, but this was nothing considering the amount of ground fire directed toward us. There were hundreds of VC bodies everywhere in the vicinity of the Tan Son Nhut perimeter. I've never seen anything like it.'

Another tribute to the effectiveness of the gunships came from a member of Advisory Team 100 at Tan Son Nhut. When he received word that Tan Son Nhut was under attack, he assembled a patrol of 30 men. "And we ran head-on into one of the attack forces. There were approximately 350 men against my 30. We were certainly outnumbered," he said. "Then those beautiful gunships came in and started circling the area. I threw up a pocket flare to mark the position, and the gunship radioed that we were too close to the enemy force and to pull back some, if possible. We pulled back and then he went in. He was right on target, placing rockets right in the middle of Charlie's position. We killed over 200 enemy, and I'd estimate that 80-85 percent was attributable to the helicopters. The morning of the 31st, if I had met that pilot, I'd have kissed him."

SP4 Kirby Spain was back home on leave and missed the opening rounds of Tet. He had his share of flying during Tet. "I started off as a gunner, but was moved to a crew chief position. I did lot's of flying during Tet." He said, "Many times we'd fly for as little as fifteen minutes, and then have to return to Hotel-3 for fuel and ammunition.

The Razorbacks didn't just defend the TSN air base. They flew all over Saigon, and supported ground troops in the Cholon area.

For the most part these warriors were young men fighting a horrible battle. They were young, but they were hardened crewmen afterwards. They were also heroes.

Wayne Salisbury



Kirby Spain

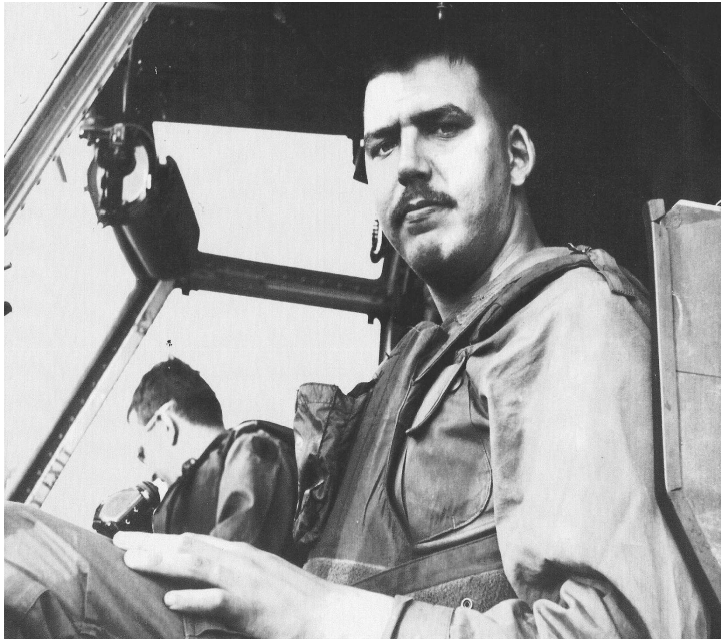
Kirby Spain: As told by Bill Stribling

He was on a mission once when they flew into a .51 cal ambush with two .51 cat NVA machine guns. Their ship took 52 hits, got the hydraulics shot out, lost the tail rotor, and landed on the skids at Tan Son Nhut doing 55 knots. They had to have that much air speed so that the ship wouldn't rotate. The aircraft commander told Spain and the gunner to jump when they thought it had slowed down enough, and Spain told him hell no, we'll ride it out with you.

Another time we were down south on a recon and there were several Vietnamese working in a rice field with one of them in dress pants and a white shirt. Bingo! A VC official or tax collector. We landed and they happened to be on Spain's side of the ship. The AC told him to go capture the VC. Spain unhooked, took an M-16 and walked over cool as hell and captured the guy. We put him in the floor of the ship on his belly, and I stuck my machinegun barrel in his ear. Just to make sure he remained a good boy



L-R Stribling, Goodman and Loendorf



Captain Chad Payne in the background—WO Early Watkins in the foreground

Captain Chad Payne as told by Bill Stribling

He was much more of a hero than I ever could be. I was just a backseater, Chad was flying the gunship. He was absolutely fearless. He was what leaders are supposed to be. Chad lead by example, and inspired in the rest of us the ability to be more than we ever could have been without him. Chad could make an overloaded gunship do things it's designers never dreamed it could do, and did it with precision. I feel privileged to say I was one of Chad Payne's gunners.



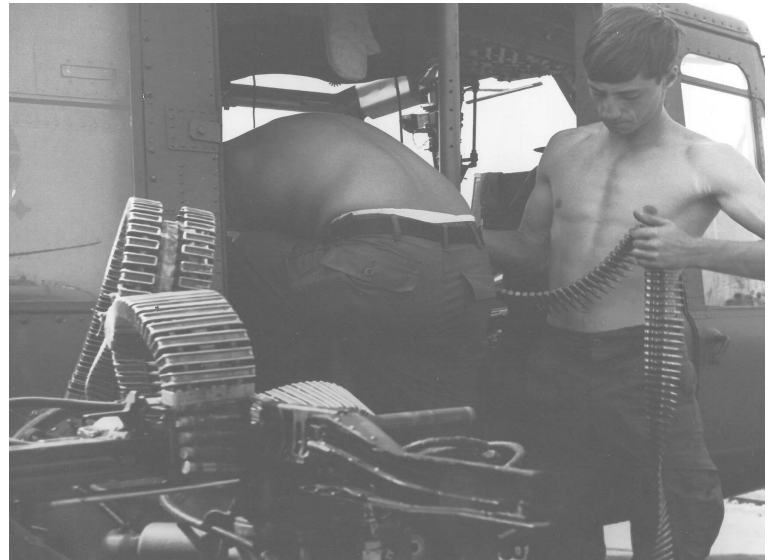
The shot of the "Hog" hovering to takeoff is my ship with Chad, Watkins and Klinker and me leaving for the Ap Tau Hoi mission in "A Gun

ship Mission". The ship from which the pic was taken by Maj Cash was the wing ship that was shot down and burned.

Bill Stribling



Crew Chief performing preflight inspection



L-R Sullivan and Wilson



**Rocket pod and machine gun
L-R Brown and Thompson**



**SP4 Bill Stribling
Ready and Able**



SP4 Bill Stribling

I am pointing to one of the bullet holes in the gunship that was shot down during the "Mini-Tet" or TET II (May 1968) as we called it. We were in an area NW of Saigon where two rivers came together, and there was an ARVN fort or outpost that interdicted NVA/VC sampan traffic. The outpost was being reinforced by ARVN units marching in on foot. We were there to keep them from being ambushed or harassed by sniper fire. We had an Air Force observer riding with us that day to take pictures, etc.

In the lead ship were Maj. Chad Payne, aircraft commander in the right seat, I'm not sure who was his co-pilot. The gunner was Fred Rexer, and the crew chief was Charles Loendorf. The lead ship was a "Hog" or "Rocket Ship", with 48 rockets plus two door guns armed with 2000 rounds of machine gun ammo each. The wing ship which I was on, had as aircraft commander in the right seat, WO Ron Davis, and in the left seat, WO Early Watkins. Our ship was armed with 14 rockets, 4 electrically fired machine guns with 5000 rounds each, plus two door guns with 2000 rounds each. Sp4 Mike Klinker was the crew chief, of course, I was the gunner on the right side.

Maj. Chad Payne in the lead ship received a mayday on the radio which we all could hear, stating that a 3/4 Cav 25th Div. gunship was shot down in a rice paddy. One of the pilots was badly wounded, one of the enlisted crew was wounded and the NVA were within 50 meters of the downed helicopter. Maj Payne radioed back that we were on the way. When we got there, the gunship was on its side in a dry rice paddy with bamboo growing on the dikes. There was an intricate network of these dry paddies with bamboo on the dikes interconnected, and sprawling toward a long spread out village.

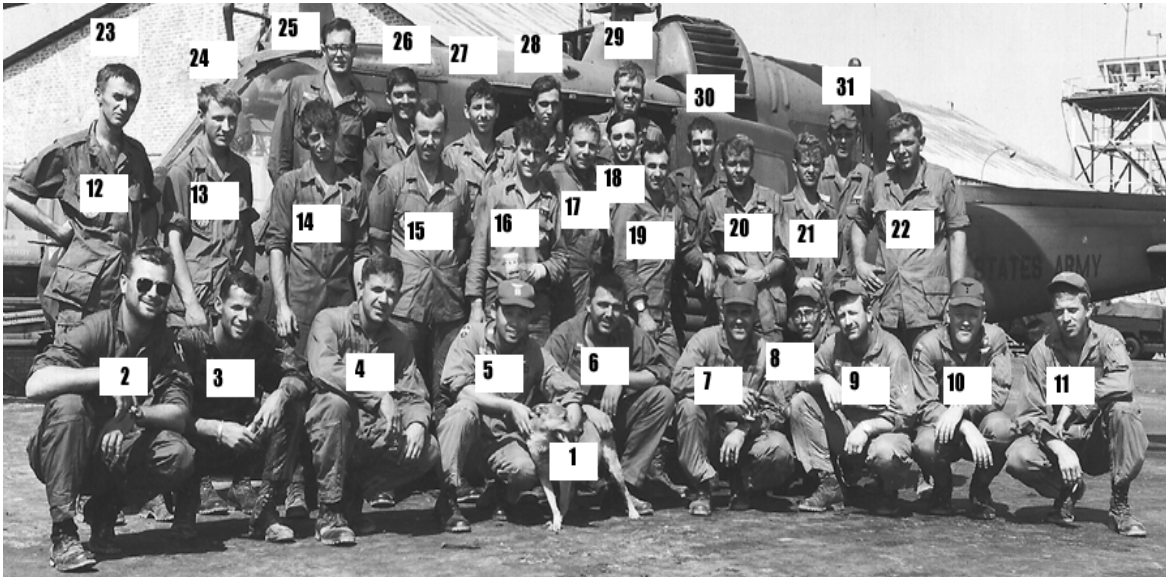
On our first pass firing rockets and machine guns, both ships came under intense automatic weapons fire from numerous heavy machine gun positions, and from NVA with AK 47's. In all my many engagements with the NVA, seldom have I ever seen so many enemy visibly firing at us plus running and changing positions. Each pass seemed to draw more intense ground fire. The smoke, dust and noise were unbelievable, plus the psychological factor of seeing so many of the enemy firing at us. I remember enemy soldiers falling and in particular one group with a big

NVA with an RPD machine gun running for the bamboo. I depressed my door gun to kill him and we flashed over him and he was gone.

It seemed that this went on for ever, but on our fifth pass, a .51 Cal machine gun got us good. Mike Klinker told WO Davis that he smelled a lot of fuel. WO Davis looked at his gauges and we registered empty on fuel. Davis immediately made for a big open dry rice paddy about 150 meters from the action. We made a hard landing, and the crew chief and I got the pilots out. We then got the door guns out plus what ammo was left and took up defensive positions behind a paddy dike facing toward the enemy. We started taking small arms fire right away, and returned fire with our door guns, as enemy rounds impacted the downed gunship.

Meanwhile, Maj. Payne was orbiting overhead, talking to two F-100's from the Air Force. The F-100's rolled in and dropped 250 pounders 75 meters from us in the tree line, and then dropped napalm canisters. When Maj. Payne burnt his fuel down to 50 pounds or so, he came in under fire to pick us up. We all piled in his ship, and as it was overloaded, he had to bounce it several times to get translational lift. I was looking out the right side at the skids, and just before the right skid hooked on a paddy dike we were airborne with everybody that could shooting out the left door at the NVA.

After the battle was over, a 120th AHC Chinook sling loaded our gunship back to HOTEL-3. There were 39 bullet holes in it. The crew chief Mike Klinker and I were supposed to be off for 24 hours after that mission. I told Klinker if I didn't fly that night, I probably wouldn't ever be able to do it again. He agreed, and we swapped with the crew on 24 hour duty. We were involved in some heavy action that night, and got our nerve back. There was no other way. We learned after the action that including the original shoot down and us there were 5 gunships shot down in that battle. The Air force observer was named Larry Felts. Larry acted with bravery returning fire with an M-16 provided him.

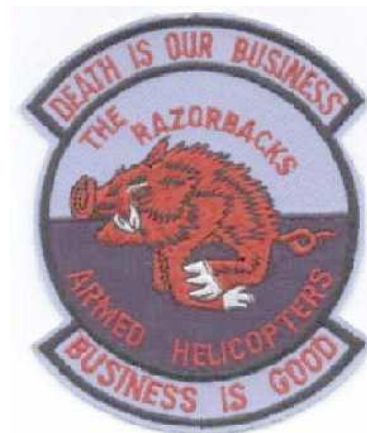


120th Assault Helicopter Company, 3rd Platoon

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|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. "Razor" the Mascot | 11. Warrant Officer Goins | 21. SP4 Anderson |
| 2. Warrant Officer Davis | 12. Warrant Officer Transki | 22. SP4 Thompson |
| 3. Warrant Officer Stringer | 13. SP4 Tichota | 23. SSG Kent |
| 4. Capt Sheibley | 14. SP4 Wilson | 24. SP4 Sullivan |
| 5. Capt Shibao | 15. SP4 Stribling | 25. SP4 Howell |
| 6. Warrant Officer Early Watkins | 16. SP4 Scott | 26. CPL Fagan |
| 7. Maj Kolhoff | 17. SP4 Klinker | 27. SP4 Kosciolak |
| 8. Unknown | 18. SP4 Vronko | 28. SP4 Rexer |
| 9. Maj Chad Payne | 19. SP4 Dunham | |
| 10. Warrant Officer Geiger | 20. SP5 Loendorf | |

This picture was taken on the morning of January 1, 1968. We had only one ship that was flyable by that time. All of the rest were shot up, and the armament systems were being transferred to new ships. Kirby Spain was on leave in the states and was due back in a couple days. He was there for most of the action. I flew my first mission about daylight that first morning when SP4 Price was shot in the knee, and I was assigned to a gunship. The lull while the picture was being taken didn't last long. I remember that we got practically no sleep for the first three days. Just naps on the floor of the helicopter between missions. We didn't see the barracks or a shower for a week

SP4 Bill Stribling



August 17th, 2002

The 120th "Razorback Reunion" Little Rock, Arkansas

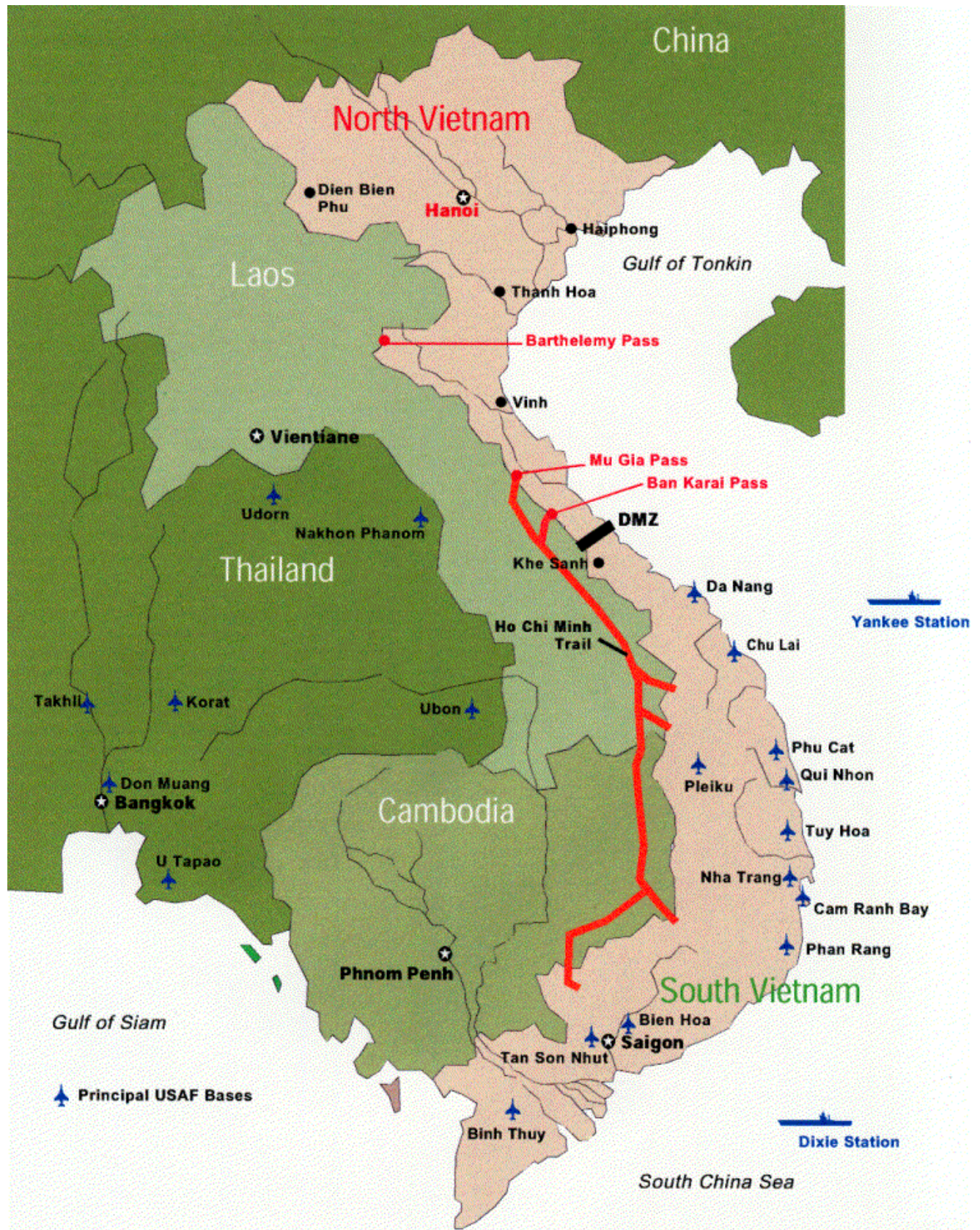


Front row: Pete Iglesias, Al Bross, Kirby Spain, Johnnie Sweeten
Back row: Barry Card, Mike Klinker, Chad Payne, Bill Stribling, Linc Shibo, Jimmy Busby

It has been a pleasure putting together this piece to tell a little bit about the helicopters that flew in and out of Tan Son Nhut. My thanks to Kirby Spain and Major Chad Payne for their contribution to this story. My special thanks to Bill Stribling for the remarkable stories he has. He has a great recall of those important events so many years ago.

To each of the former members of the 120th Razorbacks, thank you for your service and devotion to duty. Your remarkable efforts keeping Tan Son Nhut from being overrun by the VC and NVA was and is highly appreciated. The members of the Tan Son Nhut Association salute you.

Wayne Salisbury



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