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Peaches and Pound Cake

Steve Tedder

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God it was hot, pushing 100 degrees in December. I sat on my butt in the meager shade of a Kiowa helicopter on a hot PSP helipad in 1970. My pilot, WO2 White, was back in one of the slicks (UH-1H Huey) talking pilot talk with the slick and Cobra pilots. Three teams worked today. We were next up.

One team had just returned and refueled, setting down behind us next to the airstrip at Tay Ninh. My new buddy Fliegler got out of the Kiowa to tie down the main rotor blade. I walked and asked how he liked flying in the Scouts. He grinned from ear to ear. Said he loved it. It sure beat riding around in the bush in an APC. I agreed.

Soon after, a Huey sat down behind us; the crew chief dropped off several cases of C-rations. Lunch had arrived. We went over to the Huey to see what was on the menu. My being an NCO and a little bit faster meant that I got to pick first from what was left in the crates. The grunts and other crews had beat us, so there wasn't a lot left. I didn't know what I was getting because the C-ration cases were always opened upside down. Whichever box you picked is what you got. That way no one could hog the good stuff.

Having made our pick, Fliegler and I went back to my aircraft where I pulled out my stove, simply an empty C-ration can with holes punched in the sides. You would put in a little JP-4 fuel from the drain plug, mix it with sand and you had a pretty decent stove for cooking turkey loaf, which is what I had that day. I also had my favorite desert, canned peaches.

When Fliegler saw the peaches, he offered to trade.

“Nope, no way.”

He told me tomorrow was his birthday, and it would make a great early birthday present. I told him that may be so, but I wasn't trading. I told him I would get the mess sergeant to bake him a cake.

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Soon after, my team went out to the AO and poked around for two hours. Not finding anything we returned to Quan Loi.

I had only known Norman Fliegler a week. I saw this guy get off a Huey carrying his duffle bag. He stood out because he looked like a kid wearing an Eleventh Armored Cav patch on his left shoulder. I asked if he was lost. He said no, that he'd transferred to A Troop, and asked me where the orderly room was. I told him it was time for chow and we could eat first.

After sitting down with our food, I grilled him on how he came to be at Quan Loi. His MOS was 11D and he'd arrived in country back in July, assigned to the Eleventh Armored Cav as a grunt on an APC. He said they were noisy, stank, and made big targets. Every time he looked up and saw a helicopter, he yearned to be a door gunner. Finally his CO granted his wish. Here he was, with his brown curly hair and big-assed grin when he was talking.

When reporting to the first sergeant he got his assignment, not as a door gunner but as an observer in the scout platoon. I also had Top assign him to my hooch. This guy really seemed alright. He was so new to the army, five months in 'Nam but less than a year in the army.

I got him squared away with his bunk, took him down to the arms room and supply room, then we went to the flight line where I explained what he would be doing as a scout. He was amazed that he would be sitting in the front seat right next to the pilot. He said it was even better than being a door gunner.

Norman was like a kid on Christmas. The only drawback to all this was he couldn't fly until he had passed a flight physical. This would take a few days, as it involved catching a flight to Ben Hoa where they gave it.

A week later, Norman was all set for his first mission in the AO. I was flying also that day. We had become pretty tight that week. Even though I was an NCO and he was a PFC, we

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had a lot in common. We'd both spent time in the bush and we both loved flying. I learned what his life was like growing up in a small town in Oregon. He was amazed that I actually had spent my summers cropping tobacco at my uncle's home in North Carolina and had dropped out of high school to join the army.

I helped him get everything ready for that first flight. We loaded the weapons; M-60 and minigun. We placed the grenades on a wire within easy reach. He was flying the first light mission with Captain Reynolds. I'd be in the air later with Mr. White. After our morning missions, we met up again at Tay Ninh where we rested and had lunch.

The next day was December 7, Pearl Harbor Day. I wasn't scheduled to fly so as soon as everyone had left the hooch, I went to the supply room and finagled a box of C-rations from the supply sergeant. Not just any box; I made sure I had a can of peaches and a canned pound cake. What could be better for your twentieth birthday? Oh yeah, right. But we won't go there.

In the hooch, I laid the cans on Norman's bunk. No card or candles. He'd know what they were for and who they were from.

Fliegler never returned to the hooch. He was killed in action that afternoon. He died a horrible death, suffering as he died. I heard that he was attempting to throw a white phosphorus grenade to mark the ground position for the Cobras; he was shot and dropped the grenade in his lap. The aircraft crashed and it was several days before Fliegler's pilot made it back to the unit to give us the particulars. He stated that Norman did absorb the blast with his body in an attempt to shield him. Personally, I really didn't care what the exact circumstances were.

Me? When I learned what had happened, I retrieved the two cans off his cot. I tossed them both out. I told myself, "It don't mean nothing." That's what I had learned. That's how you dealt with it. You really had to keep your emotions in check. You just had to carry on. We still

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had a job to do. Just like the other saying we learned to live by; “Don’t get carried away, then get carried away.”