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Blue Star 773

Jack Frazer

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Like the phoenix rising from its ashes, Bell UH-1D (64-13773) had many reincarnations. She was purchased by the Army in September 1965 and assigned to the Eighty-Second Aviation Battalion in Vietnam. There, she sustained significant anti-aircraft damage during a medical evacuation mission. After repair, she arrived at my unit, the Forty-Eighth Assault Helicopter Company, in early 1967. Our call sign was “Blue Star.” Her story continued as Blue Star 773, the best aircraft in my platoon.

On June 10, 1967, I was 773’s aircraft commander on a flight to insert Air Force security and ordinance demolition teams into a landing zone near an Air Force B-57 crash site. The B-57 went down northwest of Pleiku in disputed territory, the area where South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos come together. American ground forces had made little headway in winning the hearts and minds of its population. The B-57 had been surveilling the nearby Ho Chi Minh Trail.

My crew members were co-pilot Warrant Officer (WO-1) Charles Meadows, crew chief (E-4) A. Suarez, and door gunner (E-4) P. Lawrence. We had flown together a number of times.

Our mission: determine if the B-57 pilot and weapons/radar operator had survived, been taken prisoner, or if dead, recover their remains. We were also to recover several classified “black boxes” containing clandestine electronic surveillance equipment.

The demolition personnel were along to detonate any explosives discovered and to destroy the B-57, denying the enemy possible use of its component parts. Extra care had to be taken because it was common practice for North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers to booby-trap crashed aircraft to kill or injure those involved in a recovery operation.

Either the NVA or Vietcong had been to the crash site before our arrival, erecting anti-helicopter stakes throughout the only area large enough to land. Adding to the difficulty, low clouds, and trees surrounded the LZ. I had to make a downwind approach, the worst possible

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scenario. After one failed attempt, I was able to land precariously on some adjacent boulders, damaging 773's undercarriage.

My crew and I got out to remove the stakes so a follow-on copter could land in a more favorable spot. We determined there were no survivors of the downed B-57, only their remains. This was my first experience with an accident of that magnitude, and I will never forget the sights and smell. We found no ordinance, and I don't recall if the "black boxes" were recovered.

The crew chief and I inspected our helicopter to determine airworthiness. We had no visible damage to the flight controls or major systems, so I elected to fly her out with no one else on board as a safety precaution.

My pucker factor was extremely high. But my pride would not allow me to leave a second crashed aircraft next to the downed B-57. The thought of a stain on my piloting record played into that decision. I knew "pride goeth before a fall" and was one of the seven deadly sins, but youthful arrogance or ignorance made me willing to test those Biblical teachings.

Once 773 was back in the air, I had no problems. I offered a prayer of thanks and made a routine landing at battalion maintenance. The other crew members, our passengers, and the bodies of the B-57 came out with a back-up helicopter.

The next day I reviewed the damage in more detail. A grizzled maintenance sergeant complained: "You really did a number on this one, Lieutenant. We can't fix her here. She'll have to go to the Corpus Christi." His tone, accusatory and flat-out pissed, made me feel like I'd just run over his dog.

Crew chief Suarez was there, too. Where 773 went, he went. Her condition distressed him; crew chiefs tend to own their rides. Unlike the maintenance sergeant, he didn't say

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anything. He'd been with me at the LZ and knew the story. He shared my relief at not leaving her on the side of a remote Central Highlands mountain.

The USNS Corpus Christi Bay was a giant naval vessel anchored off Vung Tau. She used for depot level helicopter repair. Blue Star 773 did not return to the Forty-Eighth AHC. She was reassigned to the 335th AHC (Cowboys) and later, the 175th AHC (Outlaws), incurring additional combat damage with both companies. She became a regular patient on the Corpus Christi. I never saw her again.

I returned to the States in September of '67, assigned as a tactical flight instructor at the Army Primary Helicopter School at Ft. Wolters, Texas. The June 10 recovery mission consisted of a one-line entry in my flight log, and a sad, distant memory. In November those memories were revived. A certificate and citation awarding an Air Medal with "V" device for heroism was presented to me at the base's monthly awards ceremony, a nice military moment.

After completing my four-year service obligation, my life moved on. Blue Star 773 moved on, as well. After the war she was selected for display at the US Military Academy at West Point, a prestigious placement.

Thirty years later, I was contacted by Chuck Carlock, author of *Firebirds* (Summit Publishing Group, 1995), an account of his Vietnam helicopter pilot experiences with the Seventy-First Assault Helicopter Company. He was associated with a Texas Vietnam museum, and doing research on former Blue Star 773.

She was being moved from West Point to Garland, a Dallas suburb, for static display at that state's Vietnam Memorial site. His research had surfaced the after-action report from the June 1967 mission. It contained my name, the reason he contacted me. I sent him background information on the Forty-Eighth AHC, a Blue Star patch, and a copy of my award citation.

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In return, Chuck sent me a signed copy of his book and several photographs of the old girl in transit to the memorial. He also informed me that the Blue Star patch and my citation had been part of an exhibit seen by more than 10,000 people during Memorial Day 1997, an event featuring former President George H.W. Bush as a speaker.

Chuck inscribed my copy of his book: *To Jack. From one 'Nam pilot to another. At least we didn't lead a boring life.* The last sentence seems self-congratulatory now but was pretty true in 1967.

In the meantime, Blue Star 773 and I live on—one in a retirement community in Richmond, Virginia, the other at a war memorial in Texas. Aging artifacts, we'll always be connected by a long-ago time and place.



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