



## THE BATTLE OF EASTER SUNDAY

**M**IKE HERSHEY HAD LANDED A NEW JOB. His aircraft, Outlaw 19, had been retrofitted to be the 175th's smoke ship. Mike, always looking for a position that would make him quite singular, would be flying "Smokey," a near suicidal aviation idea that provided an obscuring smoke screen alongside the landing zone for the incoming flight. This supposedly provided visual protection for the lift coming just behind his aircraft, but it also made him an absolutely easy target for the VC to fire upon at the head of this smoke. The smoke ship would make a very fast pass at the treeward side of the LZ for the flight, and thus hide the crews from the VC in their positions. This would be done initially at considerable speed, with the pilot in command pushing down the "Chinese hat" atop the cyclic stick's handle to create the amount of smoke needed, slowing back to 60 knots as he did so. Bullets, however, would still come through the smoke at the formation, but the VC were firing at something they could only hear, not see. Seeing the tracers coming through like bronze darning needles was eerie, even surrealistic, and very discomfoting.

This smoke ship was used extensively throughout the month of March. Mike would zoom down the treeline on one side of the flight with theatrical effect. Sometimes the smoke would drift over the incoming formation, causing some confusion, and other times it would also disperse too quickly. I had my doubts about the effectiveness of this new concept, and I thought any aviator

performing this valorous feat quite brave. "Smokey" took a few hits during his working day.

The "smoke" was engine oil sprayed into the hot exhaust of the Huey's turbine. A generator pumped this oil into the ring surrounding the exhaust stack; the thin ring had small holes in it for squirting the oil into the hot flame. Electrical controls leading from the pilot's cyclic stick activated the generator's pulsing of the oil outside to the ring. The smoke came out with a big "whoosh" and created a white roostertail plume behind the speeding Huey as it raced alongside the LZ. Very showy and vivid, and an exceptionally easy target.

Mike soon was shot down in the vicinity of My Tho. Although the Mavericks closed in on him quickly, and protected him from any further onslaught by the VC until Meehan in Outlaw 6 rescued him, it was quite apparent that this was a dangerous mission assignment. The smoke ship obviously was destined to take a lot of hits.

The earliest Easter Sunday I have ever encountered was 26 March 1967. As the years go by, I await an Easter of the same date, but none has ever arrived as early as this historic date engraved in my mind. We were supposed to have a down day for this important holiday, so no flights were scheduled for the Vinh Long aviation companies. Therefore, it was with some surprise, and considerable irritation to hear the alarm siren go off in the second platoon hooch right over my bunk while we were bent on sleeping in.

"All Outlaws report to the flight line. This is a scramble! All flight crews move directly to the flight line! Move to your aircraft immediately!" said some strange, authoritative voice over the loudspeaker.

I didn't even know they could talk over this alert system. The siren signal was different than what I had heard before, too. Usually when this speaker sounded off, it was remarkably like the "low-RPM audio" beeping in the Huey when the liftoff had sucked the RPM down into a dangerous area. It was not fun to wake up thinking you were crashing inside the Huey, instead of just experi-

encing a mortar attack. I hurriedly dressed and headed out of the hooch toward Outlaw Operations beneath the tower. I was the first one there.

Having never been first in anything in my life before, I was slightly astonished at myself. The sergeant there, with other EM I always saw in our operations told me I was to proceed to Sa Dec and pick up the command group there. I said, "OK," and picked up Andy Keeney, who had just shown up at that moment, as my copilot. We would together ferry the Senior Advisor and his contingent to wherever they had to be put on the ground at the CP for whatever was unfolding.

The Sa Dec helipad was up over a river, and when you took off from the riverbank to the east, you were immediately immersed in your own rotor wash's spray droplets, splattered all over the windshield. A tricky moment, with the ground effect of the hover also being dispersed by the over-water takeoff. This 9th Division helipad was downtown, in an urban area, so during landing, we had to be on the watch for kids flying kites over the buildings. Not only could these kites get caught up in the rotor system as a hazard, but, even worse, the kite string could demobilize the aircraft, wrapping itself around the push-pull tubes around the mast and ceasing all control measures to the rotor blades. Definitely dangerous—and the kind of quirky thing to which helicopter pilots have to be attentive in their lives.

We loaded up the tall bird colonel, his top sergeant, and the rest of this senior advisor staff, and pulled pitch. Just as we cleared the embankment, with the water spraying up from the surface below, this crazy colonel handed me a note, hanging it right in front of my face, and I couldn't see a thing for the takeoff! I screamed, "Andy, take the controls! Finish the takeoff!" He did, and avoided losing too much RPM and crashing into the drink. For a brand new pilot, he did a very good job under the circumstances. Irritated, I turned to the large colonel standing over my seat, with his wrinkled note in his hand.

"Sir, if you wish to speak to me, you may hand your note to my crew chief!"

"Hush! Just hush!" said the tall, hawk-nosed colonel. "Just shush and take me to this place on this note! *Here!*"

I then looked at the small piece of paper he had given to me, and it was scribbled, "Tra On." I told Andy I knew where that was, and we proceeded to this little outpost on the north side of the Bassac River, just across from Can Tho. I couldn't help but remain upset about his moving forward on takeoff and nearly putting us down into the river.

Upon landing, the irate colonel started yelling red-faced, "This isn't the place! This isn't the place!" I quickly showed him the map, and he then informed me he wanted to go to Tra Vinh. He had mistakenly taken two towns' names and invented a third with the combination, and we had surely found it for him, showing once again it could be done. So we proceeded over to the Tra Vinh airfield. Then he wanted to be transported to Vung Liem and land in the marketplace there. We did that, and on short final, all hell broke loose in the rear of the ship. A tremendous thumping occurred as we settled into the marketplace area; I thought we were losing our transmission or something of that nature. As we made it to the ground, amid all the Vietnamese vendors and their stalls, I turned around to inspect what we had just survived. I couldn't detect anything right away and inquired what had happened to the ship. The first sergeant was looking back at me with a pained expression on his face: "It's nothing, sir, he does things like this *all the time!* Please forgive us." It turns out the bird colonel had been throwing a tantrum on short final, actually stomping his feet on the cabin floor of the Huey with all his leg strength. It had sounded like we were seriously coming apart. I was becoming increasingly appalled with the old gentleman's strangeness. The staff got out of the ship, looking very perplexed. This was my first contact with Colonel Robert Bringham, Senior Advisor to the 9th ARVN Division, who had a considerable reputation as a nut-case. He was indeed very frightening. I learned later than many senior pilots had filed complaint reports about flying with the old man.

We still did not know what had transpired to affect the emergency scramble, but were beginning to overhear that a town's out-

post had been hit hard during the night by an entire VC battalion anxious to secure the weaponry inside the mud fort. Whether or not this was the true story, it was typical of the VC to hit with overwhelming force, and to calculate that our having a down-day holiday meant our helicopters would not be able to react in time. It also was not unusual for us as a flight crew to let the day proceed onward and see if there was any truth to this unfolding rumor. After all, the senior advisor staff didn't know much more at this point, either. This was the way most of our life went in Vietnam anyway.

We were to be sent over to the temporary command post being set up at the Caumoy Bridge, where highway 7A from Vinh Long crossed the Mang Thit Canal. As I headed there, I heard over UHF that a helicopter was down with maintenance troubles somewhere alongside this road on the Vinh Long side of this waterway. I asked Paddy Radar for coordinates, and plotted them out on my plastic-covered map. Looking over the site from my cruising altitude, I saw nothing, and asked for the coordinates again, just to check out their correctness. At that point, the entire Outlaw lift passed underneath me at a lower altitude. I could recognize our ships by the two broad white stripes we displayed on our cabin tops, which thoroughly set us apart for identification purposes. I had never before been separated from the flight in formation, and we certainly looked pretty from this higher position. They were swinging around like a huge school of fish, apparently headed for Vinh Long, about seven miles away to the northwest. This was immediately after their second lift into the LZ area; I would learn later they had just moved troops from Tra Vinh. I decided to get off Paddy Radar and switch the radio to the Outlaw's UHF frequency to learn what was going on. I was curious.

I listened for a while, and heard that a *number* of ships were down—two to be exact. Since I was flying empty at that time, I volunteered my services. I was told to stand by. Then I heard gunfire in the back of the radio transmissions and realized there was a war going on. This wasn't a maintenance situation at all. The two ships

had been shot down in the LZ from which the Outlaw flight had earlier escaped. Now, the radio traffic seemed to indicate that Colonel Dempsey in his Delta 6 ship was planning to go into LZ Alpha as a single aircraft, and others were warning him against this rescue. This was not an uncommon situation for the old Oklahoma cowboy, who I'd heard had served with General George Patton in WWII. He often took a lot of hits doing these stunts, and ruined a lot of ships, besides getting his crew shot up occasionally. Pursuing these heroics, he could be a young gunship pilot's worst nightmare. Just recently, the 82nd Medical Evacuation unit had told Major Casper, now the Delta Aviation Battalions' operations officer, to let the "Dustoff" pilots do the aeromedical rescues and not risk losing the battalion commander.

He wasn't going to make it this time with his impulsiveness. Dwayne Williams, flying with Major Farley Jordan in Maverick Lead, saw Dempsey going one way as they flew down the edge of the treeline in the opposite direction. There was no way they could have covered him, even though the major gave out with the customary: "the Mavericks are on you." For some reason, Jordan leaned over and switched off all the little toggle switches on this young pilot's intercom panel so "Willie" could not hear what else Maverick Lead had further to say at this moment. I heard Delta 6 broadcast, "I'm going in after my men!" despite the fact that Meehan in Outlaw 6 was advising him against it. It was rather like listening to Custer's Last Stand, if that had been broadcast over aviation radios. The guns recommended stridently that he not go in, but he replied he was on final. The Mavericks tried to close in on him as he descended, firing rockets into the tree line to the south of the LZ, but it was all for naught. As Delta 6 landed, smoke was already pouring out of his tail.

"This is Delta 6. We're hit. We're down in the LZ!"

No further replies came to the Mavericks' desperate pleas, and I was beginning to feel glad that nobody had let me go in and help out those downed ships. It was obvious that something serious was going on here, beyond my previous presumption of a maintenance problem, so I decided to fly over and take a look-see. Several

plumes of ghastly black smoke climbed into the misty sky over the LZ east of the Mang Thit Canal. They looked out of place, like oil-field fires polluting the air, coming straight up with their awful smoke. Delta 6 was now down in the LZ, along with the medevac ship that had tried to rescue the downed crew of Outlaw 17, Jon Myhre's ship. Something had gone terribly wrong on the initial lift; I felt lucky to have missed out on it. I returned back to the CP at the Caumoy Bridge and landed, quite shaken.

The MACV advisors there, peering over maps and charts that every command post keeps on hand to oversee the battlefield's progress, asked me if I had seen what was going on. Did it look bad as it sounded? I replied that indeed it was, possibly even the worst I had seen in my tour so far. The white-haired lieutenant colonel addressing me looked at me intently, and said, "Really?" I didn't mean to sound like a leading authority on warfare, but nodded numbly. He pondered this response and went back to his maps. "We will have you go back up there and fly C & C for us, as soon as we get some people together here to do that with your ship." I indicated I understood, immediately figuring I was going to miss out on the war that day, being safely up at altitude watching this big show, while my buddies were going to get shot at and had already been shot at. I wondered in my mind what their story was.

When we were airborne again, I informed Outlaw 6 that I was a regimental Command and Control aircraft in the area, and I was told what altitude to maintain in order to avoid a mid-air collision with any of the other aircraft on station. O'Kane and Meehan were flying together, and I knew O'Kane would be immensely helpful to the new CO this day. Once these communications were done, this status gave me almost an amusement-park ride on the northerly side of the operation, as we watched incredible airstrikes go in below, courtesy of the U.S. Air Force. They pulverized the thick treeline from east to west with antipersonnel cluster bombs that made the ground look like huge, exploding Fourth of July sparklers. It didn't look as though anything or anyone could survive these bombings, but that was what was happening. As soon

as the air strikes would pass, the VC would be somehow firing again at the gun platoons. They seemed indestructible to the tonnage being dumped on them. We listened to all the astonished cries from the gunships as they continued to receive withering fire during their passes. While we orbited elliptically, the advisory team in the back seat looked outward and down to the ground. It was as if we were looking at the war from the top of some grandstands. I couldn't help continuously thinking that I was having the easiest time of it for a very terrifying day for everyone else concerned. I felt left out and slightly guilty; it doesn't get this soft, I figured.

This was Andy Keeney's first shoot-em-up, and the young warrant officer was showing his boyishness. As he watched the devastating show out his right front window, he started turning to me and quoted, "War is hell! You know what I mean? They say it is, and it really is. I didn't know it before. *War is hell!*"

I replied, "Yes, Andy, I guess you're right. War is hell, I get it." This exchange went on all day as the young man registered his first trauma at seeing combat from a helicopter. The first time is always the worst, and you don't know how you're going to take it. The movies haven't quite got it right yet; I could help them a lot with the special effects. . . .

Skyraiders from Binh Thuy airbase down near Can Tho pummeled the treeline, and then aircraft began showing up from the Tactical Air Control Center in Saigon, as requested. We watched F-4C Phantoms rake the treeline with their bombs, and F-100's, too. It was a real show, looking like some combat aircraft module hanging in a young boy's room on thin, nearly invisible strings. All their attacks were directed at this 600-yard-long treeline of tropical forest, which was at the most 300 yards thick fronting LZ Alpha, where the downed crews huddled amongst the ARVN. Gunships passing over their forms radioed that all the downed pilots and crew members looked OK; they had observed them hiding behind the rice paddy dikes crisscrossing the very muddy LZ. We could only hope they weren't hurt, just stoically waiting for rescue after their ships had gone up in flames.



After a while, the backseat let me know we could return to the CP, which I was glad to hear, because I had done all this so far on two hours of fuel and didn't have too much left. They nodded affirmatively to this information and we went and set down. There wasn't much to do there in the hot sun but wait, and that's what we did. It was weird to know that a war was going on only a few miles away. Looking up at that smoke still billowing skyward was eerie. We felt disconnected, knowing what those downed crews were going through. They were having a hard time of it, and watching a Skyraider suddenly climb up at that distance produced even more of a disenchanting feeling. It was like watching someone else's town burn up a safe several miles away, while you are hearing the news of it over the radio in your kitchen. The slight columns of smoke rising at such a distance belied the terrible things happening beneath it all.

Suddenly a Major Palenchar strode out of the CP, carrying a carbine and all dressed out in combat gear. We put away our C-rations that we had been eating for lunch and stood up. He said, "The advisors that originally were put into the LZ with the first lift are all shot up; some even dead. We're going in to replace those men!" I motioned for Johnson and Coleman, my door gunner, to untie the rotor blades from the tail boom and get ready to crank. Oh boy, I thought, we *would* see some action today after all. The Huey came to life and we lifted out with Palenchar's five or six men who would be replacements in that hot landing zone. After notifying Outlaw 6 of my mission while enroute, I descended from altitude to the LZ and came rapidly over the treelines in conflict, diving down in a speedy approach and rushing past scattered palms and banana trees from the east. I low-leveled the best I knew how, but I nearly hit one gunship coming from my right; it reared back and passed over me. I soared into the LZ and then right through the damn thing because the easterly wind was at my back with this approach angle! Standing the aircraft on its tail, I ridiculously sailed through the smoke being laid down and out into clear air again, well beyond my touchdown point. Still going at high

speed, I wound up in the open area beyond the LZ and just on the other side of the western treeline bordering the conflict. I couldn't let this foolishness happen any further on this downwind approach, so kicked left tail-rotor pedal while I flared the aircraft's nose up high and to the left. I had nearly killed us doing the same thing a few weeks earlier, and Johnson knew it. He didn't like seeing me try this maneuver again; I could feel that from the back seat. It was a dangerous way to kill lift; you could sink through and crash. However, this time it worked, and the aircraft ceased its high speed glide through the rice paddy area, and stopped. Palenchar had to get out in the clear, but he did have a safe treeline in between him and the LZ, so I hadn't totally put him in deadly peril. Maybe this placement even kept him alive. As we set down, his small squad of rescuers dispersed, and I took off again. I climbed back up to sweet altitude, and thought my job was over.

Little did I know that while I had been on the ground at the CP, Major Farley Jordan, with Meehan's permission, had planned a huge rescue operation for the downed crews. Old Flash himself had designed a daring plan that no self-respecting gunship platoon leader ever would have devised, but it worked this day. Jets could strafe their targets and zoom back into the sky after overflying the enemy, dropping their bomb loads or napalm directly on them, but this was *verboten* for helicopter gunships. They were constantly warned *never* to overfly their VC targets, no matter how much target fixation caught them up in their task. It was just too easy for ground troops to kill the slow-moving Hueys then, no matter how fast at 80 knots their pilots thought they were performing their gun runs. "You can't outfly a bullet," I was always telling my copilots.

Lt. Rex Latham, a little red-haired infantry advisor, had crawled up to the downed crews hiding behind the rice paddy dikes and assembled the wounded for rescue. He also got on the radio to the CP, informing his superior officer, Major Palenchar, that his immediate commanding officer in the LZ was dead and things were not looking good. The VC were very close to the helicopter crews, some in bunkers out in the open only 50 yards away,

or even closer. During the air strikes, the VC had turned their attention skyward and shot at the Air Force, then resumed their firing at the pinned-down ARVN in the LZ, who were not returning much fire themselves. Many were seriously wounded. Not much progress was being made in this dangerous onslaught, and there was a real fear that the downed crews might be captured themselves. Without the air cover, the VC might have overwhelmed the troops in the LZ at any moment. The South Vietnamese certainly were outnumbered, and probably short of ammo by this time. We would learn later that the VC actually left their bunkers and laid down in the mud, almost among the ARVN forces, while the jet strikes occurred. When over, they went back into their camouflaged bunkers and resumed their heavy automatic-weapons fire. It is tough for a helicopter gunship to put rockets *into* the door of mud-walled bunker, so the Viet Cong battalion had been able to continue their fight all day. They were doing well, and were very coordinated.

Major Meehan had no more time to waste. This was the only moment to rescue the downed crews. The rearming and refueling of the armed helicopters at Vinh Long airfield had gone so well, that the turnaround time had shortened from 20 minutes to around eight minutes before each ship could get back in the air again. Jordan thought up a plan of having all available guns link together in a long daisy chain and put suppressive fire *straight down* on the entrenched enemy for a rescue attempt. The entire team of gunships would be led by Chief Warrant Officer Jerry Daly, in "Viking Surprise"—their version of the smoke ship in Soc Trang. Daly had a .50-caliber in the backseat, sitting on a mattress for further armament in this converted D-model. Jerry Daly was already famous, and the most decorated helicopter pilot in the Delta, having received the Silver Star, three Distinguished Flying Crosses, two Bronze Stars, and the Purple Heart twice over. This incredibly brave man would lead the gallant daisy chain of 11 ships and lay down smoke to hide us as we rescuing helicopter pilots went into that vicious LZ. Daly figured how many passes he might be able to make, wagering his supply of oil for the smoke

generator. It took him approximately 32 seconds per leg, flying directly over the fortified enemy. He had the emotional reserve to discipline himself for measuring out this necessary oil for the repeated passes covering us on the ground as we made our medevac attempts. He also had an adverse wind, which would keep blowing away the smoke he had laid down over the treeline.

I only learned of all this preparation while I was climbing back up into the sky after dropping off Major Palenchar. There never had been a briefing on the ground to collect the rescue helicopter crews. Other than the Medevac ship, this was all spur-of-the-moment stuff—absolutely spontaneous. I let Outlaw 6 know that I was empty and very available to go back into that LZ again. Meehan replied, I'm sure without thinking, "Sure, sure. Go ahead, Outlaw 23!" He probably didn't even know where I had come from. Mike Hershey was now with Major Millward in "Road Runner," because he had been the first ship shot down that day with the initial Outlaws lift. He had limped back to the runway with Outlaw 19 and parked his smoke ship at the west end of the strip, where it said "08" on the pavement, because it could go no further. Walking down the runway along with his copilot, Ron Petty, he had bumped into Major Millward and decided to fly with him the rest of the day. The 150th maintenance ship was always orbiting nearby in the operational area, which was his job. That's why "Road Runner" was available for the rescue. (Mike has since told me that the first round he took in Outlaw 19 that day severed the electrical connection to the oil generator, so he couldn't even lay down smoke as he made the first pass down that dangerous treeline.)

The third ship was a real Dustoff from the 82nd Medevac, and the final ship is Major Juri Poometuu himself, flying with John Niemier—or more likely, *being flown* by the young warrant officer from Malibu, California. This Outlaw ship had just dropped off some troops in the nearby area, so he was also readily available for the mission. The four ships were assembled for this rescue mission on this very impromptu basis.

At 2,500 feet after making the decision, I turned around to my

crew and grimly said, "Everybody get a personal weapon on them. We may not come back up out of this one!" I figured this was a decent thing to do at the time; many people never thought of this necessity on the way in and then wound up on the ground defenseless. And, having been in there once already, this time I was not going to blow the approach! We were going to get this one done right if we were going in at all. Everybody said OK, and I commenced the dive.

We came in down through the same gap in the trees I had found the first time, and approached the burning ships in the LZ. I thought of something I had learned of previously, and that was to go up behind the blackened helicopters, and utilize them as a shield. "Let them take the fire!" my head was saying. Their burning smoke would hide my bird, and their damaged fuselages would absorb a lot of bullets intended for my ship. We came to a stop behind a derelict ship, maybe Delta 6's, and I looked out across the LZ. My eyes were searching for the downed crews and I was seeing none. What I was observing were the flattest human beings I have ever seen in my life. The remaining ARVN soldiers were hugging the mud with such agonized expressions on their terrified faces that their eyes were mere slits in their grimaces. They had pressed their bodies so deeply into the rice paddy mud that I immediately thought of the flatness of "Sail Cats." Those are the run-over animal bodies one sees on asphalted highways after too many vehicles have run over the same form. Here, you couldn't tell which Vietnamese were dead and which ones weren't—until they turned and faced your ship with that traumatized look.

Jerry Daly went by again and again in the D-model smoke ship accompanied by his copilot McDonald. All the available gunships in the Delta dutifully followed him around, pouring down all the munitions they had on board with point-blank desperation. It was incredible firepower, suppressing the VC a scant 150 feet away from us. Thus, 350 members of the VC's 306th regional main force "Tato Battalion" were not able to adequately prevent our rescue effort, even with their close presence. (We dubbed this outfit the "Potato Battalion," as a nickname that sounded like their

Vietnamese word "Tato.") Trembling with fear in my ship, I still was not seeing any Americans, however. Looking over my shoulder out the right door of the Huey, I saw the other three helicopters drift into the LZ, settling in for their landings. Suddenly, my aircraft started being loaded with Vietnamese wounded. The surviving soldiers were frantically heaving their corpses and critically injured soldiers on board, and I truly thought they would overload me before I could accomplish what I had come in to do. I could just visualize for a moment, 20 or more corpses sliding out one door, while they continued to load them feverishly from the other side of the Huey. I petulantly screamed over the intercom at my crew, "We're in here for Americans! We're in here for Americans; don't let them put any more wounded on board!"

At this moment, I saw Major Don Casper. He stood up just in front of Delta 6's smoldering helicopter to my left, and then casually started strolling through the mud toward my ship. I thought it incongruous that he was taking things so well when all around him were showing the greatest display of human fright and panic that I had ever seen. Then he stumbled. I quickly realized he was very hurt, and said to Johnson, "Goddamnit, Johnson, go get him!" This was more from an adrenaline response than anything thought out, but Johnson, God bless him, went out. He ran through the gunfire like a heroically motivated nurse, with his flight helmet mike cord snapping about behind him as he sprinted. My very next thought was that I had just given an order that could cost this man, now my friend, his life. I suppose as an officer you *think* that might possibly happen some day, but it is a heavy realization when you realize you just did that act.

Johnson got to Casper, stopped his high-speed pursuit, and embraced his wounded charge with all the dispatch of a medical orderly. They slowly moved towards my ship as if they were in some hospital rose garden, taking an invalid's walk. Casper later recalled his legs felt like they weighed several hundred pounds each, and the mud kept pulling at his boots. The gunships circled and laid down intense fire. Daly selflessly came down again and again with his repeated passes, constantly taking hits, while these

two looked like they were out of a old age rest home, with all the time in the world for a nice stroll. It was high contrast.

When Johnson got Casper to the ship, the young crew chief also plugged in his helmet cord, which I always instructed my crew to do so that we again had immediate comms with each other. I knew that Casper was now down at Battalion as Delta 3, so quickly inquired through Johnson where Delta 6 was. He must have been flying with Colonel Dempsey to be in the LZ at all. Casper snarled loudly back with his response over the sound of the gunfire: "He's dead, and you're gonna be dead, too, if you don't get outa here!" He obviously did not want me to be the fourth burning ship in the LZ, but I was even more taken aback with the news of Dempsey's death than my own present situation. Wow, did that information ever stun me and I really needed to tell somebody about this shocking development! Until now, we had thought *everybody* was OK—not even wounded, much less dead. So there I was in the LZ feeling like Lowell Thomas, and I had to broadcast this like a newscaster to the known world:

"THIS IS OUTLAW 23 IN THE LZ. I HAVE DELTA 6'S COPILOT ON BOARD. HE SAYS DELTA 6 IS DEAD. I SAY AGAIN DELTA 6 IS DEAD!"

Meehan's voice came back: "Roger, 23. Get the hell out of there, 23!"

We started to pick up, and I didn't know how many wounded and dead ARVN's we had back there, along with Casper. This was going to be a downwind takeoff severely overloaded, and I didn't know yet whether this weak old ship is going to make it. Airspeed would have to suffice over power because we sure didn't have any in this ship. I started nudging it along, and we were looking pretty good at an ever-faster, increasingly speedy two-foot hover. Then we started bleeding off RPM, and I screamed over at Andy, "Beep me up! Beep me up!!" He said, "I have, I have; you've got all you've got!" He had been helpfully pushing the governor button all along. I said, "Oh. . .," and put the pitch down a bit. We made it out, and I flared the aircraft up into the sky, taking advantage of every bit of that 120 knots of airspeed I had just built up. I took it

right to the redline of "Velocity to Never Exceed" before I pulled that stick back. I'd never been there before. We are climbing up to 2,500 feet when I heard Johnson yell over the intercom.

"He can't breathe! He can't breathe! Level off!!"

I did so at 1,500 feet and gave the controls to Andy. I turned around to look at Don Casper. He looked like a volunteer at a Boy Scout first aid demonstration during some Thursday night troop meeting. Coleman and Johnson had taken down all the first-aid packets that had been adorning the inside of the Huey's cabin up to that time, and they were putting them on Casper's body and right arm, and properly. The major had a hole in his sternum, a web-belt tourniquet around his right arm (two rounds have ripped through his bicep), a bullet under the skin behind his neck, and a few other wounds, too. Apparently Casper had a very high pain threshold, indeed. He sat there while all these bandages were being so amply applied to him, and looked up and said, "They got me, the bastards." And, I'm thinking to myself, "What are we, in some Hollywood movie set, here?" These quotes are too good! What a script!

Behind me and still down there below, the Dustoff ship picks up his downed medevac crew of Hook and Jordan, as well as ARVN and other helicopter crew members like Kidd, Rhodes, and Ross. The MACV scargent carried the wounded Outlaw 17 door gunner, Joe Watson, to this ship and desired to leave himself. He was that scared. Poometuu actually stepped out of his Outlaw aircraft into the mud to help his EM pick up the wounded Americans, including Watson and the half-buried Major Eberwine from the first Dustoff ship. Jim Martinson, Jon Myhre's copilot, also got on board this second platoon ship—his fourth helicopter of the day. Poometuu and the crew all worked together to get the wounded men free of the sucking mud which so held them. John Niemer held onto the controls while our wild anti-communist freedom-fighter acted so heroically. Hershey and Millward got the rest in "Road Runner." As the ships reached capacity, they all edged forward with their loaded takeoffs and finally cleared the rice paddy



dikes and dangerous mud, fighting to ascend skyward. They would all make it; we had pulled it off.

One last note. When Jerry Daly set down the "Viking Surprise" smoke ship at Vinh Long, after somehow stubbornly making it there, Major Millward immediately pronounced it "nonflyable" as it had one main rotor blade split by an enemy round, and the rest of the ship had approximately 73 bullet holes in it. I heard he had made 18 passes over the enemy positions, each time taking multiple hits that actually made the aircraft shudder with their impacts. The only crew member injured in this incredible bravery was the copilot, McDonald, who received the Purple Heart along with his Silver Star for taking a shrapnel fragment from his armor-plated seat into his cheek. Amazingly, the uncountable rounds delivered at "Viking Surprise" missed everyone else.

A few weeks later, the after-action report would show that slightly over 100,000 pounds of bombs were dropped on that nefarious tree line, including 28,000 pounds of napalm. (This latter item was wrong, however, because both Meehan and the folks stuck on the ground knew that things would have been resolved very quickly if that treeline had been stroked with napalm. The VC would have been fried in their positions, and the day would have gone much differently. Somehow, these distortions result in any skirmish of war and become factual matter over time.) Over 100 aircraft took part, flying nearly 1,200 sorties. They fired 360,000 rounds of 7.62 mm ammunition. Besides the three helicopters destroyed in the landing zone, Hershey's ship and 12 others suffered reparable damage. Scattered among the bomb craters and grotesquely battered trees were 142 Viet Cong bodies. Twelve Americans were wounded in the battle; four more were killed. ARVN losses were 42 killed and 69 wounded.