

DUSTOFF - Lloyd Knight

Dustoff is the acronym for the motto of the US Army Medical Corps: 'Dedicated Unhesitating Service To Our Fighting Forces'. The term was used to describe a helicopter operation that provided the MedEvac of wounded troops. In 1969, the **US Army 45th Medical Company** normally flew these missions in support of the RAR. They had units based at Long Binh and Vung Tau, as well as Nui Dat. They did a magnificent job. Sometimes they were busy elsewhere so we, No 9 Sqn crews had to look after our own.

It had been a very long day. Dusk descended as we made our final approach to the helicopter landing area at the Australian Army Base at Nui Dat. We completed our approach to a hover and air taxied over to the fuelling area to gas up, preparatory to returning to our main base at Vung Tau, about a twenty-minute flight to the south. A delay on our final mission for the day had made us late, so all of the other squadron aircraft had returned to base.

For tactical expediency, helicopters were usually refuelled with engines running. This was potentially dangerous because of fire risk. The pilots' seatbelts were undone, and seat armour retracted to allow rapid escape in the event of a mishap. The crewman conducted the fuelling operation with the door gunner manning the fire extinguisher.

I was riding left seat. This is normally the co-pilot's position in the Huey. Because I was the Squadron Training Officer, I often occupied this seat while the young pilot I was checking, flew from the command, right hand seat. In this case the training officer takes on the co-pilot duties.

As the crewman was completing the fuelling operation, a call came through from the Command and Control Centre, to which I replied, 'Albatross zero two, go ahead'.

The controller responded, 'A platoon has come under heavy fire, twenty minutes from your position. One soldier critically injured. Require immediate Dustoff. Both Medical Core units are presently deployed and cannot respond. Are you able to accept this task?'

I answered, 'Albatross zero two, affirmative, go ahead with location and details'.

The other pilot called to the crewman, 'Dustoff!' and told the door gunner to grab the spare stokes litter. This is a seven-foot long stainless-steel stretcher fitted with straps, and used to lift casualties, or cargo.

One of these units was located near the fuelling plant for just such an exigency. The crewmen had also received rudimentary first-aid training, to enable them to cope with this type of mission.

I copied down the details, which were in code: the location grid reference, call

sign and radio channel, and the nature of injuries. The wounded digger had four gunshot wounds to the thorax. Because of the seriousness of his injuries, we were also instructed to take the casualty direct to the military hospital in Saigon.

I advised the crewman and door gunner to wear their bulletproof plates under their flak jackets because we could come under attack. These curved shields, made of Kevlar, were part of the bulletproof vest issued to all crew. The crewman and gunner often placed them under their seats, to protect their important parts from rounds fired from directly below the aircraft.

The other pilot and I exchanged seats and he took over the co-pilot duties.

With all checks completed, we took off into the now black night, and headed west at an altitude of around two thousand feet, to our task site. The co-pilot established communications with the platoon. The officer in charge advised us that the potentially hot area was several hundred metres to their south. They were fairly sure that the enemy had either succumbed to the return fire, or had quit the vicinity. He had called in the gunnies (gun-ships) in case they went hot again.

Because they were located in tall timber, he warned that we would need to perform a hundred-foot winch lift. The casualty wasn't really stable. He had lost a lot of blood, and there was nothing more they could do for him, except get him to hospital. He was already strapped into a fold-up stretcher and ready to be lifted. I advised that we would terminate our approach to a hover in the treetops using the landing light.

The Huey is equipped with two powerful, controllable lights. The landing light, under the belly, can be rotated from vertically down to straight ahead. The searchlight is located under the nose and can be swivelled in all directions. Either pilot can control the lights, and the crewman/winch operator, on the right side of the aircraft, can switch the landing light on and off.

We would use no other lights so as to make the aircraft as inconspicuous as possible.

The patrol had floated a balloon light, which was attached to a string, up through the trees to mark their position. This is a helium-filled, red balloon with a small battery powered light inside. They also flashed a Morse code letter with a shielded torch, which we read back to confirm their identification. This was an added security measure, used in case the enemy also sent up a balloon to attract the helicopter crew to the wrong location, and thereby become a target. They used to try that trick in the daytime with thrown smoke.

We made our approach to the balloon, heading west to place the left-hand gunner facing the previously hot area. I turned the landing light on at the last minute and told the crewman, 'You have the Con'.

During winching (hoist) operations, the pilot hands over the directing of the aircraft's position to the crewman/winch operator. He then coaches the pilot into

the final position, something similar to the old WW2 bomb-aimer. He keeps the pilot informed about the progress of the deployment of the winching cable, the hook-up, and the instruction to 'Take the weight'. The pilot applies power to ensure that the helicopter is capable of lifting the extra load. Then the crewman reels up the patient, keeping the crew informed of the progress of the operation. He also keeps a check on the tail rotor's clearance from obstacles. It's a highly responsible job.

The crewman gave me the last few corrections to our position, to place the aircraft directly over the casualty. I descended until the skids were at treetop level, having ensured that the tail rotor was in a clear area. The crewman started the cable on its way to the wounded man below.

When the hook was about half way down, all hell broke loose to our left. Heavy fire with tracer rounds came up through the trees and, our door gunner started pounding away with his M60 machine gun. The Aussie troops below also returned heavy fire and another fight was on.

The man on the ground yelled over the radio, 'Get that chopper out of there!' I had already switched off the light and was applying power, climbing vertically so that the hook wouldn't snag in the trees. The co-pilot set maximum transient power and we climbed at about four thousand feet per minute. The winch operator was madly reeling in the cable, and the gunner continued letting them have it to our left.

As we went through a one-hundred-foot increase in altitude, I nosed over and high-tailed it out of there, into the safety of the big black sky. As we climbed rapidly to the west, two gunnies rolled into an attack on a reciprocal course out to our left. We turned right, to the east, and set up an orbit at a couple of thousand feet and three kilometres from the firefight.

After about twenty minutes we advised the Platoon Leader that we would need to refuel if we were going to take the casualty to Saigon. He replied that they would need at least half an hour to subdue this new threat so we scurried back to Nui Dat. We flew at maximum cruise speed, landed and filled the tanks. We hadn't been called back in yet, so we returned at our best endurance speed to conserve fuel.

Arriving back on station after an absence of forty minutes, we could see that the fight was still going on. It was really hectic down there with heavy machine gun fire, grenades and rockets. The gun-ships were giving their best, making pass after pass against the heavy resistance.

We commenced orbiting again and waited to be called in to make another attempt.

During this period of relative respite, the crew started to talk on the intercom. There was an aura of virtual light heartedness that was probably a self-protective reaction, due to various levels of anticipation as to what we could expect next. We discussed the pros and cons of risking being shot down.

I have never felt 'scared' during combat operations. That seems to come later when you are safe and have time to ponder the 'what ifs'. However, I do recall vividly that throughout that half hour wait, I certainly felt apprehensive about returning to such a potentially dangerous situation.

Decisions, decisions! It would not be smart to place the aircraft and crew, and the troops underneath, in a position where we could all be wiped out by being shot down. On the other hand, our duty was to rescue the person down there, who was obviously in a life-threatening state.

On that occasion, I didn't have to make the decision.

After about another twenty minutes, the shooting had ceased, and the gunnies said they were returning to base. The bloke on the radio called us saying, 'Thanks for your help Dustoff, the battle's over, come back in the morning.' The young door gunner, who had just experienced his first fire-fight said, 'Thank Goodness, he must be alright now.' There was a moment's silence before the older, experienced crewman said, 'Yeah, I suppose so. We don't recover body bags at night.' The young man sobbed into his microphone, 'I didn't know that's what he meant - but I didn't want to go back down there again.'

Over the years I have often wondered what a difference a few more minutes would have made. If we'd managed to get him on the hook before they started shooting; maybe we could have towered out and saved him.

Then I think about the other possible outcomes. He may have been snagged in the trees and brought us all down. He may have been shot again! And of course, with such severe injuries his chances of surviving that kind of ordeal would have been extremely slim.

Lloyd Knight