

“Pop-a-Smoke - We’re Coming!”

Marine Chopper Pilot’s transmission
to the “Grunts” on the ground

by Joe Del Campo

June 1968 marked the beginning of a thirteen-month tour for Lieutenant Glenn Warren, a USMC CH-46D Helicopter Pilot, in Quang Tri Province, the most northern base in South Vietnam. To say the least, his missions there would be filled with lasting memories - good and bad - as well as just plain “scary.”

Marine Corps Helicopter pilots, assigned in the Quang Tri Province did day-to-day resupply missions, some medevac and/or insertion of recon troops in



Glenn Warren at his home in Vero Beach

“secured” and “unsecured areas.” Unsecured meant enemy troops in the area. Ninety percent of the missions were re-supply, but it was that ten percent which could bite you on your butt, or worse.

The CH-46D Sea Knight helicopter was a twin-engine, turbine driven beast. It could fly 140 mph with a five-man crew, which included two 50 caliber machine gun door

gunners. It also had a large circular opening in the floor called the “hellhole.” About the size of a round coffee-table, the opening had two purposes: first, for positioning of a crossbar to which a dangling pallet or cargo net could be attached for resupply missions; and second, for “hoisting” up wounded Marines.

Hoisting missions were scary, especially at night, and came with the usual “pucker” factor. Why? You had to hover. Warren recalls, “It could take a minute and a half, or more, to get one wounded Marine into the aircraft, times that by, let’s say, eight Marines, that’s a long fourteen minutes.” Think about it. You’re in a big green machine hovering at fifty feet altitude going “whop, whop, whop;” and if the enemy is there, he’ll be shooting at you.

Newly arriving pilots were assigned as a co-pilots. The main reason: If the situation was going to be “hairy,” a seasoned pilot was not going to put his life in the hands of a “new guy.” He’d have to earn that respect, or so that’s how it’s supposed to go.

On October 6, 1968, Warren was a co-pilot on a medical evacuation mission in an area believed to be secured. It wasn’t! Immediately upon landing, they came under intense, hostile fire - which included 50 caliber machine gun rounds and other small arms fire - coming from all directions. “One of the rounds

shattered the cockpit glass, blinding the pilot, who screamed out in pain, ‘I can’t see, get us out of here.’ While still under heavy fire, I took over the controls, and flew the chopper back to the base” says Warren.

After arriving at the base, Warren, not knowing he also had been wounded, was preparing to pilot a medevac chopper. The medic saw him and said, “You’re not going anywhere. You’re wounded,” at which point Warren looked down and saw that his flight suit was covered in blood. Apparently, one of the rounds struck the armor plate to the left of his head, shattering into multiple fragments, which “lasered,” the left side of his face. “I was so busy flying the chopper, and my adrenaline pumping so much, I didn’t know I was hit. After that, each day before a mission, I thought, ‘I’m probably not going to leave this country alive, but it it’s not going to be today, maybe it’ll be tomorrow.’” Warren received the Air Medal with a Gold Star for his heroic actions.

A month after that incident, Warren was again flying as a co-pilot when, at 3000 feet, the chopper began shaking so violently he couldn’t read the instruments. What he and the pilot didn’t know - a bullet had severed the oil reservoir in one of the blades causing it to overheat and self-destruct.

“All the way down to the deck, the pilot had the controls. I just sat there, with nothing to do, watching our troops scatter on the ground, my life in his hands, and I was scared to death. Immediately after landing, the stricken blade drooped to the ground and we estimated we had less than ten seconds more flying time before the chopper would have crashed and burned.”

On March 27, 1969, Warren flew one of his more “hairy” missions. It involved extracting ten wounded Marines off a mountainside position which was under heavy hostile fire and about to be overrun by the North Vietnamese. He radioed the unit to “pop smoke” (utilizing a smoke grenade to indicate the unit’s position and wind direction.) “From the get-go, we were receiving continuous fire from small arms and mortars while hovering at sixty feet. It took fifteen minutes to get the job done. Maintaining a hover and hoisting ten Marines while under fire was incredibly difficult and demanding.” For his skills as a pilot and for his bravery under intensive enemy fire, Warren received the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC.)

On May 25, 1969, while on a mission requiring an emergency extraction of a recon team, because of the terrain, Warren had to land with his side exposed to hostile fire. Normally, the co-pilot would be exposed



Medals awarded to Glenn Warren during his service in Vietnam

- the belief being, if the aircraft took enemy fire and the copilot was wounded, the more experienced command pilot could quickly recover and fly out. The Marines began running toward the rear of the chopper, one of them being severely wounded in the process. At the same time, the North Vietnamese soldiers were charging the right side of the aircraft. “I had never fired my sidearm until then, but our 50 caliber machine gun had jammed. I un-holstered my weapon, leaned out the cockpit window, shooting at the attackers. It was all happening so fast. The gunner cleared the 50 cal, killing four of the enemy as we took off with all the Marines onboard.” For his courage and bold initiative, Warren received his second DFC.

There were other incidents, including landing a chopper while the whole rear of the aircraft was in flames after being hit by enemy fire; however not all danger involved flying. The North Vietnamese would normally attack US bases on our holidays. So, on July 4, 1969, prior to being transferred back to the States, thinking he would be safe, Warren traveled to Da Nang. While watching *The Graduate* on a sheet hanging outside the officers’ club, the North Vietnamese began shelling the area. “I dove into a large, unused barbecue pit, and was thankfully unharmed. I later found out, my base in Quang Tri Province, was not shelled. Ironic isn’t it.”

Warren was transferred to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, as a flight instructor, and mustered out of the Marine Corps in 1971. He got into politics, starting out as a County legislator in Fishkill, New York, and later as a state assemblyman for New York from 1976 until 1994 when Governor Pataki, appointed him as Director of Worker’s Compensation for New York State. He retired from that position in 2007. In the off-season, he and his wife “Cricket,” reside in Kinderhook, New York, and in-season they stay in their home in Vero Beach, Florida.

Joe Del Campo is President of Excalibur Group, Inc., Investigations, Business Intelligence, Protective Services. Visit www.excaliburgroup.org.



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