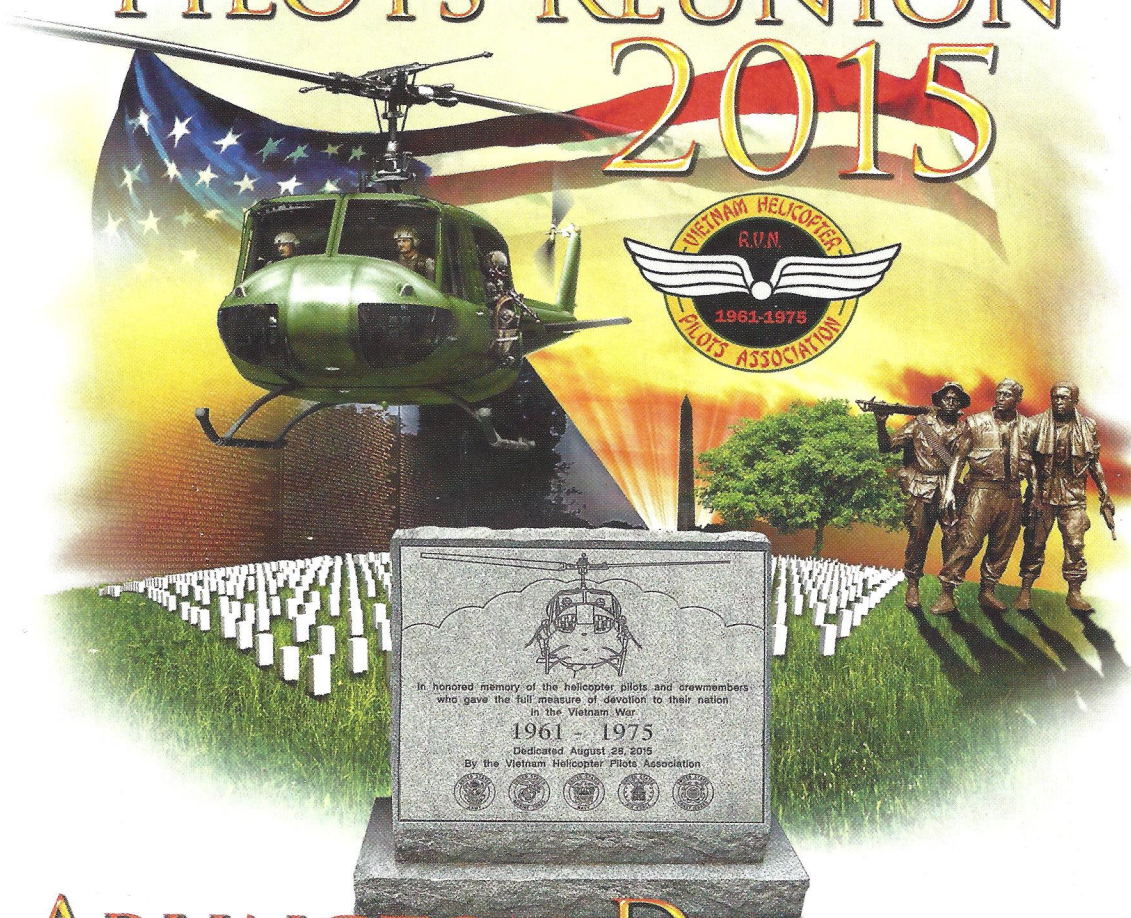




# The VHPA AVIATOR

The Newsletter of The Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association

## VIETNAM HELICOPTER PILOTS REUNION 2015



## ARLINGTON DEDICATION

W A S H I N G T O N D C

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# Thanks for the Ride

by Dany Pennington

**LZ English  
Bong Son, Viet Nam  
November 1968**

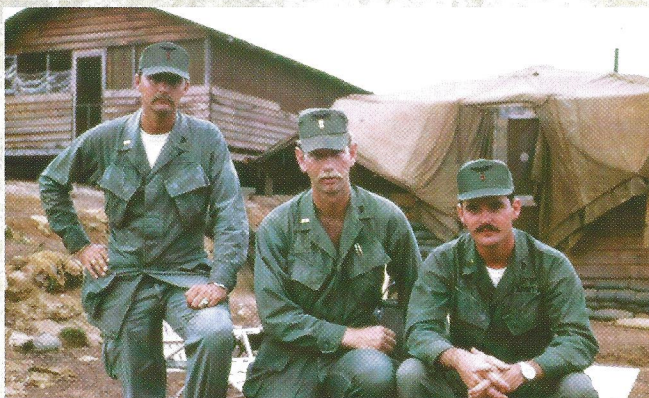
The typhoon was somewhere in the South China Sea moving closer. The rain started during the night and was coming in waves now that it was morning. Today's flying was cancelled due to the low ceiling and visibility.

LZ English was eerily quiet. The 61st Assault Helicopter Company, which normally created most of the noise and commotion here, was equally still. Nothing moved on the 'Crap Table' (the large helicopter parking area dotted with revetments). Most of the pilots were lounging around in their tents. Meanwhile, the crew chiefs and gunners were securing their helicopters for the expected high winds and torrential rains.

At the same time, some 20 miles to the north on the western slopes of the An Lo Valley, The North Vietnamese Regulars (NVA) were using tracker dogs to pursue Team F, 74th Infantry Detachment, a Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (or LRRP), of the 173rd Airborne Brigade. The team had been out several days in search of three enemy base camps reported to be in that area. They had killed the NVA point man leading the platoon size unit and began a hasty retreat away from the area. Since their location was known, their security was compromised. They decided to call for a helicopter extraction.

After Team F, a six-man reconnaissance unit, made contact with the NVA they moved away from that area. Their many attempts to make radio contact with their TOC (Tactical Operations Center) were unsuccessful. Knowing the dogs would track them down and that they would be overrun and ultimately killed, they tried the radio frequencies of several adjoining units. Following several long minutes at a dead run through the dense jungle and steep terrain, they made radio contact with the Americal Division, located about 50 miles north of them. The LRRPs situation was relayed to the 61st Operations, the helicopter unit that supported the Brigade's special operations. It then became their mission to extract the team.

A typical LRRP Team extraction consists of a four-helicopter element; Two UH-1H Huey aircraft, known as slicks, and two



(L to R): Dany Pennington, Sam Kyle and Michael O'Connor. Taken on the day we all were promoted to CW2



The First Platoon of the 61st AHC waiting to insert ARVN troops

UH-1C armed helicopter gunships. One slick is used as the Command and Control (C&C) flying overhead directing the mission while the other slick is used to fly into the Landing Zone (LZ) to extract the LRRPs. The gunships are used to cover the extraction ship as it approaches, lands, and departs from the LZ.

Inside the 61st Operations bunker at LZ English the operations officer, Capt. Easterwood, assembled two crews from the first platoon and two crews from the gun platoon. The pilots from the first platoon were on standby for any immediate emergency missions including LRRP extractions that might arise. They were also the same pilots that had inserted this LRRP team several days ago. Their leader was Warrant Officer Sam Kyle.

Minutes later the LRRP detachment commander,

a first lieutenant, accompanied by the unit's first sergeant carrying a PRC-25 FM radio, arrived in the helicopter company's operations bunker. The lieutenant said: "OK boys let's go get my team out".

"We've got a problem here, lieutenant. We are grounded because of this weather" was the response from the Ops officer, Capt. Easterwood. The lieutenant said: "That is not gon'na get it. We got men out there in Indian Country being tracked by god-damn dogs. There's an entire NVA platoon chasing my LRRP team -and we've gotta go out there and pull them out. Do you understand that, Captain?" Military decorum clearly ignored by the lieutenant due to his concern for the survival of his men.

"I understand your situation lieutenant but you have to realize that we have rules and we can't risk the lives of four helicopter crews to fly in this kind of weather" was his reply, almost apologetically.

Captain Easterwood, sensing the building tension, directed an ops specialist to: "Go get the C.O."

The LRRP lieutenant nodded his head slightly toward WO Sam Kyle in recognition from so many previous LRRP insertions and extractions. The unsettling calm and quiet of the tension-filled room was suddenly shattered as Major Wade came busting



Two-ship resupply mission near LZ Uplift, hopefully the target isn't below the low-lying clouds and fog.

into this damp, cramped space with a loud and overbearing presence.

"What seems to be the problem here?" Major Wade blurted to no one in particular. Captain Easterwood briefed the major on the LRRP situation and gave him an update on the weather. As soon as that was finished the major looked up and turned toward the group. Sam Kyle spoke. "Sir, I would like to go get them out." "Sam, you know I can't order you or anyone else to go out there in this kind of weather." "I know, sir, but I would really like to give it a try. I'm the one that put them out there." The major then turned toward the other slick platoon pilot and asked, "What do you think Dan?" He replied: "I'm with Sam, sir." The major then turned to the gun team lead. Before he even asked the question the team lead said: "If the slicks want to try it, we'll cover'em." "You know I can't order you to do this. This is strictly a volunteer mission." A smug little smile appeared on the major's face as he said: "if you idiots want to

go check the weather I'm not going to stop you". Before the sentence was completed, Sam grabbed his helmet and headed for the door. The rest of the group followed him out.

While walking toward the helicopters, the pilots discussed the details of the mission. They decide that Dan would fly the C&C ship, often referred to as the "high bird", and Sam would be the extraction ship. The LRRP lieutenant and first sergeant loaded their guns, ammo and radio on the C&C ship. Across the Crap Table, the rotor blades on the light fire team of gun ships slowly started to turn.

After cranking up and making a radio check, the two slicks hovered out followed a short distance back by the two gun ships. Easing forward the aircraft shuttered as an invisible wind-shield wiper of air from the rotor blades shook and vibrated the water droplets from the windshield. Four minutes after leaving operations, all four ships were airborne from LZ English.

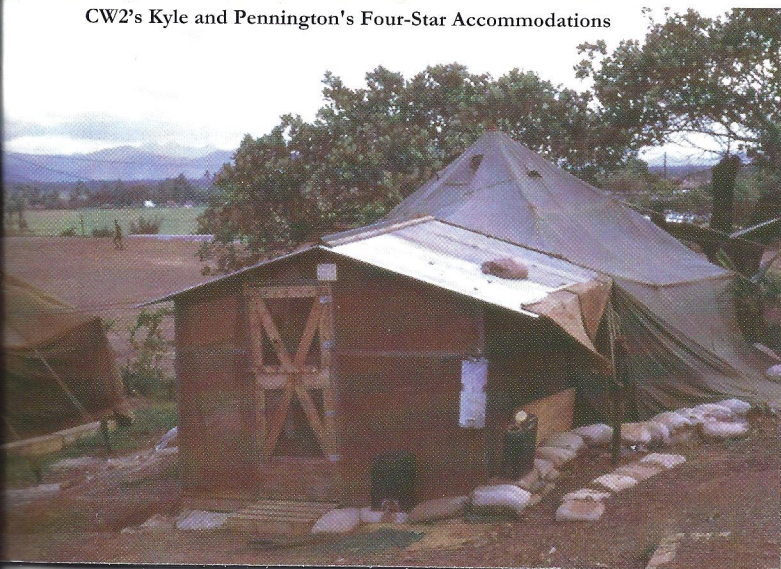
The rain had temporarily stopped and the flight visibility was about three miles. The clouds would only allow the departing helicopters to reach an altitude of 500 feet. The ground would disappear at any altitude above that.

Clouds obscured the ridges west of English, preventing a direct route to the LRRP's location. The flight of four would need to travel south to enter the mouth of the An Lo Valley before proceeding northward along the river. As the four helicopters followed the river, the weather continued to deteriorate. There was a light misty rain. As the terrain of the valley floor went higher, the clouds kept lowering.

Midway between the entrance to the valley and the LRRP team's location the lieutenant in the C&C ship finally heard from his team leader:

*Continued on page 50*

CW2's Kyle and Pennington's Four-Star Accommodations



*Thanks For The Ride, continued from page 7*

"Overlord Delta, Wisdom Crown, hear you loud and clear. What's the status of our extraction, over," the team leader said his voice half yelling half gasping over the radio. His voice contained the urgent sounds of expectancy and hope. "Wisdom Crown what is your situation, over" the lieutenant in the C&C helicopter asked.

The LRRP team was on a dead run. They were trying to put some distance between themselves and the pursuing NVA. The jungle was dense and the going was painfully slow. The only good thing in their favor was that they were traveling downhill.

As the four helicopters travelled further north in the river valley the cloud base continued to lower. The forward visibility made worse by a thick misty swirling fog that was slowly encasing the helicopters.

"Lucky Star lead, Starblazer One Five" came the call from the gunship leader to the leader of the two slick helicopters.

"Starblazer One Five go ahead.

"This cloud base is too low for us to give you any gun cover for your extraction. What are your intentions?"

Sam keyed the mic and said, "We are in radio contact with the LRRP team now and we are going ahead with the extraction, over."

The Starblazer fire team leader replied, "Lead, we don't have enough altitude or forward visibility to cover you. We are turning around and RTB (returning to base). Sorry Sam, you are on your own."

"Roger One Five, understood", was the only reply.

The situation went from bad to worse. The weather was making flight on the valley floor nearly impossible. The extraction site was in the obscured ridges above, there was a LRRP team in enemy contact with shots fired and now the gunships had gone home. It was expressly forbidden to make a hot extraction, such as this one, without gunship support. The prudent decision for the remaining helicopters would be to turn around and RTB with the gunships. That, however, IS NOT what they did. The mission continued.

When asked, after the mission, why he continued when it was obvious that the mission should have been aborted, WO Kyle simply said, "If I were out there on the ground I wouldn't want the helicopters to leave me, so I didn't leave them."

The forward progress up the valley floor, however, did not continue. The two helicopters, out of necessity, had formed into a

trail formation and were flying only 100 feet apart. Even at that distance it was difficult to see the aircraft ahead. Both helicopters slowed to only a fast hover when suddenly the FM radio erupted.

"Overlord Delta, Wisdom Crown, we hear the helicopters, over."

"Wisdom Crown, what is your position, over?"

"We left our last RP 10 minutes ago moving east toward the blue line. Estimated platoon size NVA unit is pursuing us. They're tracking us with dogs, sir."

"Wisdom Crown, can you prepare an LZ (landing zone) for extraction? Extraction birds are on station."

"Negative, Overlord Delta, we are on the move, over."

As the LRRP lieutenant and sergeant discussed how best to proceed with the mission, another radio call from Wisdom Crown interrupted them. "The helicopters are louder now. They sound below us. We are in fog and can see nothing, over." Lucky Lead, sensing that time was running out and with very few options available, decided to split the helicopters up - sending the empty extraction ship after the LRRP team while the C&C ship landed on sand bar in the middle of the An Lo River. The weather conditions would not allow the C&C ship to orbit over the LZ as is the usual practice. In fact, continued flight by the C&C ship anywhere in the valley was too risky.

Team Foxtrot's situation worsened. The NVA troops had caught up to the team and a firefight had begun. The LRRPs set up a defensive perimeter to return the enemy's fire while constantly pulling back from the NVA toward the valley in pairs. This action continues until the team reaches a bluff over the valley. It is a rock ledge with a 100 feet shear drop. On a clear day it would offer a spectacular view of the An Lo Valley. Today it is shrouded in dense fog. Further retreat is no longer possible. This is where LRRP Team Foxtrot will make their stand until they are either overrun or extracted.

Sam Kyle, piloting the extraction ship, heard the radio chatter of the LRRP team and decided that he must make an attempt to locate them and pluck them off the ridge. Time is not on their side. Their location is 500 feet above the valley floor. The cloud height being a mere 100 feet above the valley presents the pilot with only one option. Sam turns his helicopter sideways to the ridge and, while looking out the left side window, starts hovering up the side of the hill. With the crew chief helping keep the tail rotor clear of rocks and trees, the helicopter disappears into the clouds climbing slowly up the hillside.



LZ English - 61st AHC's base in 1968

The LRRP team announces that the sound of the helicopter is getting closer. To maintain sight of the trees covering the hill Sam maneuvers the helicopter as close as possible to the trees and rocks. Normally the sound of the main rotor blades striking tree limbs is unwelcomed... but in this case it is somewhat reassuring.

"Lucky Star, I hear you. You are below us and to our south. Move farther north, over."

Sam starts the helicopter moving forward while still climbing upward slowly. After several minutes, which seemed like hours to all those involved, the radio crackled, "I hear you louder now. You are directly below us. Please hurry. We can't hold on much longer. Ammo almost depleted, over." The sound of small arms fire can be heard in the background.

"I see you. I see you. You are about 50 feet below us. You need to move forward 100 feet. We are popping smoke, over."

Looking upward through the rotor blades Sam sees purple smoke mixed with the fog.

"Wisdom Crown, I have your smoke insight."

He slowly moves upward and forward until he can place the left landing skid against the rock ledge. The rotor blades clicking away as they hit the trees above while the remainder of the helicopter



Returning from CA for 173rd Airborne

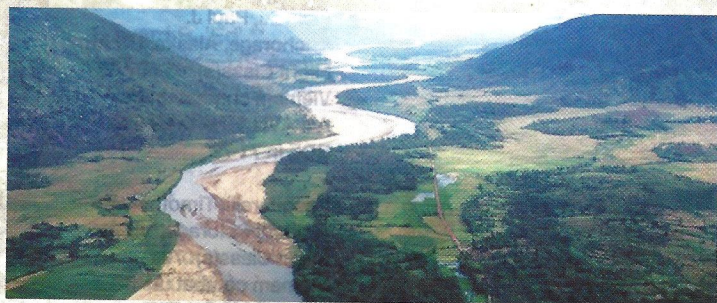
dangles over the foggy valley. Beads of sweat travel down the pilot's nose and drip into his lap. With the helicopter perched delicately on the rocky ledge, the LRRPs move two at a time toward the helicopter, step on the skid, and jump into the cargo bay. Once the last LRRP is in sight, the rest of the team, along with the crew chief start firing their weapons at the advancing NVA. Upon hearing the helicopter the NVA charge the LRRP teams position. Knowing that this would happen the LRRPs earlier placed their remaining Claymore mines with trip wires around the LZ. The advancing NVA tripping the Claymores created sufficient chaos and distraction to allow the team to move toward the helicopter and escape.

Amid the exploding Claymores and small arms fire, Sam moved away from the edge and descended into the fog. All six LRRP team members were aboard were, safe and sound.

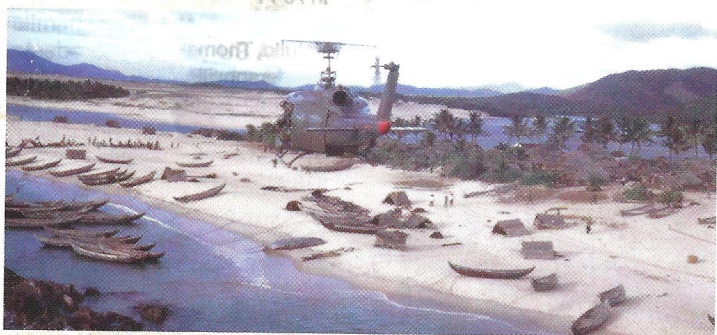
The helicopter makes its approach to the Crap Table at LZ English. It hovers into the revetment and lands. As the LRRPs are gathering their gear and leaving the helicopter, the team leader walks up to the open door where WO Kyle is sitting, taps him on the shoulder and says, "Thanks for the ride, sir."

No greater thanks were ever expected or accepted.

**Dany Pennington**  
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The infamous An Lo Valley



Inserting troops in fishing village



Inserting 173rd troops near LZ Pony

*This is a non-fiction piece about an event that occurred in the An Lo Valley in November 1968. The main character, WO Sam Kyle, flight school class 67-19 and 67-21. He served with the 61st Assault Helicopter Company in Viet Nam from January 1968 to January 1969. Upon returning from Viet Nam he served as an SIP in Standards Division at Ft. Rucker in Instrument MOI and RWQC Courses. After release from active duty in 1970 he served in the Tennessee National Guard as a full time technician IP. He was killed July 2, 1984 when his OH-6 hit a wire in remote Tennessee while searching for escaped convicts.*

*The author Dany Pennington attended flight school class 67-19 and 67-21. He served with the 61st Assault Helicopter Company in Viet Nam from January 1968 to January 1969. He is a freelance copywriter and lives with his wife of 45 years in Monticello Florida.*