

# Lawrence Fullaway

*March 28, 1968*

*by Donald Klotz.*

Soc Trang is a city located about 150 miles south of Saigon, Vietnam. Just south of the city is an airfield that was home to the 336th Assault Helicopter Company and the 121st Assault Helicopter Company (AHC) along with several support units.

By March of 1968, the Tet Offensive, which began on January 31, 1968, was still very active and much of the Delta region of Vietnam was under enemy control. On March 26, 1968, the 336th Assault Helicopter Company (AHC) was the primary aviation unit for a major operation southwest of Soc Trang near the city of Rach Gai. Nine-hundred troops from the 21st ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) Division were dropped into landing zones (LZs) beginning in the predawn hours of the 26th by the "Warrior" slicks and aircraft from our sister unit, the 121st AHC. The operation was supported by the "Thunder Bird" gunships with backup from other units as needed. Contact was made with a major Viet Cong (VC) force and fierce fighting ensued. Twenty VC troops were killed during the first day of fighting.

The operation continued for two days and ended on the 28th. One hundred and fifty-four VC troops had been killed. Five anti-aircraft machine guns, 30 automatic rifles / small arms, one 60mm camera, one radio, four mines, 20 gas masks, 360 hand grenades and a large amount of ammunition and explosives were captured; also captured were 40 coffins.

As the operation ended on the 28th, a Command-and-Control helicopter, five slicks and a light fire team of two "T Bird" gunships were held out to perform a "Snake Hunt," a search and destroy mission 20 or 30 miles east of the city Rach Gia. The Viet Cong controlled most of the countryside as well as parts of Rach Gai on any given day.

The C & C located some enemy troops and decided to check it out. The five Slicks dropped in their troops, about 40 total, and then flew to a safe staging area several miles away where we landed to wait and see what developed. On this day, the co-pilot, the officer who was second in command of our "Slick" Huey helicopter was a 20-year-old Warrant Officer named Robert "Bob" Offutt. He had been in country for about three months. The Crew Chief, SP5 Ernest Staples was 22 yrs. old. Our Gunner was a SP4 named Larry Fullaway. I was the Aircraft Commander, a WO1, 21

years old and had nine months of experience flying a "Slick" UH-1D Model "Huey" helicopter in the southern part of Vietnam from Saigon down through the Mekong Delta.

The ARVN troops we had inserted made contact with VC troops right away. A small number of the enemy that were guarding a cache of weapons were quickly killed. The cache was found in the edge of a dense forest near a fairly large canal. The whole of the Delta region of Vietnam where we operated is laced with canals. These canals are both a source of irrigation for the rice crop and the transportation system for everyone who lives there. There were almost no roads or wheeled vehicles in this part of Vietnam. Sampans moving on the canals were a common sight since they were the primary means of transportation for everyone in these out-lying areas. This weapons cache was positioned so that the material could be delivered to any one of many locations overnight.

It turned out that what the ARVNs had found was no small ammo cache. The ARVNs uncovered more than a ton of weapons, ammunition, mortar, and recoilless rifle rounds, 122mm rockets as well as various explosive devices such as anti-personnel mines and hand grenades. This was a major weapons supply. It could not be left for the enemy to use.

Our aircraft was one of two assigned to extract this material. When given an assignment like this you don't know whether to feel honored because your leaders consider you to be competent and likely to succeed, or perhaps they are willing to risk losing you because they don't think much of you. I'm just joking here, I think.

The two gunships were on-site when our two slicks arrived. We were to be the second ship in, so we orbited a mile or two away, while the first ship landed. The first ship was piloted by 1LT Basil Maciolek and WO1 Donald Althouse. After ten or fifteen minutes, Lt. Maciolek came on the radio and told us they were almost loaded and suggested we begin our approach. We did.

As soon as Lt. Maciolek's helicopter took off, they started yelling that they were taking fire. Lt. Maciolek was hit in his armored chest plate and the bullet bounced off hitting him in the chest and arm. Their Gunner was hit. WO1 Althouse was hit in the leg by a bullet. Having both pilots hit is every helicopter crew's worst fear because if neither pilot is able to control the aircraft, a crash is inevitable. In this case neither pilot was injured so badly they could not function. We were close enough to see automatic weapons tracers flashing

upward around their aircraft.

As we approached the landing zone, we received enemy fire. We could hear the familiar "pop" of passing bullets, but we weren't hit as far as we could tell. On short final approach we could see someone waving us into a clear area bordered by trees on the right with a tree line in front of us about 200 ft. away. We were quite sure this was where the majority of enemy fire was coming from and we knew if we could see the tree line, the bad guys could see us. We needed to move fast since we knew the enemy would be moving quickly to get a good line of fire on us. The good news was that the gunships had been hitting that area hard since the first ship took fire there.

We were directed to land next to a pile of munitions and weapons about 100 feet from the edge of thick woods. There were several ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) soldiers standing around the weapons and a dozen or so were going and coming from the jungle. Those coming out were carrying boxes of munitions. The pile of ammunition was as big as a dining room table and looked like more than we would likely be able to lift. We would just have to load and check to see how much we could carry.

As Crew Chief, it was Ernie Staples' responsibility to load the cargo into the aircraft. He had to be sure the load was balanced in a way the helicopter would perform properly. Our Gunner, Larry Fullaway, would assist. Ernie got out as soon as we were on the ground and had a brief conversation with an advisor. ARVN soldiers started carrying boxes to the aircraft and Staples and Fullaway started placing the load in the cargo bay.

We were on the ground for several minutes and the pile in the cargo bay was getting pretty high. A big concern was knowing we were certain to come under fire at short range and take hits from enemy fire as we left as the first aircraft had and we were loaded with hundreds of pounds of explosive material.

Staples had a long "commo" cable attached to his helmet so he could talk with the crew while he was outside the air-

craft. I told him not to load to the max because we had to have enough power in reserve to take evasive action as we departed. He said it was time to do a hover check.

We lifted the aircraft to a hover, let it stabilize for a few seconds and checked the torque gauge. The reading we got told us that we could take a couple hundred more pounds and still have adequate power for a strong take off. We sat the Huey down and Ernie signaled for the ARVN troops to load on some more material.

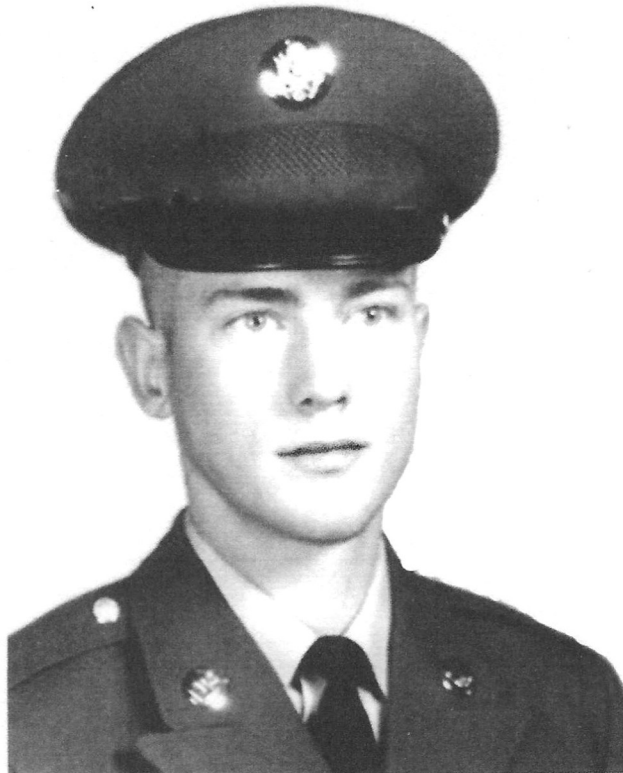
As the first of the additional material was hitting the pile in the cargo bay, I heard a loud SNAP that seemed to come from the right. Being as loud as it was, it was clear that the enemy sharpshooter barely missed. I looked to the right and saw no troops of any kind in the small trees and brush scattered around the area. Another snap!

I looked to the left, back through the cargo bay, toward Staples. Ernie had his back to me and was busy looking over the pile of material, deciding what he wanted to load. Looking past Ernie to the far end of the clearing, something didn't look right at all. Two or three of the ARVN troops back there laid down. They just laid down on the ground. I didn't get it for a few seconds but then realized that

three or four men wearing black pajamas and carrying AK-47s were walking out of the trees. In the two or three seconds it took me to realize that the soldiers had laid down because they had been shot, I saw something else.

Ernie was working between the pile and the helicopter, maybe ten feet from the door. I was about to tell Ernie to get in the helicopter when I heard three or four bullets hit the aircraft. At the edge of the brush and trees closest to us stood a soldier wearing the same black uniform as the men at the far end of the clearing. This guy was bringing his weapon down and putting a new magazine of ammunition into his rifle. This was who was shooting at us. As he did this, two more soldiers stepped out of the brush. They were little more than a hundred feet away. They raised their weapons and pointed them directly at us.

Ernie!! Get in!! ERNIE!! ERNIE, GET IN!!! I am



Army Specialist 5 Lawrence Lee Fullaway.

screaming at Staples, and he is lunging toward the ship. The two new guys raised their rifles and fired. The muzzle flashes of their rifles made it clear that they were on full automatic so each of them could fire 20 to 30 rounds at us in a matter of seconds. Ernie jumped into the cargo bay as the two guys let us have it. I had to be sure Staples was in securely while I watched the muzzle flashes from the, now three AK-47s. Two seconds felt like forever. Three or four more black-uniformed soldiers ran from the brush toward our helicopter. They were raising their weapons and firing on the ARVN soldiers and us.

Bullets were snapping, popping, buzzing, and zinging all over the place. Staples was safely inside, and I pulled pitch, hard. I had intended to reverse course on takeoff so we would not fly over the area where the previous aircraft had been hit but there was no time for that. The Huey lurched up and rolled forward. Fullaway jumped across the stack and disappeared behind me into his Gunner's well on the right side of the aircraft. Fullaway's machine gun started firing.

WHAM!! Something hit me in the head. I was trying to make a full power take off and my helmet spun to the left as my head rolled to the right. I was disoriented for an instant and it was at the worst possible time. WO1 Bob Offutt was on the controls with me, and he continued the takeoff. Offutt never missed a beat as he rolled the Huey forward with the cyclic and pulled pitch with the collective even harder than I had. I shook my head and reoriented my helmet so I could see and function. The cockpit was full of dust from a smoke grenade and the acrid dust burned our noses and eyes. A bullet had struck one of the smoke grenades we kept hanging in the doorways. It or something else had apparently hit me in the back of the head as it flew through the cargo bay.

Offutt had the Huey stood on its nose gaining speed as rapidly as possible, straight at the tree line we knew was full of enemy soldiers. We stayed close to the ground and put all the energy the turbine engine could produce into gaining air speed. Bullets continued to hit the ship.

The tree line at the edge of the clearing wasn't far away, maybe 100 – 150 feet from where we had been sitting. Our original plan was to turn around and exit the area the way we had come in, but we weren't able to do that because that would have put us turning at a hover in front of the five or six enemy troops who were firing at us. We were going straight ahead, right where the first ship got shot up. We had no option.

Things were happening in split-second time. We had to gain speed and get away from these guys before they could reload. There were now at least six Viet Cong with AK-47s firing at us from a distance of less than the width of a football field.

Fullaway was firing his door-mounted M-60 machine gun on the right side. Staples was firing ahead and to the left. We got to the tree line still only a couple feet off the ground with our airspeed gaining rapidly. There were numerous muzzle flashes visible in the trees and brush. We pulled back hard on the cyclic and jumped over the trees. As we flew up, we were hit by automatic rifle fire from below. Bullets burst up through the floor. Shrapnel flew up bouncing off the windshield, the ceiling, and our plastic face shields. A bullet came up through the floor and shrapnel from the floor peppered the underside of my right leg.

Little more than six seconds had elapsed since the first bullet had hit our aircraft when we cleared the tree line and started climbing. Staples stopped shooting. Fullaway was still firing so I spoke to him over the intercom and said to cease fire. He didn't respond. I spoke to Staples and he didn't respond either. I realized that I couldn't hear my voice in my helmet. The electrical commo cord that connected my helmet to the radios and intercom had been shot in two. I could not communicate with anyone.

I couldn't tell if Offutt was hit. He was obviously fully on the controls and flying the aircraft with me, but he was looking straight ahead, focused on getting out of there. I yelled at him. He looked at me and I pointed to my microphone and shook my head, "no." He nodded understanding. He didn't appear to be hurt or even bothered at all by what had happened.

SP5 Fullaway continued to fire. We were now over a half mile from the LZ and were at almost 1000 feet altitude. There was no reason for Fullaway to be firing. I could see his tracers sweeping back and forth and up and down in an odd fashion. Staples must have noticed it too and I saw him climbing over the pile of explosives heading to the Gunners position. The firing stopped. Staples came up and yelled in my ear, "Fullaway is hit! I don't know where he's hit. No blood, but he's hurt bad!"

I was sick. I had taken enemy fire many times over the past nine months, almost daily for the past several weeks. We had taken hits on many occasions, but my crews had been almost magically protected. We had several minor

wounds, but I had not had even one crew member seriously wounded. Today was different. We had been hit several times, warning lights were coming on, and Fullaway was wounded. The main thing we were focused on now was to get to the staging area, which was several miles away, where Fullaway could receive medical aid.

We began an approach and gently touched down. WO1 Offutt had been in contact with the team via radio and medics were standing by. The moment the skids hit the ground, they got busy getting Fullaway out of his seat.

All four of us crew members wore armored plates while operating in hot areas. These were referred to as "Chicken Plates" supposedly because only a "chicken" would wear one. After we lost a couple of crewmen because they weren't wearing them, the rule was to wear them going in and out of all landing zones, hot or not. The two pilots used one which we sat on our lap. The plate was wide enough to cover your stomach and chest came up under your chin. The Gunner and Crew Chief wore a vest arrangement that had a plate in the front and back. Fullaway was wearing his, but not exactly.

Since a helicopter usually takes fire from below, a lot of crewmen would sit on their back chicken plate. That is what Specialist Fullaway was doing. He had an armored plate in a vest covering his chest. The plate for his back was on his seat. While we were sitting on the ground, a bullet hit from the left side, easily punctured the thin aluminum housing of the transmission bay and passed through without hitting anything other than the skin on the other side. The bullet exited the transmission area and hit Fullaway in the back.

The Medics had SP5 Fullaway out of the Huey and had him

lying on a stretcher. I got out and went over to him. The medics had already evaluated the wound and were preparing him for evacuation. One of the Medics showed me Fullaway's stomach. You could see a bump under the skin near his naval that was the bullet. It had passed from back to front through his abdomen. Fullaway wasn't doing well but he was conscious. When he saw me, he asked, "Mr. Klotz, am I going to die?" I told him he was not!

Amazingly, Specialist Ernest Staples and WO Offutt had survived the incident pretty much unscathed. Bob Offutt had a bullet hit him in his helmet. The bullet entered the helmet and ran around inside but it had not hit him. I am sure that both Bob and Ernie had been scared like I was, but they sure didn't show it. I had a cut on the back of my neck and a few small cuts on my left shoulder and neck caused by shrapnel of some kind. I also had a slight wound to my right leg. The Huey couldn't be flown and had to be unloaded and slung back to Soc Trang by a Chinook helicopter. Specialist Fullaway was loaded into a Helicopter and evacuated.

Several days passed and we received word that Larry had died. Specialist Lawrence Lee Fullaway was a good friend, a good soldier, an American Hero. He served his country with honor and gave all he had.

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