

11 - RETURN TO LZ NEW PLEI JERENG FROM CAMBODIA

Located in the northwest corner of Vietnam

May 13, 1970

After a quiet night, we awoke to the surprising news that the mission had ended, and that we would be extracted immediately. Immediately with the Army could mean plus or minus a week. After breakfast, various squads performed some perfunctory sweeps, and the field next to the night lager was secured as an LZ for the choppers. Everything was in order, and quiet.

At 9 am, the choppers arrived and the extraction began. Our platoon was scheduled to be the last unit to be extracted from Cambodia. It was supposed to be an honor to be the first in and the last out. I kept thinking about the story about the two guys left on the LZ because of the lame chopper. Honor and a dime, wouldn't buy you a coffee. I could feel the enemy's eyes on my back.

As the first two choppers departed, they drew distant fire from the west. The source of the fire was too far from our position. We could not do anything about it, so gunships were called in on the approximate enemy position. Shortly thereafter, the gunships arrived and began saturating the source of the fire with machine-gun fire, grenades, rockets, and minigun fire.

In Georgia, six blacks were shot dead in the back at a rally.

The NVA probably knew they would come and evacuate the area well in advance. There was no return fire and the extraction began again without incidence. I was on the first chopper for the 1st Platoon since I was considered a part of the LT's entourage. I had really moved up in the world. I was not sure if this was a permanent move.

About twenty choppers were used to pick up our company. During the flight, there must have been a hundred choppers continually in the air ferrying troops and supplies. It was impressive, and would not be repeated again during my tour of duty. It was a relief to be headed back to Vietnam and safety. That was an odd feeling.

We landed at a place called New Plei Djereng, which was halfway between Pleiku and Cambodia. It was a small army base that was located on a small rise with an airfield. There were concrete bunkers and a dirt road adjoining the area. The road went in an east-west direction.



There was a truck convoy consisting of deuce & half-style trucks waiting in the dust for us. We quickly loaded on the trucks and headed west. West? The commander of our battalion was in a lead jeep followed by a truck full of engineers that had just arrived from a firebase that they had built in Cambodia. Also on that truck, were a couple of guys from B Company. We were a couple of trucks (about 50 meters) behind the engineers. Someone radioed the commander to tel him he was leading us west, back into Cambodia. He decided to make a U-turn across the end of the runway where a group of Chinooks was taking off. The dust raised by the chopper rotors was blinding, I could hardly make out where we were heading. I just kept my eyes closed and breathed through my handkerchief.

As the engineer's truck was turning in front of the choppers, we heard a loud strange noise and saw a chopper blade go whooshing about ten feet above our truck. We decided that a chopper was crashing, and proceeded to evacuate our truck. As our feet hit the ground, we ran away from the airfield screaming at the other trucks to do the same, which they did. We found a ditch near the road and took cover in it, waiting for a possible explosion and fireball. The explosion never developed, and as the dust cleared we could see the wreckage, it was horrific. We got up and ran back to help the survivors.

A departing Chinook had crashed. It landed upside down on the engineer's truck and was leaking fuel all over the truck and the surrounding area. We made a quick one-hundred-meter dash back to the Chinook to see if we could help anybody. As we got closer we saw arms and legs hanging over the side of the truck.

Sgt. Brown went to move a rucksack from a wheel of the truck to find out it was dead body. I was in a state of shock. My mind couldn't fathom the carnage. I was worse than combat and I was totally unprepared for the situation. I felt a mixture of sorrow and disgust. I sobbed for all the suffering that was happening around me, and for the thought of the poor family's back home. This was not war, this was stupidity. These guys deserved a warrior's death. I always thought that dead was dead, but it was not so, not by a long shot.



Screwy Lewis took this photo of the crash site as we were leaving.

Four guys on the truck were killed instantly; two from B Company and two from the Engineers. Others were trapped under the chopper, and still alive. One guy crawled out unhurt and was in a state of shock. There were about forty grunts and crew inside the Chinook that had various degrees of injury. We helped evacuate the injured.

I noticed one of the dead in the truck was a Sergeant that I had processed with in Plieku, a few weeks before. He was on his second tour of duty. I believe that he was a draftee who had signed up for the full four years to get into the Engineers. I was offered a similar deal to get out of being a grunt. It got him another tour in Vietnam and a trip to eternity.

For the first time, since I arrived in the country, I had the urge to kill, and it wasn't for the NVA or VC. I was beginning to feel that there was stupidity from within that was more deadly than the enemy we had come to fight.

We did as much as possible, and reloaded on the trucks for the trip back to An Khe, leaving some medics behind to continue giving aid and comfort to the survivors.

We would later learn that one guy was completely submersed in the fuel, trapped between the truck bed and chopper. Only his face was above the surface of the fuel, that was filling the truck bed. He couldn't yell out because of the pressure on his chest from the crashed chopper. He survived with chemical burns all over his body.

There were all kinds of explanations for the crash, from a hydraulic failure to a blade, or wheel hitting the truck. It didn't really matter anymore.

Although I was an eyewitness to the event, some of the details came to me second-hand.

[Here is another account of the Crash](#)

On the way back, our convoy stopped for a short time at Pleiku, where we bought cans of warm soda from the Vietnamese. We backtracked along Highway 19, arriving at An Khe around 8 PM. There was a truck full of beer and ice waiting for us in the company area. I drank until I passed out, and ended up sleeping under the truck, in the mud caused by the melting ice.



The right picture shows (Back Row: Brown, Me, Robertson, Front Row: Screwy, Carrie, Shevlin)
The left picture shows me with the two machetes captured in Cambodia

In Lebanon, Israeli forces leave after a 32-hour strike at guerilla bases.

A total of 30 Arabs were killed.

Cambodian Epithet:

Our mission was a hunting trip to a virgin NVA paradise. We found plenty of rice caches and destroyed them. The mission was not long enough to finish the job. We did not go in with

enough force, or support, to accomplish a meaningful end to our mission. Our company didn't get any credit for any enemy body counts.

During the standdown, there was a rumor that after the Cambodian Incursion, the Marines might invade the North and finally end the war.

PS: Along the way back from Cambodia, in the convoy, everybody was celebrating our survival by shooting flares, and throwing smoke grenades. While passing through one of the villages, a carelessly thrown grenade ignited a grass and bamboo hootch. The fire spread, eventually burning the village down. We were all reprimanded by the higher-ups. There wasn't much sympathy for the villagers who lost their village. With friends like us, who needs enemies?

The army had to pay for the damage and was moaning about it. I couldn't believe what a skinflint Uncle Sam was. Billions of dollars sent over here, and nothing to show for it, yet. Shortages of equipment and ammo, old weapons; where was the money going?

Years later it would be revealed that the army had no budget to finance the invasion, and they, or Nixon, were too afraid of congress to ask for an appropriation. As a result, there would be more shortages of ammo and fuel in the future. The army had to run the mission on a shoestring. They probably pulled us out because we weren't getting enough bodies for the buck, or the political pressure, which was mounting back home. Destroying food supplies and encampments didn't count as much as bodies.

January 2018 Observation: Many questions remain about the "Incursion", such as

1. *Why didn't our unit, especially our leaders, get the details of the incursion almost a week after Nixon had outlined the mission on TV in April? The NVA obviously knew about the incursion, since it started farther south of us on April 29th. Did the NVA have access to Nixon's Televised News Conference on April 30th (May 1st in the Hanoi Time Zone)?*
2. *Did the NVA and Chinese know about the incursion during Kissinger's secret meetings in February, March, and April? I hope it wasn't staged for some political reason.*
3. *Our mission area was relatively flat and did not have dense jungle like the Central Highlands. Trails and hootches were very visible from the air. I did not see any evidence of carpet bombing or defoliation. Why not? Books published*

after the war talked about the extensive "illegal" bombing of Cambodia in this area.

- 4. This area of Cambodia was sparsely settled by Cambodians, but densely settled by the NVA. Making this area a "no man's land" would have broken the back of the trail at a vital fork. One fork headed into the Central Highlands, and the other, all the way to Saigon. Does this make sense?*
- 5. Later, Nixon would mine Haiphong Harbor to cut off supply ships feeding ordinance to the NVA. What took so long?*
- 6. We also never bombed the vital North Vietnam rail links from China to cut off another supply line. Why not?*
- 7. The "incursion" should have happened a lot sooner, or we should have withdrawn our troops. Today, we give "billions of dollars" to the Pakistanis. In exchange, they harbor Bin Laden, al Qaeda, the Taliban, and ISIS.*

McGEE's EMAIL

Date April 18th, 2008

Hey Dick, I was surfing and found the cacti site, signed the guest book and Bill mailed me back and included your e-mail address. I asked if anyone knew you and others we served with and after 38 years you are the first one I come across. Do you remember me? I'm Dennis McGee or McGee or "mad dog". I humped the 60 you had the 79. I helped you drink the kesslers whiskey your Dad used to send you and you let me read the Godfather for the first time. Lt. Cassidy brought me back to the rear to do security for S 5 till the colors were brought home and then I transfered to the 101st up north to finish out my tour. Out of the frying pan into the fire in the Ashau Valley. Where did you go? I hope this finds you well and enjoying life. I have kind of had a hard way to go. Not a day goes by that I don't think about that Godamn place. I have forgotten a lot of names but I can still see all the faces I knew. Tell me my friend how you are doing and have you had any contact with any of the others, Sparky, Mouse, Simms, the football coach from Nebraska, or that full of shit Tims I think his name was, the one who said he played key boards for the Monkees. Take care and God bless my friend.

McGee

COMMENT:

Later I would also join the 101st Airborne and serve in the bloody Ashau Valley. My Mother would continue to bake fresh brownies for me, and my Dad would press in nip bottles of Kessler's whiskey so they wouldn't get broken. A couple of weeks later I would receive the hardened brownies and chisel out the nips. Then I would add water to the brownies and crumbs to soften them up and have a party! As an enlisted man, the Army would not allow us to have "hard liquor". We could handle grenades & guns, but not shot glasses?

Anyway, I would take one canteen and put in a mixture of Kool-Aid (also in my Care Packages from home) and whiskey for the road. It really felt good to have a swig after a firefight. Hard day at the office, I suppose?



I wish my parents had lived long enough to see McGee's email. My family was then, and still is, well remembered for their generous packages from home. They spent a lot of time and money to send me these weekly packages. I'm sure they split a lot of beers while putting the packages together on a Saturday Night.

When I came home, Dad took me to the package store next to Lavoie Auto in Dudley, MA to introduce me as their "good" Kessler customer. The package store was almost within sight of Lt. Wajer's parent's home.