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Crashing an Officers Only Party

Steve Tedder

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The Mighty Pen

Steve Tedder

(May 1999)

Crashing an Officer's Only Cav Party

the Cav unit of the 101st Airborne Division, "Alpha Troop."

There were a lot of pictures and info about the unit but something was a little off. All of the pictures and stories were of pilots, both Warrant and Commissioned. This wasn't about the entire unit, only the pilots. I discovered that they were having a reunion in conjunction with the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association in Nashville.

My curiosity brought me to look them up, not only did I find them but they're actually having a reunion in two days? I start blabbering to my wife about it, saying we have to go. She reminded me that I had not been invited, it was for pilots only. Plus she was taking our daughters to Kings Dominion. Some damn kid named Britney Spears was performing. I responded in the only way I could, "Are you kidding me. You would pass this up for a nobody singer in a short skirt? This was Alpha Troop! You know, A Troop, 2nd Squadron, 17th Air Cavalry, 101st Airborne."

She did have a point, the girls came first. I would just have to go alone. But come hell or highwater I was going.

Mid-way between Knoxville and Nashville reminded me of the Skyline Drive. The mountains and valleys were beautiful. This when the enormity of what I was doing set in. Perhaps this is kind of rash and stupid. The reunion is for pilots only and I was not a pilot. Maybe I should just turn around and go back home.

All the way to Nashville, the only thing that kept me headed west was I had nothing to lose and a lot to gain. The worst that could happen would be told, nice seeing you, now kiss off. But maybe a few of my pilots would be there, the ones I had flown with.

I did not have to ask for directions to Alpha Troop once I entered the hotel. A large sign in the lobby said "Welcome Alpha Troop" with an arrow pointing the way to the "Hooch." I saw twenty guys sitting at the tables. Most were talking and drinking beer. I tried to recognize anyone. Nope, I didn't have a clue who these people are. Damn, what do I do now?

I walked around for a better look, after all it had been 27 years. I grabbed a beer from a cooler. Still no one I knew, but they were definitely Alpha Troop as most were wearing Cav hats. Several of the guys

sat watching an 8mm home film one of the pilots had taken in the Ashau Valley with a camera taped to his helmet. The film showed the Cobra pilot's view of making gun runs on enemies running in the open. Rockets, mini-guns, Blooper, the whole nine yards.

A guy comes up beside me and I glance to see if I know him. I can't exactly place him. He heads for the door. Then it hits me. Damn, it's Mr. Todd without the handlebar mustache. I give chase but he's in a hurry and I don't want to run up behind him. So I yell out, "Hey, El Toddo. Is that you?" He twirled around and said, "No one's called me that in twenty-five years. Who the hell are you?"

"Steve Tedder, do you remember me? I flew Observer in the Scouts."

With a big grin he put me in a bear hug, "Of course I remember you, how the hell are you?" I replied fine, married with three daughters, living in Virginia.

I asked him where he lived.

"Why do you ask?"

I told him that I had often wondered if he was living in an underpass somewhere in L.A. I remember him getting shot and crashing on the side of a mountain.

Laughing, he pulled his pant leg up to show me the damndest scar I had ever seen, half of his calf was gone and the skin was white and gnarly. He almost lost it after getting hit by a .51 cal. After nine months in the hospital the Army discharged him. His wound motivated him to go back to college and get his degree. Then law school. He gave me his business card.

"Damn, you are really doing well." The card identified Richard Todd as the Assistant Attorney General for the state of Alaska.

I asked El Toddo, "You don't think they'll kick me out, do you? This is for pilots and I wasn't invited."

He told me to follow him back into the Hooch where he introduced me to Bob Karig, the president of the association. I was told that I was more than welcome. Bob led me to a table where several men were sitting and introduced me, telling them that I had flown with the troop as an Observer.

The word spread that a non-pilot member was in attendance and a few of the guys I knew came over.

The first was Mike Streeper, who I had never flown with but remembered for his immaturity and brashness. Mike had also been medevac'd home from Nam, having been shot down and fracturing his skull from crashing through triple canopy. Glen Veno, who I always assumed was Canadian, talked with me about our time together. When I asked him why he painted a Maple Leaf Flag on his helmet he stated that he grew up in Michigan and just loved Canada.

Another pilot I recognized was Gary Green. One of the most highly decorated pilots of the Viet

Nam War. 1st Lt. Gerald “Gary” Green received the Distinguished Service Cross, 3 Silver Stars, 4 Distinguished Flying Crosses, Bronze Star w/”V,” 4 Purple Hearts. 60 Air Medals, Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry plus he one of the few Battlefield Commissions of Vietnam, promoted to First Lieutenant.

Gary Green was definitely a legend not just in Alpha Troop but among all Vietnam Pilots. There was just one problem. I didn’t like him one bit. Not only was he a damn lunatic he also had a mean streak when it came to practical jokes. Our last encounter hadn’t gone well at all. I did learn from Veno that Gary was medically retired from the Army while stationed in Germany not long after Vietnam. He was driving recklessly through a village on his motorcycle, crashed and had a leg amputated. Next he went to South America as a flying mercenary. He returned to the states a multi-millionaire, bought a large ranch in Colorado and owned several aircraft and his own airstrip. Every year Gary invited his friends from Nam for a week of camping and horseback riding.

Before leaving the hotel, Bob Karig invited me to accompany them to Ft. Campbell the next day. When I offered to pay, he replied it was too late for that. Everything was paid in advance and he didn’t want to do any extra paperwork.

The next morning, I got on the bus with Streeper and Veno for the ride to Campbell. We were welcomed by the entire troop, then went to the airfield for a demonstration of the helicopters currently used by the Army. They would also have a Cobra and LOH fly in to show the new guys a piece of their heritage. The commanding general of the 101st was also expected to greet us.

When I asked why a Two-Star General would do that I was told it was our very own Major Teddy Allen had gone on bigger and better things after Nam. He retired as a Two-Star and in the 80’s had commanded the 101st Airborne. I remembered him as a demanding typical West Pointer who flew Missions as C&C (Command and Control). We certainly didn’t cross paths in a social way.

They had actually rolled out a red carpet for us. We had a flyover of Apaches and listened to a very long speech from the two generals. Then something that none of us expected happened. The entire 2nd Squadron of the 17th Air Cavalry came out in formation and saluted us, which we returned. I was actually feeling proud to be a Viet Nam Vet.

We then went to the “Dining Facility” as they now call the Mess Hall. To say we were amazed at the changes from our Army to this All-Volunteer Army is an understatement. It had everything that a 4-Star restaurant could offer, even several salad and desert bars, everything had the calories listed beside each item. I couldn’t believe it.

A voice off to my rear asked if the seat next to me is taken. I replied no and was surprised to have Gary Green and his wife sit beside me. He asked how everything was going and if I was enjoying seeing what the new Army was all about. We talked through the entire meal. Just like old friends. He even insisted that I come out next year with my family and visit him on the ranch. Me???

Shortly afterwards we went to the Squadron Flight Line and they had their toys on display. The OH-6A Loaches that we flew were a thing of the past. The Army had upgraded the old OH-58A Kiowa's that I had flown as an Observer in 1970. They were now called OH-58D Kiowa Warriors and they looked nothing like the originals, were outfitted with cameras, computers and infra-red sensors. They even had rocket pods in addition to the mini-gun, which is basically all we carried, plus my M-60.

When I asked about the funny looking mast on top of the rotor I was told it was a camera/sensor and the pilot could see what was around him by looking at the video monitor. The Captain giving the orientation explained how they trained to hover in the trees with only the mast showing. Once a target was detected they would pop up, fire missiles and beat feet before the enemy could react.

I was flabbergasted. "What about the little bastard underneath you with an AK, wouldn't that make you a great target, just hovering there?" He tried to explain that wouldn't happen as the area would be secured. Oh well, they'll learn just like the Army always does, the hard way.

The Captain that had given the talk on the Kiowa came up. I asked him to look inside the LOH at our Turn and Bank Indicator. He stuck his head inside and said that he couldn't see it. I laughed and told him that I would hang a nut on a string from the front strut and that's what we used. He simply shook his head and laughed.

Finally the moment we had all been anticipating arrived. A familiar WHOP WHOP WHOP and buzzing sound came with two of the most beloved helicopters from our time making straight for us. A LOH followed by a Cobra from the Army Heritage Museum landed close to the Kiowa. After shutting the engines down our entire group went up and checked them out.

The LOH was outfitted with a mini-gun and the doors had been removed, looking exactly like it did in Nam. Not only that but it had the marking of Alpha Troop with the red band on the tail boom and crossed sabers on the nose. This wasn't done just for us, it turned out this particular LOH had been assigned to Alpha Troop in 1971. The people at the museum had marked to show its history.

Streeper and I waited our turn and climbed in, he in the right seat, me in the left. All I needed was an M-60 Machine Gun on a bungee cord and a box of grenades. Memories just flooded back, I hadn't been this happy in many years. Gary Green came up beside Streeper and said he wanted to trade places. I started to get out and he said that he wanted a picture with me sitting in the Observers seat.

After a few moments I whispered and asked if he remembered the last time we had sat like this.

He said it was something he'd never forgotten. He also said that it was one of the few times he could remember being scared shitless. I asked why he hadn't had me court marshalled for threatening him. He said I was a good observer and that he may have reacted the same way. Wow, my whole world went round and around when he said that.

Here is what happened so long ago.

I had been in the troop less than a month before I was scheduled to fly with him. A few of my fellow Scouts warned me that he was a great pilot but he also had no fear of dying. That he could do things with a Cobra or Loach that no one dreamed possible. Hell, he even landed once in the A Shau and captured an NVA soldier.

We were flying at two thousand feet with the Cobras and a Huey behind us. As we approached the mountain range north of the valley I noticed we were slowly increasing our altitude. I didn't give it much thought. I'm just sitting there enjoying the scenery. Out of nowhere the aircraft violently slips around pointed in the opposite direction. At the same time every warning light on the instrument panel lit up flashing like a damn Christmas tree and the warning buzzer screamed in my earphones. We're dropping like a stone right over the top of a jungle covered mountain. HOLY SHIT, I'm going to die. I squeezed my eyes shut waiting and wondering if I'd feel anything when all of a sudden the noise stops and we're flying again. I opened my eyes and everything was back to normal, no noises, no warning lights no falling. Then I heard the laughter in my earphones, Gary laughing his ass off. I had pilots practice auto-rotations many times before. But never a 180-degree auto-rotation and never without knowing what he was going to do beforehand.

I thought I was going to die and this asshole did it on purpose? Watch this, you son of a bitch. I reached down and pulled out my .45 from its holster between my legs. Cocking the hammer back I pointed mere inches from his head and said, "You ***, you ever do that again and I'll blow your *** brains out. Do you *** hear me???" Our eyes met and I could tell I had gotten his attention.

My hands were still shaking as I replaced the pistol back into its holster. We didn't say much after that.

We continued out and completed our mission. He did live up to his reputation by hovering around a lot but we did find and kill enemies with no damage to us. As soon as we returned to Phu Bai I just knew that I was going to LBJ (Long Bien Jail) but nothing ever came of it. I did inform our platoon leader Captain Robert Baker that I would never fly with that mental subject again, and I never did.

But here we were back in the World twenty-seven years later and are he's acting like we're best friends.

I spent an uneventful day on Saturday meeting new friends and mostly talking about our lives since Viet Nam. We walked around Nashville and not once did I feel out of place. I was invited everywhere and participated in all of the events. I learned a valuable lesson: whether we served in Alpha Troop at the same time or not we were truly a "Band of Brothers."

Sunday morning we had a farewell breakfast. Many of the guys said a few words about the great time they had renewing old friendships. At the very end I stood and said my piece.

"I want to thank all of you for not only allowing me the honor to be with you but making me feel like a Brother. I started out as a Grunt in my tour and graduated to Flying Observer in the Air Cavalry. I did that not for the hot meals and safe bed to sleep in at night, but simply because I wanted to be the best

and you all know that we were the best in any branch of the military. You guys are the bravest pilots the world has ever known and it's an honor to be considered a friend among you. However, let me tell you one *** thing about this re-union. Without the enlisted men who flew with you, that you depended on to keep the ships flying by staying up all night replacing engines or patching bullet holes while you were drinking beer at the Officers Club. Yes, I did fly beside you and volunteered to do so. But, I never had a say on where we were going or was even asked if I thought some of the crazy things you did was a good idea. Make no mistake, my trust in you to bring us both back was absolute. But I must say, if you wish to continue calling this the Alpha Troop re-union you should include the enlisted men who supported and fought alongside you. Thank you again for welcoming me so warmly." Amazingly every one of them stood and applauded. A lot of them actually came up to me and thanked me.

I returned home happier than I'd been in a long time. I told my wife that she and the girls really missed a wonderful time to which I was told that they actually enjoyed the Britany Spears Concert.

In 2001 the Re-union was again held in Nashville with over 120 members of Alpha Troop in attendance. Both pilots and enlisted men. Two years later we had over 160 members show up and I got to meet up with most of my fellow crew chiefs and Observers. Plus my wife and daughters were with me.