

Blue Max 1972
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December 1971, a day or so before Christmas, I was in country up north with the "Redskins" 158th AVN Co. D. We were near the Z and I had no clue in what I was doing there. I was assigned to the maintenance platoon, all Cobras. This was all a blur to me as a "FNG" and the company had not had much fresh meat lately. I was chosen to join a hooch of Cobra maintenance guys. One of them was Bill Gregg, who took me under his wings to ease the challenges of Viet Nam.

Just before Christmas the Redskins were due to stand down and go home. I thought, "Great two months here and I get to go home!" Wrong!! I had too much time left in country to qualify. I received new orders and they were to go south to the F Btry 79th ARTY in Long Bin or Bien Hoa.

Bill Gregg, myself and a few others were headed there. Most others went home or to other units. We packed up the few things we owned and got on a C-130. From what I could remember it was hot as hell that day, which was not unusual. I had no showers for a couple days and on the last pairs of skivvies. The flight was about two hours or so. We landed on some strip; it was almost dark but still hot and steamy. A duce and a half picked us up and we drove to the new unit. We unloaded from the truck and someone barked out, "Fuck, I don't know where we're going to put you guys, all of our hooch's are full to over full." I did voice my opinion as being over tired, very sweaty and just wanted a fucking shower and a place to crawl into to get some rest.

We were then ushered into the CO's office to report for duty. I thought, "Report for duty..." This man's army had just shit on us, put us in a place where we most likely weren't wanted or needed and they want me to report for duty, salute some guy, stand at attention, listen to some spiel as how great he is and what a great Army we are in, how privileged I should feel to be here. Blah, blah, blah.

Instead this guy with some brass on his shirt looked at our sorry asses and said with a warm smile, "You guys look like you could use a good hot shower and a nice hot meal and a nice bed." My first thought was 'Right'. All we had up north was mostly cold showers unless you knew when the company clerk fired up the heater. I had slept in a bag on wood, no pillow and as most of us knew, lousy over cooked cold food. To my amazement (I learned this fine gentleman was Major McKay), Major McKay then called the company clerk and instructed him and some others to call the mess hall and get us something to eat. He told others to clean out the area behind the arms room and put up extra beds with mattresses and then called the hooch maid or bar maid to wash our clothes. Then he said, "Guys you are more

then welcomed to use the officers showers to get refreshes.” I stood there in total awe.

After watching M.A.S.H., Larry McKay reminded me of Col. Potter, stern and a genuine heart of gold.

It has been 34 years since the time in Nam; lots of things have changed since then. My wife and I got married in October 1974; we waited a few years and then had kids. Laurie, my wife is a wonderful person and very strong. I owe a lot of my success to her. We have three great children, one grandchild and a future daughter in law. Justin and Sara will be wed in October of 2007, they are a great couple.

The reason for me commenting on some of the past is when in Nam, if I recall it right, some time in June or July, we were slated to move from Long Bin or the Plantation to Da Nang AB. The night we finished packing I sat in the hooch, leaning against my duffel bag kind of dozing in anticipation of the big move. The week before was hectic as packing did not go along with keeping the “Max” in the air.

[New prior to that mission –Jack 3 days—before Easter, during Easter and just after] *Jack went down in June*

As I was dozing in the door came a voice. Jack [DiLallo] just went down and we needed to find him. I was numb, what the fuck was he saying? Jack and I had many long talks about things back in the world, dreams, hopes and ambitions. We shared lots of great stories and we got along as if we were brothers. Jack also shared his other tours in Nam and some of the ups and downs. It was great; he had no reservations and a lot of trust and confidence.

Just that afternoon, Jack and I had worked on a bird, 206? We had a lot of problems with the controls in the hell hole just under the driver’s seat, in the amo bay. We worked hard and long as the next day we were to fly up north, I think some 300 miles.

We did fire the bird up and checked and double checked the operations of the stick and the collective controls. As we worked we talked and joked, and just had a great time. We finished and signed off on the book and had a TI inspection of my work, all was good.

I had said to Jack, “Let’s test fly to be sure”. He said, “I’ll do it, you go and get something to eat and try to rest.” I told him okay and felt all things were okay. We trusted each other. When I focus on those words, “Jack just went down, we have to go find him”, I was up and on the run, I honestly think my feet did not touch the ground. I felt like “beep beep” the roadrunner’s feet, moving like a fan.

I did pass a couple of guys on the way to the flight line. Some of the Cobra's were already in the air and some just starting to fire up. As I passed one I yelled, "take me with", but most had the front seat just around the corner.

I saw our only slick, Captain Cleason and someone else in front. I am not sure who was on the other side, the other gunner. As I jumped in, I grabbed a helmet, plugged in, keyed up, and said, "Let's get the fuck in the air, I need to find Jack!" I could feel us lifting off as I locked and loaded the 60cal and checked my M16. All I could see was several Cobras racing off the runway balls to the wall. We also put it to the board, wind, and debris flying every where.

I saw lots of lights searching, some flares in the air, and lots of chatter on the radio. My anxiety was high, I was pumped to the max. Tears flowing from my eyes, hands sweating buckets and my stomach churning. My thoughts were, "Jack where are you, signal us, do something to show us where you are."

I did not know if he was shot down, crashed or what. Bastards! What if they captured him, how or what will I do if I see him as they, the NVA were carting him off. I would give my all to protect him as I would have for any one in the "Max".

You must keep in mind we all had a bond, mostly unspoken but as I do realize now it was a special understanding and love for each other. Whatever it took to fly a mission or keep our unit at 98% fly ability, re-arm, wherever, fuel however, or just be there, we were committed to the "Max" and all out troops we supported.

BAM! Suddenly the Huey shook. We sort of rolled, fish-tailed. Captain Cleason and whoever was the other pilot did put us in a straight path. My highest admiration and thanks go to these guys.

We headed back to base, flying kind of high and approximately 80 knots. There was a lot of chatter on the radio. As we got closer to the runway I could see flashing lights at the end. My thoughts were mixed. "How do we get this huge hunk of metal down on the ground and without turning into a bunch of 'crispy critters'?" Fear and panic started to set in. Do I jump and make it go fast and easy? I did not want the pain of burning. I know, I'll go up front and help drive this thing to a safe place. Not a good idea as the last time I took the stick we looked like a huge gyro ball floating in space.

As we got closer to the runway I felt we were in deep shit. Eighty knots hitting the runway? Damn, someone forgot to install wheels. All we had was skids, thin metal tubular skins, weak and not meant to land hard on or skid down a bunch of concrete.

We were at the edge of the runway and still at 80 knots and things were moving fast. All I could do was ask God to put His big powerful hands on us and set us down in the soft grass. I said, "God, I'll do anything you want, just don't take us just yet."

Captain Cleason & the other pilot came over the intercom and said "hang on guys we're going in, don't know how this is going to pan out as we don't know if anyone has succeeded with a skid landing at this speed."

As we got closer to the ground my throat got tight and I thought we were going to die. This can't happen, there is too much to do in the rest of my life. God spared us. Suddenly we started to lift slightly and we went down past the runway. Spared. There is a God and He put his gentle hand on us and put us back up in the air. As we made a very big loop back to base the captain came on the intercom and said we were going too fast. I thought, "No Shit! Any speed is too fast to skid down the runway."

Lots of things went through my brain, "Why can't we auto rotate? What happened to the bird to make it so difficult to maneuver the controls?"

Actually to this day I still don't know what failed and I hope some day, someone will inform me.

On this second approach, we were doing about 60 knots, still too fast for me. Fire trucks lines both sides of the runway along with jeeps and a number of company troops. My thought was "Dummies, what if this thing decides to go left or right, you're going to get hurt too."

We were just in the wire and close to the ground. The start of the runway just ahead. Six feet, five feet, four, three, two and then inches above concrete.

Captain C came over the intercom and said, "Hang on this is going to be rough!" As we entered the point of no return, I again thought of Jack, he's down and who knows what has happened. Now we were at risk to join him and the others who gave their all.

Reality struck as the first sparks flew from the skid. The sound was mild at first and almost soothing as I thought, "If this is the worst, wow we're home without incident." Wrong! Boom! All the weight hit the runway, what a deafening sound, loud, screeching and creaking. As we slid the sparks flew violently from everywhere under the bird. We started to rock side to side and some back and forth, nose to tail. I remember looking outside and seeing a jeep and trucks trying their damn-est to keep up with us. Eternity and slow motion all at the same time. I did give it all to God as it was all in His hands but I wanted to know right then what the outcome would be.

As we slowed things came more into perspective, the trucks and jeeps were catching up to us, sparks still flying in tall directions as we rocked. I looked forward at the pilots, they were all assholes and elbows to do all they could to keep us upright and straight. I did see the side of the runway approaching very fast. I could not calculate in my mind how long it will take to stop this thing, no brakes to help.

We did finally stop just short of the edge by the grass just as Major Funk wheeled his jeep close to us. Skids smoking, engine running down and all that was on my

mind was get out. I did and Major Funk approached the bird I ripped off my helmet and barked very loudly, "GET ME ANOTHER BIRD! Jack's down out there!" The tears flowed like an open faucet, I'm not sure what from, if it was joy, fear, anxiety or hurt and confusion.

The major in a very professional manner explained that all our birds are in the air. As I looked around I could see a bunch of search lights. It also appeared all my peers were swinging into action as the professionals they are, they put a set of wheels under the slick and moved the now very hurt slick into the hanger.

After I semi calmed down and gained some composure, I went back to the hanger and someone was up on top by the rotor area and said we can't get this up tonight as we need parts. To this day I still do not know what failed.

The next day the CO flew and most everything was flown on C-130's going up to DaNang Air base.

We set up and resumed that the Max it known for, great support. Also that next day I was told they found Jack's body, he had no shoes, no shirt and no tags. I don't know what else as most of the pilots were quiet and just did not talk. It was quite a while before I could do much of anything. I did not crew chief and I had no interest in anything.

One day the pilot Sgt. "Rubber Ducky" McDonald, came to me and said, "We have a shortage of CE's and I would really like to have you back on the flight line. You are good and know your shit and work hard under pressure." I really admire and respect him for that day as this started to put me back on track...for a while. But as the days passed, the shit, combat missions started all over and all I was consumed with was Jack. During that time lots of rounds hit a lot of birds but I don't think we actually lost any one.

As the days passed we learned that the Max was standing down and was to return to the states. This meant another unit, more change and whatever kind of shit they could throw at us.

The reason I wrote so much about these days, about Jack is ultimately to know the truth about what really happened that day. As the story was I did not do my job and there was a mechanical failure killing Jack. Also the official report says mechanical failure. I had heard this from several officers and enlisted. Some saying to me, "You're not working on my bird."

For years this has weighed heavily on my heart and mind. In my mind I killed Jack due to some error and ill repaired part or as someone said, "You probably left something loose or left a wrench in the area you were working on!"

The months to follow were hell in the next unit and the short time at Ft. Campbell, I just did not do shit for anyone. I even said to the new CO at Campbell, "You don't look like you have seen or know what combat is." I politely said "I have been to hell and back, saw and did a lot of shit, so don't expect much from me, as I don't have much time left or patience."

Also that day left a large scar. I loved cars and working on them and was also very talented and could fix almost anything. Back in the world I did go back to the gas station and worked for sometime. I had many doubts and fears to work on anything mechanical. I did change careers and worked as a printer for a while, but I believe I was destined to be a mechanic. I got a great opportunity to become a Body man/painter at Champion Auto in Elgin, IL. I used my GI bill with training to add income to my family while learning the profession. I also felt this was great as U did not do much mechanical stuff. One day though a wheel fell off a car I worked on, I did the R & I but another guy R& I-ed to balance the tires. Wow! The fears and emotions swelled up inside real bad.

Every day the recording of Jack going down plays in my head, "Tower this is....."

I did go to a reunion of the VNHCMMA and the VNPA was also in attendance. A guy came up to me, he was Ron McCullough and we talked about Jack and what happened. At that time it was 24 years since Viet Nam. Ron explained that Jack had actually committed suicide. Wow I was relieved that I did not kill Jack. But the fact that the official report stated mechanical failure was the cause still weighs heavily on me. It is my hope that some home some where someone can shed light on this. I would really like to know before I die the truth.

I have a huge fear of Agent Orange cancer getting me. Recently I was alerted about a substantial raise in my PSA, it almost tripled in six months. I am still having this looked into.

Then in the last couple years we, The Max, lost another CE, Dennis Schmaucher to cancer and who knows who else.

Help me guys I would really appreciate it.

There are many things that happened during the Easter Offensive of 1972. We, "The Max" kept the birds up at 98% on most days. We had a two minute hot bounce which meant the pilots slept in there clothes as did Ace down at the flight line. One would take off the downs and push the blade in motion. The back seat would start the run-up as the front seat checked all radio frequencies and buckle up, get the grid coordinates and write them on the window. When the time was right the front seat took the controls and the back seat got buckled up. This enabled them to do a lift off in two minutes. Most of this was done against how the manufacturer suggested the proper start up. But at that time the only thing that matters was that our support was in demand and someone was hurting.

Many a day I spent waiting for the return of one of our guys, mostly a team of 4 to 6 birds would go out or sometimes just two. It all depended on the mission. They always flew over "balls to the wall" and usually at a low level. They came in hot

and fast, what a rush it was! They went out and accomplished what they needed to do and supported our troops in the bush.

During Easter we did lose several birds and pilots. Those fly bys were tough as one was missing and there were a lot of emotions on who it was and what happened.

Many a day when we lost someone, as we always tried to do, we met the incoming birds. I was very solemn and quiet not a word was usually said unless it was a Red X concern. That meant the bird was unsafe to fly. Many a day I could see eyes welled up or just the emotions from their body language. To this day I have the utmost respect and admiration for those guys, to risk their lives to support our ground troops, knowing there is a SAM waiting to take them out at anytime.

One time Mr. Shields, before he was shot down, came in from a tough day at the office and I took a picture of him. I did get a strange look, man I wish I would have taken more.

Jackie Phillips came in and he looked white as a ghost, as I looked at the rotors there were branches and leaves stuck in weird places. Wow that close to the tree tops, boy he was really giving his all. Mr. Phillips was known for his "short timers flight". HE would take it up and it felt as if we were on our side and go down at a high rate or speed. What a rush. He was one to push it to the limit and past. At that time he was short, I wasn't, but I wanted to experience the ride. Thanks Jackie!

One day someone was doing auto rotates on the runway. As we walked toward the runway, Bam! Tail hit the ground and the tail rotor busted. I had my camera with me and took a roll of 35 mm just then Nick Molea came up and said, "I need that film for my report." Who was he to demand the film? So I said I would get copies. Nick was fairly new to the company at that time.

I do remember going on a test flight and we just cleared the wire. He came over the head set and said "Okay you got it" This meant, "Okay chief you have the stick and you better do good or we will crash and burn."

I did okay as we flew a kiddie wampus over the field. I got used to the controls and kind of went straight. I then gained a whole bunch of respect for the pilots and their experiences. That day we also took a detour from what we were suppose to do. We went and shot up a bunch of rockets and chunkers. O did get some great pictures.

Nick was also transferred to the same company as I was, when the Max stood down. I don't remember much from that last company but on the day I left country, I was checking out all the different places, as I went to the infirmary and brought in a guy who was shot up from an ARVN at the gate. From what I heard, ARNV just went off on one of ours.

As time was getting short and I needed to get to the processing out area, many MP's and guys were shooting up the place. Nick came by and asked, "I thought you were real short!" I said I was but now did not think I would get out because of

all the commotion. He said, "No one fucks with the Max!" We grabbed a jeep and just took off right through it all. He dropped me off in front of the out process building. We said our good byes and I went in to go home. Thanks Nick, I wished I would have given you a hug and real men love Jesus.

Now I am on a roll and things coming back. One day just before Easter we had some slack time and the guys loaded up on a ¾ ton truck and were heading somewhere. We looked down the flight line and the last bird which was mine had a bunch of people by it. There were one or two cameras filming Captain Cleason and my bird. We decided to get into what was happening. We drove in circles around and around the bird. After a few times Captain stopped us and asked, "Just what the fuck at you guys doing?" We or I replied, "Just wanted to know what's going on." Their reply was they are doing a documentary on the Blue Max. Wow, we're in the lime light! Someone really cares about whom we are and what we are doing.

They were sincere but I don't think it ever made it to the world.

During the time with the Max there were several articles in various publications. I did save a lot of stuff but most have seems to disappear.

Wow one time Sammy Davis Jr. came to the Max to entertain us. I do believe Mr. Sheilds took him up on a flight. What a treat. I am not sure who else was there, we were too busy to know what was going on.

AHA Christmas 1971, a few nights after coming to the Max and consuming a large amount of beer and stuff, someone came into our hooch and blurted out, "Does anyone want to see Bob Hope? We leave in 5 minutes." I jumped up and grabbed my camera and all the film I could find. This to me was an opportunity of a life time to see Bob Hope live. He is an American idol and one of mine for sure. He has done so much for the morale of the troops. (This was his last tour to Nam also.) I did have a large photo lens and was sure I would need it just to see him. Wow was I surprised as we pulled up next to the stage only a few rows from the show. I was ecstatic and I took a lot of photos. What a thrill as I was honored to be there. I am not sure but to this day I think the name "Blue Max" carried some weight in how close we were.

Easter '72. What a wild and exciting time. There was a three day stint where we were in such demand we; "All" the Max guys gave it their all. We all gave it, everything, I don't remember actually eating during that time. (The Easter Offensive)

At the end of the offensive we were awarded the Bronze star for doing what we did. I look back and think we did what was asked of our country and to this day I would do it again and again for anyone who needed help.

Easter 1972, I can't remember the backseats name or the front seat. We were back at the hooch's and heard that one of the birds got shot up and was being sling loaded in. God, I hope no one got hurt. As we got to the line the crane was just bringing the wounded bird in. Wow it did not seem to have much damage, a couple holes in the bottom and a few others, Then to my amazement some one

said a 50 cal came up the belly and through the seat armor and into the guy in the best seat. So I climbed up the side and looked in the seat, now picture this guys, right where your ball sack would be there was a large hole and a ton of blood. The pilot was air lifted to the states or wherever first to take care of his missing ball. What a mess, besides the blood there was skin and flesh. We did manage to get the bird back into acceptable condition. I do remember several pilots did not want to AC the bird as this could be bad luck.

As I said before, I went to Fort Campbell after Nam, Well guess who was there; you guessed it the guy who lost his ball in Nam. We both saw each other about the same time and with a huge smile and a high pitched voice I said "Hi sir. How are you doing?" He said fine and asked how I was. I don't think all the others in the company actually knew what happened to him, other than he was wounded and received a Purple Heart. The days passed and word traveled quickly and we all got a good laugh. See there is humor in war!

Back to the heavy days when Major McKay did quite a bit of flying. The litho from An Loc is a great representation of courage and commitment. Those days were not a long time but they seemed like eternity as I recall we did have to blow a bird up as it crashed. I am not sure if it was hostile fire or low fuel. I really admire those guys. They knew how dangerous things were and with only a hand full of Americans on the ground they were still committed to total support of all the ground troops.

When I talk about our of fuel, that is because each A/C would know how much ammo and rockets he would need based on previous flights or from what the others had experienced. Then they would fuel up with only enough to get in and get the hell out of Dodge. I could remember several occasions loading up fuel cans with JP4 and running down to the end of the runway to perform a service call.

As we worked our way through this fast time and losing several birds and the most devoted and committed men. We became short handed of crew chiefs and cobras. I don't know exactly how but Major McKay did manage to get some replacements.

Get this, there were two ones brought in, a new Cobra and an old war bird. It was great, I did get the to be on of the first to fly front seat, it was a thrill almost like a new car.

Believe me; these were put into actions immediately. Everyone fought over flying them. My thought was these were so new and so tight they would handle superbly and I know they did.

Another great and very intense time was when encountered tanks at An Loc. No one knew how to disable them much less put a dent in them. Our rockets were like shooting a bb at a brick wall; useless. From what I recall we got Willie Petes white phosphorus from, I thought Korea, not sure.

But I do know Tusi and Causie were the guys who did the first tank kills. They did manage to get the tanks backed into a building as they were trying to hide from us. We were on top of our game, at our best. Every swinging dick did all they could and gave 150%. No one ever got cocky or out of control. We all had a job and knew our limits. Respect and admiration went a long way.

The Max was very well known in Viet Nam and a lot of people I mention this to have heard of us and knew what we could do.

There was also a time we had the opportunity to do guard duty on the flight line. There were a lot of things that came from intelligence. Like sabotage of the birds at night. With a very secure area how could someone get at us? But as I learned from the long nights on guard duty, this was one time, it was very quiet, and all that was moving were rats. Many a night we had a team of guard dogs with their handlers. These dogs were huge approximately 125# and very smart and well trained.

[November 6, 2006]