

Pacific Stars & Stripes

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Wednesday (Blue Ghost)

Flying the ‘Little Bird’- It’s Like Poking a Beehive

QUANG TRI, Vietnam – The Cobra pilot peered through his blue-tinted cockpit window, down upon the light observation helicopter (LOH) 1,500 feet below him.

He was reminded of a small tropical fish as the LOH darted, circled and explored the shadows and depths of the mottled, green and brown algae-like terrain below.

Occasionally the “little bird” would stop as if suspended, hovering over a single spot only to dart away or glide airily to a nearby gully or hilltop. The entire scene, when viewed from above, appeared tantalizingly tranquil, as if the pilot were watching a hummingbird drift from flower to flower on a lazy summer afternoon.

“Taking fire, breaking left!” The voice barked sharply into the headphones of the Cobra pilot. Even as the words were being transmitted, the LOH suddenly dipped its nose and then veered sharply upward and to its left as the gunships started their run, spitting death and fire down over the LOH’s right side, where a white phosphorous grenade was marking the spot of contact.

Again and again the heavily-armed Cobras fired into the dense jungle, thick gray smoke billowed from explosions, and soon bright red flames liked up into the sky.

It was the gunbird’s show now. The LOH, or Little Bird scout, had done its task well. It had found and exposed an enemy position and had escaped with only minor damage. One bullet hole through the rear fuselage and another in the center of the plexiglass bubble of the cockpit.

Sometimes the LOH does not get hit at all.

Nevertheless, any abstract tranquility that a LOH mission may evoke from 1,500 feet above is abruptly and repeatedly dispelled by the more realistic perspective gained from the scout pilot’s seat in the cockpit.

The scout pilot can hardly help but think of a go-cart as he climbs into the small seat and straps himself in behind the stick.

The high-pitched whine of the 314-horsepower turbine engine brings the Little Bird to life as it gently vibrates with the increasingly fast revolution of the rotors. The LOH lifts off the ground from the F Troop, 8th Air Cav. pad and zips away barely skimming over the elephant grass and mud-caked water buffalo grazing contentedly below.

The pilot pulls pitch, adding power as he pushes down on the stick, and the LOH eases upward in a gradual arc until it levels off at about 2,000 feet. Cruising west at 90 m.p.h. along Highway 9, the LOH, the two gunships and a Huey slick of this visual reconnaissance team will provide escort for a convoy moving from Khe Sanh to FSB Vandergrift.

The thin dusty line of vehicles is spotted snaking its way eastward along the meandering, sandy ribbon of highway. The terrain is hills and gullies interrupted by occasional stretches of flat grassland.

Radioing that he is going in for a closer look, the scout pilot depresses the stick and dives the LOH toward the road.

The doorgunner sitting on the floor behind the pilot’s seat checks his supply of smoke cannisters, hand grenades and ammunition. He adjusts his M60 machine gun in its sling and then eases himself onto the lip of the doorway, with his feet dangling out over the skids. The LOH is now a tree-top level and has slowed to about 20 m.p.h.

For a while, everything remains quiet. The convoy stirs up dust but nothing else as it inches along the road. High above a C130 cargo plane lumbers through the misty air of the pass toward Khe Sanh. The helicopters scurry out of the way like minnows darting away from a predatory pike.

The voice of the Huey pilot crackles into the headphones, advising Little Bird that the convoy is nearing a stretch of highway that harbored an enemy ambush the previous day. The road is bordered by steep hills and a dense woodline, making it ideal for hiding enemy positions.

Circling lower and lower, the pilot and gunner scan the shadows and thick underbrush. The LOH alternately darts and glides from area to area as the pilot seeks to use his maneuverability to cut down his exposure time to enemy fire- the basic rule of scout flying.

Topping a ridge and dipping down into a gully, the pilot spots a trail not more than a foot wide winding its way to a dense treeline. He hovers the LOH a scant 10 feet above the ground, using the rotor wash to seep aside the foliage. The doorgunner points to some freshly cut tree stumps at the top of the trail.

“OK, let’s keep moving down there.” It is more a command than a suggestion from the Huey pilot above. “We don’t want you losing your feathers, Little Bird.”

The LOH slowly circles the area and then dips down for another close look. The rotor wash again sweeps aside the elephant grass like parted hair- and reveals a small enemy bunker.

“Gun bird, we have a narrow trail down here leading to a bunker,” the pilot relays up. “So far, no sign of Charlie.”

This is typical ... An LOH can fly over an enemy position all day and not draw fire. As long as the enemy doesn’t think he’s been seen, he’ll sit still.

“I’m going to drop a grenade down there and see if we can stir someone up,” the LOH pilot says.

Watching over his shoulder as the gunner tosses the grenade, the pilot immediately pulls pitch and the LOH bobs upward to avoid the explosion.

For a moment there is nothing. The smoke from the grenade drifts away from the bunker and the scout swoops in again.

“If anybody was home, we either blew him away or else we sure made his ears ring,” the pilot says.

Suddenly, a guttural barking “ack-ack-ack” shatters the air. The pilot had been looking down and his head is snapped violently backward by the force of an AK-47 round. The doorgunner sees that the pilot is hit and immediately starts hosing down the area with a hail of M60 fire in anticipation of a forced landing.

Suddenly the LOH veers upward as the Cobras come screaming down into the fight. The LOH pilot, his head ringing as if he’d been hit with a baseball bat, radios instructions to direct the gunships’ fire. the gunner looks at him and motions to his head. The pilot gingerly reaches up and his fingers brush over a gaping slash in the top of his helmet.

The Cobras continue their gun runs and finally call in air strikes to get at the well-fortified position. the LOH meanwhile has suffered a punctured fuel line, and the pilot radios that he is going back to Quang Tri for repairs.

As the LOH settles onto the pad and the whirl of the rotor begins to diminish, the pilot removes helmet and pokes his finger through the shredded lining. The gunner hops out to see how badly he’s injured, but smiles when the pilot points only to a small bruise on his head. Lady luck is always a welcome co-pilot.

Photo Captions: Story & Photos by SPEC. 5 HOWARD LAVICK S&S Staff Correspondent

Above a gunner stands on the LOH’s skid as he and the pilot watch for Red troops. At right, the LOH crew drops marking grenade after coming under fire, and then clears out of the way as a Cobra gunship (below) comes in on its firing run.

AN LOH’S DOWNWASH FLATTENS BRUSH AS THE PILOT SKIMS ALONG AT LOW LEVEL, SEARCHING FOR SIGNS OF COMMUNIST TROOPS