

Surviving

a Downed Helicopter Crash the Worst Day of My Life

by Richard Strohm



It was in April 1969. Many of the details are really blurred for me. I was a green Lt. FO. I had been the Fire Direction Officer for about six weeks when Captain Brian O'Neill gave me orders to serve as an advisor FO for the 2d ARVN Division 9th MACV. We were to go out on a search into the DMZ for an NVA battalion. The day before had been a real trip with some in country R&R on the white sand of the China Sea. I was sun burnt from swimming in the ocean and rafting on an air mattress.

That night I prepared for the trip to our kick off point where Chuck Stiles (my RTO) and I spent a restless night waiting for the flight to a small hilltop just inside the DMZ. There were about 20 on board the Marine "baby" Chinook. As we approached the LZ at about 50 meters above ground all hell broke loose when there was an explosion right underneath my seat over the left fuel pod. The helicopter was blown up. The ramp was down, and I had been blown out

of the open door. As I hit the ground and looked up, the aft rotor missed decapitating me by about a foot.

Chuck and I crawled down the slope to a crater where a Vietnamese medic attempted to dress my burns. I hadn't noticed, but my skin was hanging from my arms like long surgical gloves. My skin had been ripped from my arms by the heat and the JP4 jet fuel.

I crawled back up the slope to retrieve the radio and called in a medivac. The chopper arrived while the Air Force was taking care of the NVA around us. The medivac

chopper dropped a doughnut ring down to us and hauled us about 200 feet up to the hovering chopper. I was immediately given a very large shot of morphine. The next thing I remember was two weeks later when I was being shaved by a Japanese man in an Army Hospital in Japan.

The experience was the worst ever for me, and I consider myself extremely fortunate to be alive. Half the men on board that day died.

NOTE: Richard Strohm and Chuck Stiles both spent several months in a burn hospital following this incident. Around 1995 Chuck was hit with a stroke which left him wheelchair bound and with a paralyzed arm and speech impediment. In 2003 he went into a VA hospital where he is fighting to survive a bout of cancer. 8/4th's Bill Curry also was on that eventful flight. After years of searching we have been unable to find him.