

It was a dark and stormy night. Suddenly, a shot rang out! Oh, wait, never mind, that's a different war story...

THE PLAYERS: WO1 Edward "Ned" Schantz, CW2 Bruce James, SP5 Jim Aldendifer, and an unremembered crew member with a first name of Victor. There was possibly involved a fifth crewmember who is completely unremembered after 42+ years. Also involved was a FAC known only as Seahorse (possibly Seahorse 11) at the time of this incident.

THE BACKGROUND: Until very shortly before the incident, everyone mentioned above (except Seahorse) were members of C/227 (Ghostriders) Assault Helicopter Battalion, 1st Air Cavalry Division, based out of Phuoc Vinh in III Corps. Ned and Bruce had a total of 20 months in-country; both were highly experienced Aircraft Commanders with a couple of thousand combat hours between them. Jim had 9 months experience in-country as a top-notch crew chief, and it is believed that Victor (gunner) also had considerable in-country experience. The Ghostriders were a pure lift company; i.e., 20 UH-1H "slicks" with no gun platoon, but each of the 2 10-ship slick platoons had a bird configured with a minigun and searchlight on the left side and a .50 cal on the right side. These 2 aircraft were normally dedicated to Nighthawk missions and seldom, if ever, flew normal missions. The Ghostriders flew traditional slick missions (C&C, Log, Combat Assault, passenger ferry, etc) in many areas of III Corps such as An Loc, Lai Khe, Quan Loi, Tay Ninh, etc, but several crews wound up flying many of their Infantry support missions in the area around Song Be north up to Bu Gia Map and the many associated fire bases around the areas north, west, and east of Song Be up to the Cambodian border. The Ghostriders had also been heavily involved in the Cambodian Incursion (1 May 70 – 30 Jun 70). By coincidence or planned happenstance, 2 or 3 crews very often supported 1/8 Infantry Battalion (then Commanded by LTC Jack Galvin; A/1/8 Commanded by CPT Brian Utermahlen). These Ghostrider crews grew very close to the "Jumping Mustangs" (1/8 Cav), and even participated in an informal exchange program. When possible, Brian would take a few days off while not in the field and come fly right-seat with the Ghostriders, and one of the Ghostriders mentioned above spent a week in the field humping the bush with an Infantry Company (he shall remain unnamed, as this act clearly demonstrated his lower-than-average IQ).

Now, the 1st Cav was an airmobile Division with very deep combat assault experience (particularly after Cambodia), and had a very effective method of troop insertion into LZ's. When inserting into a new or known hot LZ, the slicks always had gun cover, normally provided by AH-1G Cobra gunships armed with 2.75" FFAR, Fleshettes (Nails), 40mm cannon (Chunker), nose or pod mounted minigun, or sometimes 20mm cannon (Vulcan). On less common occasions, gun cover might have been provided by a FAC, either OV-10 (usually callsign Rash), or sometimes by O-2. Regardless, when the slicks got told they were covered, they truly were...and by expert pilots. The Ghostrider pilots had only to look left-rear or right-rear to see the covering guns. Going into hot LZ's, the guns were often out front in clear sight prepping the LZ. It was a very effective and comfortable way of doing business for the slicks armed only with an M-60 on either side.

In early 1971, the 1st Cav began standing down and rotating back to CONUS. Some organic units inactivated, some went home, and others remained in-country, were re-designated, and moved elsewhere in RVN. The Ghostriders were re-designated 60th AHC and moved to Ninh Hoa, a place very near the coast in II Corps north of Nha Trang and south of Tuy Hoa. They replaced the 48th AHC (Bluestars), who were sent North in support of Lam Son 719, and fared very badly in that operation. The mission in Ninh Hoa was to support the Korean "White Horse" Division. The 60th arrived at Ninh Hoa in mid to late March 1971, and naturally was completely unfamiliar with the AO.

THE INCIDENT: (Prior to recounting this saga, the author should point out that he is very clear on some portions and hazy, or even totally clueless, on other aspects...he will depend on the other 2

crewmembers to edit, add, or delete as appropriate). On 31 Mar 71, Ned and Bruce were either sitting in the new Ops building or very close by...possibly getting some rays. A call came over Guard from Seahorse, asking for any armed aircraft vicinity Ninh Hoa to come up on a certain freq. Since we had the 2 Nighthawk aircraft, we responded. Seahorse explained that he was a FAC, and had a friendly convoy under attack in a mountain pass nearby (Duc Me, as it later turned out), and the friendlies had abandoned the vehicles and cleared the area. Some had left weapons behind, and the main vehicle (there may or may not have been others) was a 5,000 gallon tanker that had enemy crawling all over it. The convoy friendlies were either ARVN or US, but not Korean. We described our Nighthawk birds, and Seahorse said "Perfect, come on." He probably had to give us directions to the site, due to our newness in the AO. Upon arrival in the area, Seahorse instructed us to destroy the tanker and get as many enemy as we could. We probably made a high recon, and Seahorse reported us in sight (we were single-ship). Since we had the .50 with Armor Piercing Incendiary (API) on the right side, we decided to make a low pass to the left of the tanker, firing mini on the left and .50 on the right, and so informed Seahorse, who rogered and said, "I've got you covered going in." Upon initiating this pass, we could see many enemy who suddenly decided that we were unwelcomed intruders to this invitation-only event, and decided to shoot back...a lot. We opened fire; the mini fired one round and jammed, and the .50 fired one round and jammed. Calling Seahorse, we made a hard 180 so he would know to stay clear and exited back out of the area. We were able to clear both weapons and test fire pretty quickly, so notified Seahorse that we were back in hot. He responded, "Roger, got you covered." This trip went better – got a number of bad guys and the tanker made one hell of an explosion when the .50 API lit it up. We made some more passes, each time covered by Seahorse, and return fire seemed to lessen considerably. At some point, the gunner reported that he had been hit in the leg and got pretty excited, so we began to clear the site. Ned and Bruce asked each other, "Did you see Seahorse?" Both responded with a negative. As we were headed back to Cam Ranh hospital, we called Seahorse, asking, "What are you and where are you?" The reply was, "I'm a Birddog at 5000 feet. Been there the whole time." We turned and looked at each other, shook our heads, and queried, "What weapons are you carrying?" Back came the rather sheepish reply, "Well, I was out of rockets when I called for help, but had you covered with my M-16."

POSTSCRIP: We never were able to hunt that sucker down and castrate him, but recent web research indicates that Seahorse was the Army 183d Reconnaissance Airplane Company, flying O-1's in the area. Their unit historian (copied on this) is attempting to research the incident. Our gunner took a clean through-and-through flesh wound and returned to the unit in a short time. There is a good possibility that he shot himself in all the excitement and chaos after running out of .50 ammo and engaging with his M-16.