

Sgt. Johnnie G. Lee was just an average G. I. Born in Macon, Mississippi, he was blonde, blue-eyed, five-foot seven, slightly chubby and probably stronger than most men his size because he had worked in his father's sawmill when he was young. He didn't like movies, music, sports or ~~may may~~ have any hobbies. He didn't ~~drink~~ drink or "run around." He was "a good kid", who would do anything for anyone in the unit. Almost every month this included loaning as much as \$125 to his buddies.

Though he ~~is~~ celebrated his twenty third birthday on October 11-- only eight days after arriving in South Viet Nam--he was still so baby-faced "he'd have a hard time buying a drink in a States-side bar." On ~~otherbirthdays~~ birthdays, he would have been given the day off and the commanding officer would have sent him birthday greetings. But in South Viet Nam, the ~~Utility~~ U. S. Army Utility Tra Tactical Transport Helicopter Company didn't have time for such "frilly things."

Sgt. Lee was distressed that with three months more duty in Viet Nam, he would not be home for Christmas. He had wanted to be home "the worst way" with his wife, Maudie. He had bought her a pink Mandarin-collared Chinese dress in Okinawa and a star sapphire ring in Bangkok. Presumably these were for Christmas. But most of all he wanted to be with ~~his~~ Jonnie (correct) Gene Lee, his first son, whom he had never seen.

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In the Far East, Sgt. Lee's big interest was "old ~~789~~ 689", as he called his HU-1A helicopter (now designated as ~~HUH-1A~~ UH-1A). As crew chief of the ship, he was responsible for its proper care and maintenance. He scrubbed the floor of the aircraft with the fetishness of an oldmaid housekeeper; kept the outside shell polished; often worked until 10 p.m. on its engine after a day-long mission. In Spe September he had installed a new engine in the helicopter and boasted to the other crew chiefs he had the fastest ship ~~in the company~~ of the 15 in the company.

On Friday, Nov. 2, "old 689" was it "EDP" (equipment down for parts). So Sgt. Lee volunteered to fly the next day's mission in helicopter "690". On Friday night, he and three of his buddies left Tan Son Nhut airport, where they lived eight to a hot, mosquito-filled tent, and squeezed into a small blue-and-white Renault taxi.

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 "Tom, I'm not coming ~~xxxx~~ back from tomorrow's flight," he calmly told Sgt. Tom Pounders, his 25-year-old Arkansas buddy, during the ride downtown. The foursome ate a quiet dinner of filet mignon and ~~saladxxxxx~~ ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ in the pizzeria on central Saigon's Tu-Do Street.

The next morning, Sgt. Lee asked to be taken off the flight he had volunteered for. Another crew chief offered to substitute for him. But at the decisive moment, Sgt. Lee decided to go. At 8:00, he decided to move from the left side of the ship, where he placed ~~the~~ an a Vietnamese "observer", strapped him ~~in~~ in and then set down moved to the rear right side of the helicopter. He squatted crosslegged on an old settee cushion and a double layer of his flac shorts. At 8:10 the five ~~HUH-1A~~ HU-1A's exc escorted in the first lift load of troops carried in H-21 helicopters into the first ~~in~~ Mekong delta landing zone. It was a quiet run.

The next left was different. As the troops leaped off the H-21's, a blanket of automatic gunfire streamed from the treeline skirting the rice-paddy landing zone. Helicopter ~~in~~ 690 spun around fast,

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making a 45-degree turn to return the fire with its 16 2.75 ~~xxxxxx~~ inch rockets. One bullet moved through the bottom of the helicopter, through the thin outer shell of the helicopter, through the settee curshi cushion, through Sgt. ~~xxxx~~ Lee's left leg and into his abdomen.

Sgt. Lee pushed the inter-com button. "I've been hit, Mr. Wright," he told CWO Richard "Pappy" Wright, of Augusta, Illinois. Wind blowing through the door-less helicopter splattered blood over the pilots and the instrument panel.

Five minutes later, Sgt. Lee was in the hands of a French surgeon at Vinh Long's ~~x~~ airport. Twelve minutes later he ~~wax~~ died from loss of blood and shock.

Four other Viet Cong bullets hit the HU-1A's on that lift. Capt. Joel R. Stein of Warrenton, Georgia, was luckier. A bullet came through the instrument panel of his ship, but was stopped by the seven layers of fiberglass in his flac jacket., his notebook and ~~xxxx~~ metal ballpoint pen. The U. S.-made M-1 rifle bullet which that he pulled out of his flac jacket left only a black-and-blue imprint of his pen.

Despite Sgt. Lee's death, the mission was an important victory in the four-day Operation Da-Da (Partridge), one of the most successful ones conducted within past weeks. A total of 232 Viet Cong were confirmed dead and an estimated additional 100 dead were carried away. Forty two prisoners and a number of weapons were captured.

On Wednesday of this week, the officers and enlisted men of Sgt. Lee's first platoon, dressed in fatigues during duty hours, gathered at Tan Son Nhut airport for a five-minute planeside ceremony. Crews of the company's other two platoons were flying another mission, ~~airax~~ They had changed the chalk or paint markings on the helicopter rockets from "Give 'em Hell--UTT" to "This one's for Johnnie Lee."

The heavy drones of incoming and departing military aircraft drowned out the minister's words at the brief ceremony. One thousand feet away, "old 689" stood on grassy strip, still down for parts. The flag draped casket was lifted aboard by six khaki-clad pallbearers for shipment back to the United States and burial.

Sgt. Johnnie Lee made it home for Christmas.

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Three other American deaths were recorded this week: Pfc. Garry C. McPetridge of Wheatland, Indiana, was killed by grenade thrown into restaurant; two were killed in crash of B-26 light bomber (names unavailable here). Official American military records here show this brought the total to 40 American dead (from all causes, including natural death, drowning, suicide as well as killed in action) since July, 1959, when first death was registered. Ninety eight have been wounded (from all causes) since the beginning of this year.

~~Shaggy~~

NOTE: suggest you check the Pentagon for casulty reports asl also since there is a discrepancy here between American ~~mi~~ military figures, Vietnamese ~~institutions~~ and wire service figures.