

Bar-Me-Thuot--It was only a two-hour helicopter ride. I thought I was lucky to get on it--and luckier to get off.

For the first time in my four months' stay in South Viet Nam, I had hitch-hiked a ride on a ^{REAL} "combat mission"--carrying Vietnamese troops into the densely jungled hillsides of the high plateau region north of Saigon.

But in those two hours we had flitted at tree-top level for 120 rpt. 120 miles over heavily-infested Viet Cong & territory in the roughest terrain in ^{TRIS} the small country.

The pilots battle started when they entered the cockpit. Mine began before I even entered the chopper--a 45-minute verbal contest with the American commander who hours later finally allowed me to go.

"But you're not going like that," Pilot Willie interjected, pointing to my black skirt, sports blouse and tennis shoes.

^{He} The small five-foot-seven pilot with bushy blond mustache, Lt. Arthur Arlington Williams was born in Delaware, raised in Cape May, New Jersey, but considers Ft. Bragg, North Carolina his home. (address unavailable).

Of course, everyone calls him Willie.

I hurriedly scrounged a flight suit, a tired-blue shapeless, pajama-styled affair, grabbed a drab green shoulder bag commonly called a survival kit and a dilapidated bush hat, the Australian version of Gene Autry's 10-gallon.

I trundled into the chopper ungracefully—it wasn't built for women, ~~except~~ especially short-legged ones—behind six nine steel-helmeted Vietnamese marines wearing brown and green leopard-spotted camouflage suits and carrying large packs of ammunition, bedrolls, tents and long sticks of French bread.

I "sat" down on a too-small ledge near the radio equipment where I could peer over the machine gun ~~post~~ ^{MANEUVERED} poised at the front door and into the cockpit where Willie maneuvered the H-21 Shawnee.

Sgt. Joseph Joseph Sluus, of North Chatham, New York (Box 95) was huddled at the front machine gun, ^{checking} checking his carbine; Crew Chief Harold E. Rains, of Fayetteville, North Carolina (Route 6), stood alertly at the back one, adjusting the intercom ~~cord~~ cord.

At the touch of Willie's hand, the helicopter bulldozed forward along the red clay airstrip and then nosed upward. To absorb the sweat, he wore black kid gloves with a big ^{HOLE} hole in the right index finger used to press the intercom button. His ~~base~~ bushy mustache almost hid the mouthpiece.

The tin and tile roofs of the shops in ^{BAN-ME-TRUOT} bannethuet faded from my view out the cockpit window; the French-owned rubber, tea and coffee plantations jettied by.

"You're the scariest looking gannor I've ever seen—with lipstick on," Willie said over the intercom.

"That's a good idea," said Co-pilot William E. McKenzie, chief warrant officer from Fayetteville, North Carolina (722 Hilton Drive).

"Well, I'd get pretty worried if old Sluus started wearing lipstick," Willie countered.

"No, I mean having female gunners."

But the chit-chat ceased as we headed into the mountainous jungled terrain so dense it looked like sprigs on a massive head of cauliflower. The chopper rollicostered along, flitting five to ten feet above the contours of the tree tops and river beds.

More more

"Willie, why do you fly so low," I asked, wondering if he was playing tree-top tag.

"Ah, we're collecting butterflies," he replied. (Foliage absorbs roar of the engine.)

Sgt. Sluus was hunched over his machine gun, his head pointed out the door so that the ^{wind} tossed his hair. From his chopper door, I saw us whiz by the long stilted houses of the Rhades, the primitive aborigines of Viet Nam who live scattered throughout the jungle by burning the hillsides and planting unirrigated rice. They are constantly harrassed by the Viet Cong.

Thirty miles from ~~Banne~~ Ban-Me-Thuot, Willie slowed down the chopper, edged it into a small "clearing" littered with half-burned tree stumps, pulled the ~~ex~~ craft's nose to within two yards of a stake and landed. The nine marines scurried out, hiding behind bushes and rocks to secure the area.

These troops were lucky. We could land. On previous flights a dozen whirlybirds of the 8th Helicopter Co. had dumped Vietnamese troops--and sometimes they jumped--as the chopper hovered above the steep tangled hillsides.

And back we headed for another lift-load, buzzing across the countryside at 100 rpt. 100 miles per hour.

Gunner Sluus pointed to five elephants bathing in a stream, but he was more interested in spotting a tiger in this area once famous for big-game hunting. Now only Viet Cong hunts are advised. A herd of water buffalo stampeded when we buzzed over. Villagers stopped their rice paddy work; two small boys waved.

As soon as the chopper hit ground, my two feet did the same. But only shortly. Another load of troops piled in and we started on our second one-hour mission.

"These dangerous missions must get kinda dull after awhile," I said to one pilot.

"No, I'm scared all the time," he replied.

Yet, I was surprised--and relieved that the chopper-ites maintained an air of calculated nonchalance about their death-cheating missions.

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They take coffee-breaks between their breath-taking runs. Between lifts, while the choppers are being re-fueled, the mess officer brings to the airstrip mid-morning coffee and cookies, served from the hood of the jeep.

One of the crew laughed, telling about a pilot taking off from his jungle landing-pad after unloading troops.

"Bill didn't want to fly straight like the rest of us. He slid over into the tea plantation. All I could see was the rotor blades whirling around and a million white hats," he chuckled. "I bet those cotton-pickin' tea-pickers are shock up today."

Another pilot reported being being shot at, but missed, from a hillside.

"Well, those holes are just drilled in during the rainy season to let the water drain out," Willie explained.

Later, the crews learned that another helicopter in their company had crashed and burned further north. "They must have wanted a winter roast," one pilot said nervously.

"You only crash when you make sudden contact with the ground," Willie observed.

But they all knew it could happen to them somewhere over the enemy-infested jungles of South Viet Nam.