



# Helicopter Loss Possibly Vietnam's Deadliest Hostile Crash

by Janie Blankenship

For those serving at LZ Judy, Aug. 26, 1970, is a date they won't likely forget. That's the day 31 men died when their Chinook went down just shy of landing.



For Eric "Ric" Reid, Aug. 26, 1970, began like most days in Vietnam ... at "0:dark-thirty." Serving with the 178th Assault Support Helicopter Company (ASHC), Reid was the co-pilot of a CH-47 Chinook (tail number 67-18445). Dan York was the aircraft commander, and Jole York, George Tiff and Hima McDougall filled out the crew.

As part of *Operation Elk Canyon I-II*, they were extracting elements of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade (LIB) from Kham Duc and transporting them 19 miles to Landing Zone (LZ) Judy.

On its last flight out of Kham Duc, the Chinook had a full load of troops and ammo cans and 105mm artillery rounds in cartons.

With 25 grunts and two artillerymen on board, Reid remembers that final trip to LZ Judy as "routine."

## Co-Pilot Sole Survivor

"As we closed on LZ Judy, we were informed by the mission commander we were number seven for landing," he

said. "It was like a major U.S. airport. We were actually in a holding pattern."

After watching the other six Chinooks land and discharge their troops and cargo, Reid's crew was cleared to land.

"About 200 yards out with approximately 150 feet of altitude, I heard a loud bang in the back of the aircraft,"

cinated as the aircraft settled into the trees," he said. "I remember thinking how much I would miss my wife and boys. I was knocked unconscious."

When Reid came to, he heard men moaning and the sound of crackling fire. York was dead, and Reid tried to get into the back to start pulling people

**"I locked my harness and watched fascinated as the aircraft settled into the trees. I remember thinking how much I would miss my wife and boys. I was knocked unconscious."**

Eric Reid, co-pilot, 178th Assault Support Helicopter Company

Reid said. "I was astonished to see the master caution light on as well as what appeared to be the majority of the caution panel lit like a Christmas tree."

Reid said the aircraft was quickly losing altitude and started to turn to the right. He could see they were going right into the trees.

"I locked my harness and watched fas-

out. The entry was blocked. While trying to get out of the burning Chinook, Reid lost his footing and hit the ground rolling downhill until he was stopped by two large boulders.

He freed himself and started up the slope when the aircraft exploded.

"One of the front landing gears landed not 10 feet from me," he said. "I knew



PHOTO BY RAY TINDALL

▲ Soldiers from B Co., 1st Bn., 6th Inf., load onto a CH-47 helicopter of the 178th Assault Support Helicopter Company in September 1970. That same aviation unit lost the Chinook at LZ Judy on Aug. 29.

the aircraft was lost. More importantly, my fellow crewmen and the troops that had trusted us to get them to LZ Judy safely were lost.”

Reid was the sole survivor of the crash, but 31 others were killed and eight wounded, including one killed (from C Company) on the ground from debris. Reid thought there was one other survivor who was later flown to a hospital in Japan, but no one has ever been able to confirm this.

The men killed came from six units, but the preponderance (18) were from D Company. Four hailed from the 178th.

No one has ever been able to conclusively confirm the cause of the crash.

Retired Lt. Col. Richard Carvell, then-commander of the 1st Bn., 46th Inf., 196th LIB, was flying in a light observation helicopter not far behind Reid. While he never observed any enemy fire, he did see the Chinook go down. He said he was “following close enough to hear and see.”

In his report of Sept. 1, 1970, Carvell wrote that the helicopter “allegedly” received ground fire. The after-action report states that the CH-47 “received enemy fire” while approaching LZ Judy.

“I don’t know the exact truth of what brought us down,” Reid said. “I only know that it did.”



◀ Cpl. Thomas Steven Hickman was among the D Company soldiers who perished in the crash on Aug. 26, 1970. Some 31 men died at LZ Judy that tragic day.

### ‘No Definitive’ Cause of Crash

Greg Sanders was in the Americal Division Tactical Operations Center when the crash occurred, but did attend the Chinook crash briefing.

He said there was much speculation as to the cause, including that it may have been caused by a rough landing.

“The truth is, there is no definitive evidence one way or other as to the cause of the crash,” Sanders said. “As with nearly all events, many eyewitnesses see things differently.”

(Sanders, along with co-author Jim McLeroy, is writing a book chronicling the battle at Kham Duc May 10-12, 1968. See the June/July 2007 issue of VFW magazine.)

As commander of the 2nd Bn., 1st Inf., Al Coleman was overseeing the withdrawal of the security outposts at Kham Duc that day.

Once everyone had been airlifted out, Coleman said he made one more

## Deadly Helicopter Crashes During the Vietnam War

DATE	LOCATION	CAUSE	DEATHS	HELICOPTER TYPE	MAJOR UNITS
1-8-68	Near Dong Ha	N	46	CH-53A	1st and 3rd Marine Divisions; Helicopter Squadron 463
11-28-71	Da Nang—Camp Eagle	N	34	CH-47C	A & HHC Cos., 1st Bn., 327th Inf., 101st Abn. Div.*
5-10-72	Bien Hoa—Vung Tau	N	34	CH-47A	D Co., 2nd Bn., 8th Cav, 1st Cav Div.*
8-26-70	LZ Judy	H	31	CH-47B	D Co., 2nd Bn., 1st Inf., 196th LIB; 178th ASHC*
2-28-68	?	H	22	CH-46D	HMM-262, MAG 36, 1st MAW*
5-13-75	Nakhon Phanom, Thailand	N	21	CH-53A	Air Force 56th Security Police Sqdn.; 21st Special Ops. Sqdn.
5-4-66	Nhon Co	N	20	CH-47A	2nd Bn., 502nd Inf., 101st Abn. Div.; 147th Avn. Co.
7-15-66	?	H	15	CH-46A	E Co., 2nd Bn., 1st Marines, 1st Marine Div.; HMM 265*
11-18-70	FSB Rainbow	N	15	CH-46D	1st Marine Recon Bn; Helicopter Sqdn. 263
10-31-72	?	H	15	CH-47C	18th Avn. Co.; C Trp., 16th Cav*
5-15-75	Koh Tang Island, Cambodia	H	14	CH-53A	2nd Bn., 9th Marines
6-6-68	LZ Loon	H	13	CH-46	C Co., 1st Bn., 4th Marines, 3rd Div.
3-12-70	FSB Rhode Island	N	13	UH-1D	B Co., 4th Bn., 9th Inf., 25th Div; 128th Assault Helicopter Co.
7-3-68	?	H	13	CH-46D	B Co., 1st Recon Bn., 1st Marine Div.; Helicopter Sqdn. 164

\*=Additional units H=Hostile N=Non-Hostile

**Sources:** Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association, Gary Roush; VFW research through the Interactive Vietnam Veterans Memorial

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Lt. Col. Richard Carvell (Ret.), 1st Bn., 46th Inf., 196th LIB

pass over Kham Duc to make sure that the demolition guys had done their job.

“We were inbound for LZ Judy when I received a call that a CH-47 had crashed and that the LZ was closed,” Coleman said. “We diverted to LZ Mary Ann, and I rejoined the battalion the next morning.”

While Coleman did not see the chopper hit the ground, the information he received, as well as a later visit to the crash site, led him to believe it was enemy gun fire that brought it down.

178th ASHC (call sign Boxcars) commanding officer, Brian Foote, was flying in a Huey command and control ship a few minutes from the landing zone

when the crash occurred.

Foote also did not see the crash occur, but thought it was likely caused by a short burst from an AK-47. He also stated that maybe the helicopter had a mechanical problem.

He tells of losing an aircraft at LZ Siberia on Feb. 6, 1971. Unlike the crash at LZ Judy, Foote was able to retrieve many of the parts for evaluation.

“As it turned out, the cause of that accident was a [broken] bolt that went through the pilot valve in the aft rotor,” Foote said. “Sometimes the cause is not always apparent to the observer.”

Serving with D Co., 4th Bn., 31st Inf., 196th LIB, Americal Div., on LZ Judy,

Bob Dolan was in a hole next to the helipad when the Chinook came around the hill on its approach.

He said what he saw was a small burst of AK fire, less than a full magazine. He believes that the gunfire must have taken out the hydraulics because the aircraft dipped once and then again before plunging into the jungle.

“We humped down the hill shortly after and found that Reid survived,” he said.

Carvell noted in his report that the thick vegetation could have allowed an enemy soldier to position himself to shoot down the helicopter without too much difficulty.

“I do not feel that the crash resulted from negligence on the part of any U.S. member involved in the operation,” Carvell concluded.

When all is said and done, those killed in the crash are classified as hostile deaths by the Defense Department. ✪

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