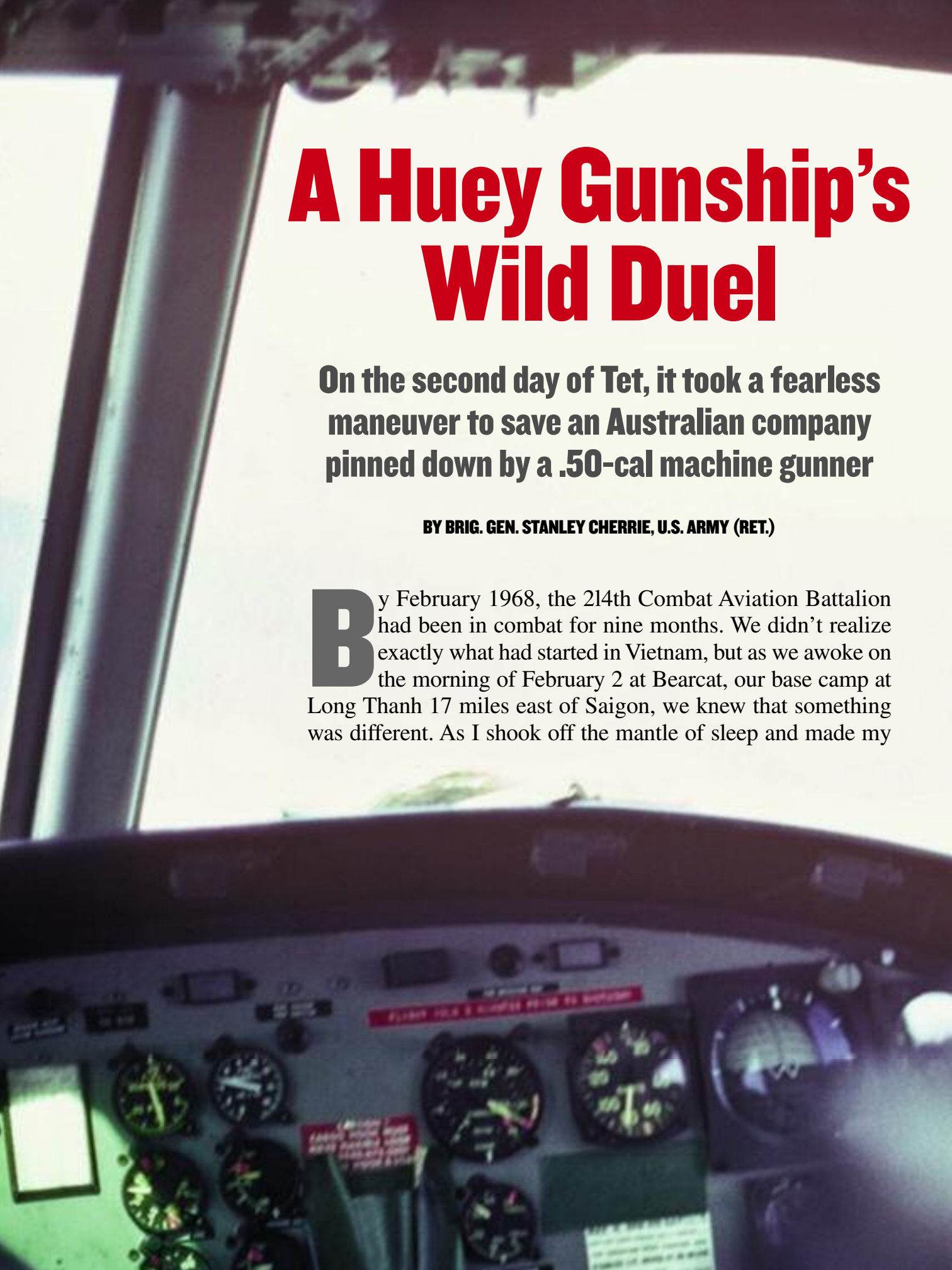


A Huey Gunship's Wild Duel

On the second day of Tet, it took a fearless maneuver to save an Australian company pinned down by a .50-cal machine gunner

BY BRIG. GEN. STANLEY CHERRIE, U.S. ARMY (RET.)

By February 1968, the 214th Combat Aviation Battalion had been in combat for nine months. We didn't realize exactly what had started in Vietnam, but as we awoke on the morning of February 2 at Bearcat, our base camp at Long Thanh 17 miles east of Saigon, we knew that something was different. As I shook off the mantle of sleep and made my

ON THE HUNT With the call sign of Bounty Hunter 21, Huey gunship pilot Captain Stanley Cherrie eyes a target through his 2.25 FFAR sight on a firing run out of Bearcat base camp in early 1968.

COURTESY OF STANLEY CHERRIE

SHOCK AND AWE **The coordinated ferocity of Tet came as a big surprise to most of the Americans on the ground, who were also stunned by the show of widespread support for the Viet Cong among the populace in the South.**

way to the shaving troughs, I couldn't help but notice a great deal of aerial activity, both helicopter and fast mover, for that early in the morning.

Someone at the shaving trough told me that there had been attacks by the Viet Cong all over the country at precisely the same time. We knew that the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army troops were good soldiers who fought exceptionally well, but most of us didn't believe the actions of the VC were coordinated at a very high level—certainly not at the national level.

I decided to skip breakfast and go straight to the operations tent to file my flight plan for the day. Walking in, I learned that my platoon leader, Major Bob Stack, who had the Navy support mission at Nha Be for the day, had been diverted on the way there and sent to Bien Hoa airbase, where he had been shot down. His helo was damaged but no one was hurt. He was being flown back to Long Thanh to get another helicopter.

My mission for the day, as Bounty Hunter 21, was to take my light fire team south to the Australian base camp at Nui Dat and work special air service (SAS) patrol insertions.

As we lifted off and cleared the perimeter berm on a 270-degree heading, I could not believe my eyes. All around there were thousands of Viet Cong flags of all sizes—in the fields, in trees, on fence poles—and, as intended, they served notice to us that the peoples' support for the VC was a hell of a lot stronger than we had ever imagined.

Breaking right and turning south, we were stunned by the many fires burning below. Usually in the early morning a thermal inversion trapped the cooking fires' charcoal smell at about 1,000 feet and we'd get a good whiff as we climbed through it to our in-transit altitude of 1,500 feet. This morning, however, dozens of

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

large fires raged all over the countryside along our route. To our right rear, it looked as if the whole city of Saigon was in flames.

The radios were alive with traffic. Normally there were two or more pairs of gun drivers on each of the five VHF channels at any given time. Even on a quiet day there was plenty of chatter on the nets, but on this day they were busier than I had ever heard in my nine months of combat flying. I knew something big was up when I heard that helicopters attempting to resupply the U.S. Embassy with additional small-arms ammunition had taken fire and were driven off after repeated attempts to land on the roof.

We proceeded to Nui Dat, landed and received our mission brief, which was to insert an SAS patrol. As we accomplished the mission in the rural hinterlands, it was agonizing to know that the locus of the fight that day seemed to be around the cities of Saigon, Bien Hoa, Da Nang and Hue, and not where we were operating.

Upon returning home we were met on the flight line by several of the crews that had been in the fight for most of the day. They all

'All around were thousands of VC flags—in the fields, in trees, on fence poles—they were everywhere!'

COURTESY OF STANLEY CHERRIE

LOADED FOR BEAR Cherrie's bird, Mother Goose, was a killing machine with 400 rounds of 40mm grenades, two 19-shot rocket pods and two M-60s.

were dripping wet and extremely fatigued. I learned that Major Stack had been shot down twice that day and had just flown his third helo home.

That night we had a company meeting to evaluate what had happened and what we could expect in the near future. There were several assessments and counter-assessments, but all we really knew was that on that day, at least, Charlie had stood up at the bar and said, "OK sumbitches, let's fight!" Armed Forces Vietnam Network television reported that all over Vietnam large-scale attacks had been launched in tandem with the commencement of the celebration of the lunar New Year—Tet. The AFVN report confirmed that there had been heavy fighting, especially in and around the larger cities, with extremely high loss of life on both sides.

We were put on a higher state of alert, and we anticipated that there would be a greater-than-normal need for gunships. Over the next day, February 3, our battalion was involved in several actions that demonstrated that the war had assumed a whole different scale. As luck would have it, my section still didn't draw support in and around any of the big city hot spots, but again we had a support mission for the Aussies at their base camp, Nui Dat.

We landed at the small Nui Dat airfield and were met—not at operations, as was the norm, but rather on the flight line—by an Australian officer. He excitedly told us that his men had a "Tac E"—tactical emergency—to their west, near the town of Beria. A tactical convoy had been ambushed. The Aussies had some seriously wounded, but had been pinned down for 30 minutes by .50-caliber fire, which prevented helicopter medical evacuation. The officer gave us the approximate convoy location, as well as the site of the .50-caliber machine gun and a frequency and call sign. We logged the information, climbed to altitude, called Bearcat to apprise them of the mission and headed west for Beria.

We then punched in the ground commander's frequency and identified ourselves as Bounty Hunter 21 and Bounty Hunter 27,

'Saigon was ablaze and fires raged across the countryside'

a light-fire team with 2.75-inch rockets, a 40mm grenade launcher, two miniguns and four M-60 machine guns. We were now about six kilometers to his east.

The ground commander, an Australian major, quickly—and with understandable excitement—briefed me on the situation. His company had been on an operation and was traveling in a column formation through a village when it came under simultaneous fire from all directions. The Australians' initial actions on contact had driven off most of the enemy. But, while they were in a herringbone formation—a defensive immediate-action drill in which tracks assume a zipper-like configuration to provide immediate defense in all directions—they had come under .50-caliber fire from a gunner located in a small bell tower atop a building used as a movie theater. Since the tracers were pinkish-orange and not green, we concluded that we were up against an American .50-caliber; but it really didn't make any practical difference, as a U.S.–made .50-caliber and a Chinese .51-caliber were both formidable weapons.

The enemy gunner could fire on the Aussie company no matter where they were, regardless of the angle from which they approached him. The Aussies were hopelessly pinned down and needed help in eliminating the machine gunner in the bell tower.

I told the major that we were familiar with the area, since we had frequently worked with the Australians as a part of the American helicopter force that routinely flew in support of the SAS patrols. He was relieved to hear that. I told him to stand fast and give me a few minutes, and we would come up with an appropriate strategy.

COURTESY OF STANLEY CHERRIE

PACKING A PUNCH **The agile Huey, armed with 2.75-inch rockets, wreaked havoc on the enemy.**

We were about three kilometers to the southwest of the area of operations when I began assessing the conditions in order to set up the attack. My wingman, Command Warrant Officer 2 Larry Miller, and I got the lay of the land. There was no terrain cover, but rather good unrestricted observation in all directions. The bottom line was that we had no option but to attack the .50-cal in a head-to-head fight.

I established the attack parameters. We would be starting at 2,500 feet, as opposed to the normal 1,500-foot "over the top" gun run. What we would lose in initial rocket gunnery accuracy we would make up in ship and crew safety. I can still feel the adrenaline rush and stark fear I experienced on the first gun run. As I started inbound, the enemy gunner, perched in the cupola, let me know that he knew exactly where I was and that he was going to do his best to kill me first and then my wingman. Seconds into the run I saw large, bright pink golf-ball-size objects flying at me on what seemed very close to a 180-degree course to mine. What bothered me most was that for every two of these orangey-pink "mothers," there were four more nonilluminated .50-caliber bullets in between them.

The "Fifty" struck fear in the hearts of all helicopter drivers. The .50-caliber slug is large enough to stop a charging elephant, let alone a thin-skinned, lightly armored magnesium, aluminum and titanium UH-1C gunship.

I fired a couple of pairs of rockets, but I had no idea what effect they had on the target, because before any of them hit, I was breaking right, trying to dodge the fiery golf balls that were flying toward me. Climbing for altitude, I could see that my wingman was going through the same thing. Even though we were pouring door-gun fire on our target area, the .50-cal gunner was still locked directly onto his target—us. It was obvious that on the first pass, at least, we hadn't eliminated the problem. We had to find a different way to attack him without giving him another head-on chance at us.

In the target area, an M-113 armored personnel carrier (APC) had been hit and disabled. It was burning, giving off a huge amount of smoke that roiled skyward in a thick, black column that could be seen for miles.

Shooting rockets requires selecting an attack axis that fires into the wind in order to maximize the rocket's accuracy and effects. When a 2.75-inch aerial rocket is launched, it seeks the relative wind. Shooting into the wind, in trim, is therefore the preferred method. With that in mind, while circling out of range, I got a good look at the long, thick black column of smoke from the APC being blown downwind—and got a wild idea.

I told my wingman to fly to the north and beyond the .50-cal's effective range, to tempt the gunner into concentrating on and tracking him, thereby diverting his attention long enough for me to enter the cover of the smoke column. I would then fly down the column, break out near enough so I could be fairly sure that a salvo would hit the target, then run like hell at low level while my wingman suppressed from another direction.

I gave a quick mission brief, wished my wingman Miller good luck and approached the smoke column at 2,500 feet. It wasn't long before Miller called me and reported that he had taken several bursts as he approached the target from the northeast. I feared the gunner sensed what we were up to, but there was no turning back now; it was my turn. I entered the long, black smoke column and came over the top at 2,000 feet. As we came screaming down at 80 knots, I checked trim, centered the bubble on the top of the sight and caught a brief glimpse of the building through the smoke.

I put my target indicator, or "pipper," where I thought the target would be when I broke out of the smoke column into the open. As we broke right at 1,200 feet, I was thrilled to find myself squarely facing the cupola in an almost perfect lineup.

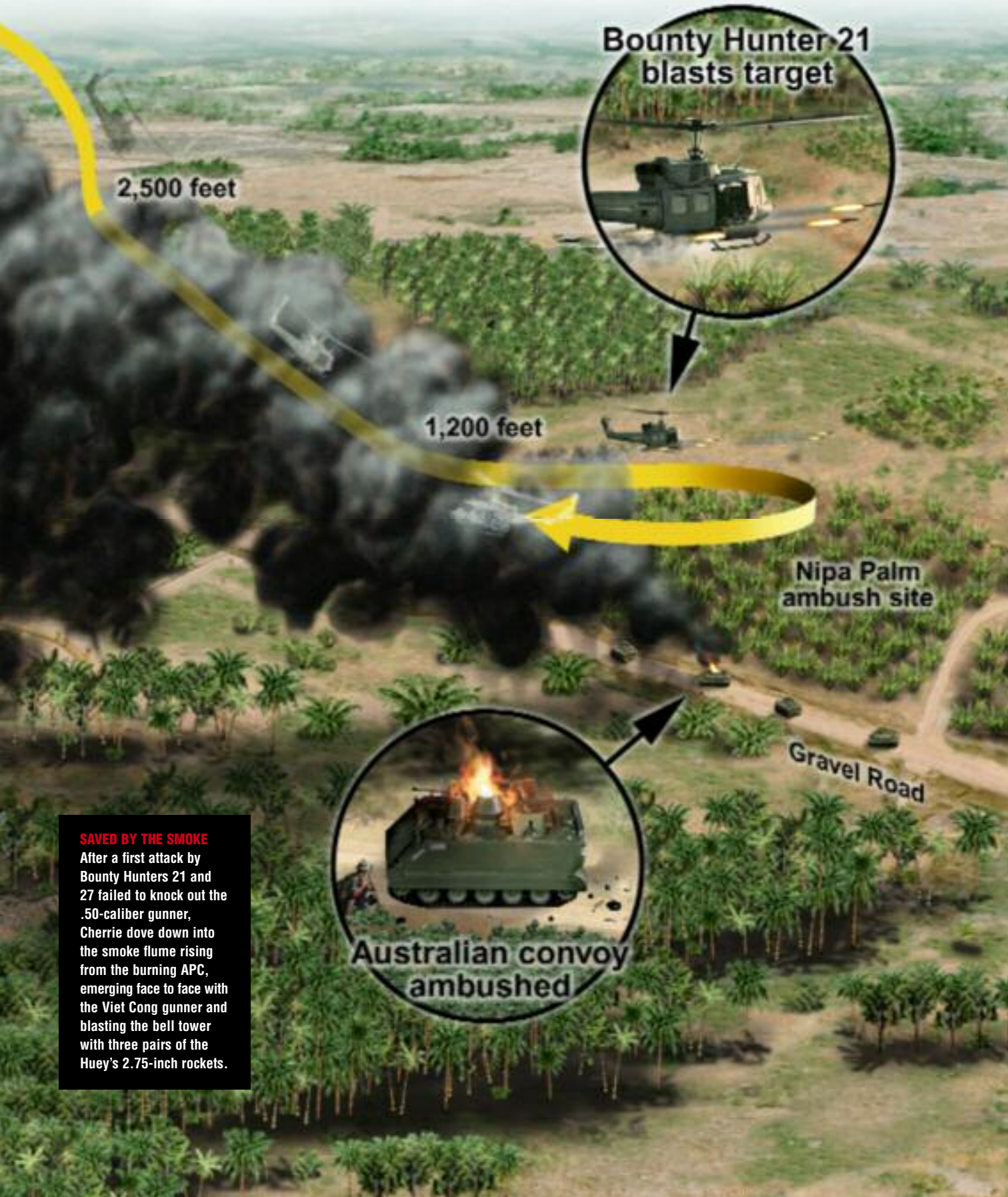
Fortunately, the .50-cal gunner was not oriented in my direction at that instant—he certainly had the more accurate weapon, and at 1,200 feet he would have eaten my lunch. I fired one, two, then three pairs of rockets in rapid succession and then broke wildly to the right as my co-pilot switched to 40mm and started suppressing the target area. My left door gunner also opened up, and then in an instant we were out of there.

I thought that we had gotten the bell tower, but wasn't sure. Then

SAIGON BURNING **On the morning of February 2, 1968, chaos engulfed the capital and, from Cherrie's Huey, it appeared the entire city was in flames.**

CORBIS

A Huey Gunship Pilot's Shootout at Beria



SAVED BY THE SMOKE
After a first attack by Bounty Hunters 21 and 27 failed to knock out the .50-caliber gunner, Cherrie dove down into the smoke flume rising from the burning APC, emerging face to face with the Viet Cong gunner and blasting the bell tower with three pairs of the Huey's 2.75-inch rockets.

GREGORY PROCH

both radio nets, the FM ground command net as well as my wingman, started chattering excitedly about how the building and the .50-cal gunner had just disappeared. Still not convinced that we were out of danger, I pulled the guts out of my Huey to put as much distance between me and the .50-cal as quickly as I could.

Once we were several kilometers from the target area, I climbed to 1,500 feet and called Miller. "Good going, boss," he said, and that was all I needed to hear. He took up his wing position, and as we approached the target we saw that the Aussies had already swarmed over the area and had dustoff choppers inbound to take their wounded out. By the time the medevac was over, it was late afternoon and we broke station to go to Nui Dat to rearm and refuel.

We were jubilant as we humped rockets and ammo, and then headed back to the area of operations to ensure that there was no further need for our support. We again checked in with the Aussie company, and they thanked us for what we had done. It was late in the afternoon when we finally broke for the flight to Bearcat, very pleased with what we had accomplished that day during Tet.

FAST FORWARD TO AN EVENING in February 1980, in my British Army Staff College student quarters in Camberley, England, where I was stationed as a student for a year. I had hosted a party for my promotion to lieutenant colonel, and most of the guests had left. The one couple remaining was the Australian Directing Staff Colonel "Horrie" Howard and his wife. The colonel and I both had consumed enormous amounts of cold Budweiser and were just sort of lounging around when he casually asked me if I had ever flown in support of the Australian forces.

I told him how one fire team had routinely flown in support of Aussie SAS patrol insertions, but that only on one occasion did we encounter a fight. I then told him the story of the Beria fight. After I finished, Howard quietly excused himself. We all assumed that he was making a pit stop, considering all the beer we had drunk, but after about 10 minutes I went to check the bathroom and it was empty. Shortly, the doorbell rang and there was Howard with a big brown paper bag in his hand.

We went into the living room, and before his wife could begin questioning him he demurely said, "I have a gift for my U.S. brother." He then pulled out a sweat-soiled, stiff Aussie bush hat that one could tell had clearly seen some hard times, namely in Vietnam.

THANKS, MATE The Aussie bush hat given to Cherrie by Colonel Howard for saving his company.

Colonel Howard then explained that the company that my wingman and I had helped save a dozen years before had belonged to his battalion. "I want you to have this as a symbol of my thanks for the support you gave to my battalion during Tet '68 at Beria," he said.

That bush hat remains one of my fondest treasures to this day. ☆

Brigadier General Stanley F. Cherrie, U.S. Army (Ret.), served two tours in Vietnam. During Operation Desert Storm he was the Operations Officer of VII Corp. From 1993 to 1995 he was Assistant Division Commander–Maneuver of the 1st Armored Division in Germany and Bosnia. He has been awarded the Distinguished Service Medal, the Silver Star, the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Legion of Merit, the Air Medal with V device and the Purple Heart. For additional reading, the author recommends: Chickenhawk, *by Robert Mason; and* Low Level Hell, *by Hugh Mills.*