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The day started out well enough for Sergeant Harris but suddenly things began to go wrong. The temperature was hitting one hundred and it was only seven-thirty in the morning. The Lieutenant had just informed O.K. that the Chinooks would not be flying for him today because of higher priority missions. Sergeant Harris started phoning to other chopper units in the area, trying desperately to arrange to airlift ammo out to Bravo battery. Finally, he managed to get a marine helicopter unit to agree to take his ammo out.

He and his team of ammo bunnies left Camp Eagle in his jeep and a couple of duce-and-a-half trucks and drove to the ammo dump in Phu Bai. The ammo dump was laid out like a small city with dirt berms, six to eight feet high, separating the varieties of ammunition into square blocks. At that time, they would prepare the loads in the dump and the helicopters would pick up the loads from there.²

By none o'clock he had all the ammunition loaded into slings and awaited the call on his radio that would indicated the Marines were on their way. They were flying the H34 Choctaw, which had a cargo capacity of 3,000 pounds. The Chinooks normally used could lift 7,000 pounds. This was a memorable day for the helicopter units, as this was the first day they would be hauling for the 1st of the 83rd Artillery.

The first helicopter came in for his load and call by radio "Blackfoot Indian³ this Foot-loose, over".

Sergeant Harris replied, "Foot-Loose, this is Blackfoot Indian. I'm throwin' smoke – purple. Over"

The chopper slowly drifted down to a height of ten feet above the ground. "Foot-Loose, ya'll have to come in lower". The chopper settled down another two feet. "Got ya'. Hold it." Sergeant Harris paused as he watched Red put the ring of the sling over the hook of the chopper. "Ok, you got it!" he yelled into the mike, the watch as the pilot began turning the helicopter in an attempt to go back out the way he had come in.

¹ These events took place over 45 years ago. My memory isn't perfect, so please help me clean up the details if you have more information. Most of this narrative is based on information I remember hearing from Sergeant Harris, Red and others after the explosion. I could see the black cloud growing from the ammo dump from our location in Camp Eagle. I was fortunate in being the battery clerk who put together the submission for the Soldier's medal for Sergeant Harris. I cannot find any record of the medal being awarded.

² I know that the load was prepared inside the ammo dump. I don't know whether this was normal practice or just an expedient dictated by time available or whatever.

³ I am not sure of the call signs used since and would appreciate any correction or clarification.

“Lift-Off! Lift-Off! Ya’ll gonna hit! The tail of the chopper kept coming around barely missing the top of a duce-and-a-haft truck.

“Lift-Off! Lift-Off!” Sergeant Harris yelled into the mike. He dropped the mike as he watch the tail of the chopper meet the top of a large steel container. Ya’ll gonna hit! The tail of the chopper kept coming around barely missing the top of a duce-and-a-haft truck.

Red was in the lead, as all the men who had been helplessly watching, ran to get on the other side of a small berm in the ammo supply point. There was a loud screaming sound of metal scraping metal and the tail of the chopper blew apart. Leaning over to one side, the chopper started rotating against the blades as it fell the eight feet to the ground. Red saw one of the pilots jump out of the chopper as it hit the ground, with the other out a split-second later. The chopper burst into flames, its rockets starting to fire from the intensity of the heat.

Within moments, the fire spread and that part of the ammo dump was a mass of explosions as everything from the large eight-inch power and rounds down to small arms in other containers started going up in smoke. Large pieces of metal weighing fifteen and twenty pounds sailed overhead as all the men ran for their lives. Sergeant Harris jumped on an Engineer’s tuck and ordered the stunned driver to “Get the hell out’a here!” The truck sped out of the ammo supply point and raced down the road until ordered by Harris to pull over at the guard booth where he leapt out got on the phone.

After notifying the Engineers and the Air Control of the fire, he called through to Captain ____⁴. The Command bunker was located a little over ten miles from the AMMO SUPPLY POINT, and after getting word, the Captain attempted to shrink the miles by yelling at his driver to step on it. The driver went fast through the outskirts of Camp Eagle until on the well-policed roads of the main compound, then slowed down.

“I said GO!”

“But the speed limit, Sir...”

When they pulled up to the AMMO SUPPLY POINT, Sergeant Harris ran up to join them, along with three of the men that had been on the airlift detail that morning. As the captain and driver got out, Sergeant Harris jumped into the jeep and yelled to them, “Can’t stop now. There are still a couple of my men in there!” He shoved the jeep into gear and started towards the dirt hill and the depression surrounding the AMMO SUPPLY POINT.

At that point, Red came running from the AMMO SUPPLY POINT. “Who’s in there?” yelled the captain.

⁴ Just can’t recall our captain’s name.

“We don’t know, sir. Someone said they though they saw a couple of men in the bunker inside the dump.” Even where they stood, a thousand meters away, they could feel the heat generated by the increasing explosions going on inside. The black cloud, swirling thousands of feet into the air, blotted out the sun. In the dump, the inferno continued hurling large chunks of metal through the area. Some of the debris occasionally landed near where the captain and the other men waited.

Sergeant Harris drove inside the supply point and scanned down the road into the cauldron of flames and smoke. The main area of the incessant blasts was near the center of the block where the 175mm and 8 inch powder canisters and projectiles were kept.

He fought for his breath as he squinted his eyes against the heat, driving up to one of the few small bunkers inside the AMMO SUPPLY POINT. Before he’d given the jeep a chance to come to a complete halt, he was out and running. Inside he found a soldier who caught shrapnel in his leg. The man looked up “Thank God! Get me outta here!”

“Stay there! I’ll be back!” Harris yelled at him realizing the soldier was safer in the bunker than in the jeep. He jumped back in the jeep as the din of metal hitting metal joined the sounds of powder exploding. He tried to drive closer to the place where they’d been loading the ammunition when the heat and rain of metal drove him back.

He stopped at the bunker, grabbed the soldier and started racing the jeep towards the exit. By the time he made it, the jeep’s windshield was shattered and one tire was on fire. Harris and the wounded man were immediately surrounded by boots and legs as the wounded man was plucked from the jeep.

Red grabbed Harris and yelled in his ear, “You f***ing idiot!”, as he loaded Harris into a jeep. He and the others were taken to the treatment facility. Sergeant Harris was treated for numerous burns on his face and hands as well as for glass cuts over his head and face. When asked why he did it he replied, “I ain’t leaving any of my men in there.”

A few days later, our captain signed the Request for the Soldier’s award. Sergeant Harris was transferred to one of the firing batteries because he wanted to be where the action was. Red was put in charge of the ammo supply for battalion. A couple of months later, I had my one-month leave before heading back for the second tour in MACV Personnel Headquarters – but that’s another story.