

*This is a book about survival. It is about a 21 year old Army Scout pilot shot down during the Vietnam War on a Scout mission inside enemy held territory in Cambodia. He along with his two crew members were shot down, he alone survived.*

## **Apache Country: A Cambodian Odyssey**

By CW5 Craig J. Houser (Ret)

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# APACHE COUNTRY

**A CAMBODIAN ODYSSEY**



CW5 Craig J. Houser

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# Table of Contents

|                        |            |
|------------------------|------------|
| <b>Part I.....</b>     | <b>1</b>   |
| Chapter One.....       | 3          |
| Chapter Two.....       | 15         |
| Chapter Three.....     | 29         |
| Chapter Four.....      | 41         |
| Chapter Five.....      | 51         |
| Chapter Six.....       | 81         |
| Chapter Seven.....     | 85         |
| Chapter Eight.....     | 91         |
| <b>Part II.....</b>    | <b>99</b>  |
| Chapter Nine.....      | 101        |
| Chapter Ten.....       | 111        |
| Chapter Eleven.....    | 121        |
| Chapter Twelve.....    | 147        |
| <b>Part III.....</b>   | <b>153</b> |
| Chapter Thirteen.....  | 155        |
| Chapter Fourteen.....  | 171        |
| <b>Part IV.....</b>    | <b>181</b> |
| Chapter Fifteen.....   | 183        |
| Chapter Sixteen.....   | 201        |
| <b>Part V.....</b>     | <b>207</b> |
| Chapter Seventeen..... | 209        |
| Chapter Eighteen.....  | 219        |
| Chapter Nineteen.....  | 225        |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>Part VI.....</b>                            | <b>231</b> |
| Chapter Twenty.....                            | 233        |
| Chapter Twenty-One.....                        | 241        |
| Chapter Twenty-Two.....                        | 245        |
| <b>In Memoriam.....</b>                        | <b>249</b> |
| <b>Vietnam Veteran Aviators in the Indiana</b> |            |
| <b>Army National Guard.....</b>                | <b>251</b> |

## Chapter Five

We caught up with 25 two or three miles north of Loc Ninh. It was about 13:30 (1:30), and by now even at two thousand feet it was very hot. The jungle had changed to scattered trees with large open areas. We continued to follow Highway 13 as it ran generally northwest out of Loc Ninh towards Snuol. Somewhere below us was the border. It was about fifteen clicks (kilometers) from Loc Ninh to the border and about the same from the border to Snuol. There was no river in this area defining the border, and there were no markers that we could see from this altitude, but we were now in Cambodia.

Snuol was still out of sight to the northwest, but we could begin to see the rubber plantation that surrounded it on the north and west. This was the Chup Rubber Plantation, and it was much larger than the plantation at Loc Ninh. Some days earlier, we had been involved in what had turned out to be a large battle between the ARVNs and an NVA unit. Almost the entire battle was fought in the rubber, which made it difficult for us to lend close air support with our Cobras or with air strikes from jet fighter bombers because of the visibility problem. Only a Scout bird could fly low enough and slow enough to make out anything in the rubber trees.

“One-Two, this is Two-Five, how do you hear?” There was no mistaking Paul Foti’s New York accent.

“I have you Lima Chuck, how me?” I answered.

“I have you loud and clear also. O.K., what we’re gonna do here, is you follow me up the highway here, and we’re going up north of Snuol and look around up there north of the river, so we’re really looking for that.”

“Copy” I answered.

“Hey, ...and uh, One-Two.”

“Yeah.”

“I still got your body bag, baby,...maybe today’s the day.”

“Yeah, and you know where you can shove that body bag, too, don’t you, asshole?”

“You mean he carries a body bag just for you?” Smoot asked, “I thought that only the Hueys carried those.”

“Oh, he’s been telling me that ever since he was a Huey driver. When I first met him and he found out I had volunteered for Scouts, he told me how stupid I was. Then he started telling me that he was carrying a body bag on his aircraft, just for me. That shit gets old after awhile.”

“Yeah, man, I didn’t like that part about ‘maybe today’s the day’! That’s cold man! Wow!”

Snuol was below us now, passing out the left door. The village was on the southeast side of the rubber plantation. On the extreme southeast side of the village was a small compound in the middle of a large dried-up rice field. That compound was what we really referred to as Snuol. That was the headquarters of the ARVN division we were supporting.

The compound was about a mile west of Highway 13 and did not sit on any of the main (dirt) roads. Like most ARVN compounds, it was built partially underground, and what was above ground was covered with sandbags and dirt. Bunkers and concertina barbed wire surrounded the main buildings. A landing pad sat on the south side of the complex just outside the wire. The entire perimeter was surrounded by a minefield.

A couple of times a day the ARVNs would request one of our Hueys to come in and pick up some Vietnamese general or VIP or drop somebody off. None of our pilots liked to land there because every time they did the place got mortared.

I was generally familiar with the area surrounding Snuol and the rubber, at least from the air. I had never been on the ground there, but the farther north that we flew, the less I had seen. Today we would be

working north of the river in an area I had *never* worked or seen. In fact, none of Apache Troop had been as far north as we would be working today.

I tried to get an idea of the lay of the land as we flew. The road continued to run generally north slowly bending from time to time. The sparse trees and clearings became thicker forests with fewer open areas. Highway 13, if that is still what they called it here, was the only major road in the area. It was a “hardstand” road, but it was barely two lanes wide, and it certainly did not represent what we considered a “highway” back in the States. If we had followed it south out of Loc Ninh, it would have taken us to An Loc and eventually all the way to Saigon, the way I wished we were going. I did not know where it was taking us to the north, but it could not be anywhere good.

After a few more minutes of flying, I saw a single Huey orbiting high over the river. It was our Command and Control ship. In Vietnam the Cobra always ran our Pink team missions, but since we had been operating in Cambodia, we had the luxury of C & C birds. While the Scout was working low-level, and the Cobra covered him from about two thousand feet, the C & C bird sat up at about four thousand and circled around directing the entire mission.

He was nice to have around for several reasons, but the most important one for us was that if we got shot down, he could come down and try to pick us up. There had been Scouts picked up by Cobras, but they had had to ride the rocket pods out. The tiny cockpit on the Snake only held the two pilots one behind the other. There was no room for any passengers. The thought of hopping on a rocked pod facing backwards and lying over the stub wing did not appeal much to me. Needless to say, in that situation I would take it.

We “married up” with the Huey and crossed the river where Highway 13 intersected it. Below was an old two-span iron bridge, which had been partially blown up some years before. The northern



span, disconnected from the center support, lay crumpled in the river partially submerged. Its rusted hulk was still connected to the north bank. The other span did not appear to be badly damaged, but the bridge was, of course, unusable.

The road turned west just north of the river, and we turned with it. The vegetation had gotten very thick and had become triple canopy jungle. I was still at altitude slightly lower and just to the left and behind 25. We began to fly over an area of foothills. The road was still visible, and from time to time we could see portions of other hard-packed dirt roads that joined it. It was hard to tell from this altitude where they went or if they had any common direction.

We continued further west. I had a very uneasy feeling about this. My discomfort was a combination of things: my usual nervous stomach; we were farther north than we had ever worked and not familiar with this area; the closest “friendlies” were at least twenty-five clicks to the south, and they were ARVNs; and that business that morning about breaking two aircraft and now flying a third. That all made me feel as though maybe we were not supposed to fly today.

Well, shit, shake it off. I had never turned down a mission yet, and I was not going to start now. My stomach had been upset every mission that I had flown in Cambodia, so that was nothing new. I did wish that I was flying my own 273, the bird that I was most familiar and comfortable with.

“One-Two, Two-Five, you ready to go down?”

“Yeah, roger that, how about a test fire?” I asked.

“Just a minute,” Foti responded.

“O.K., you guys ready to go?” I asked. “Smoot, you ready?”

“Yes, sir, I’m ready,” Smoot said, as he rearranged his M-60 and edged out further into the doorway.

Kiser reached over and grabbed a red smoke grenade from a wire loop at the door hinge, pulled the pin, and held the spoon down with

his left thumb. He held the grenade close to his body in his left hand and draped his M-16 across his lap with his right.

“One-Two, you’re clear to fire,” Foti said.

“Roger that, I’m going hot,” I said, then shifted my thumb to the other side of the mike button so that I would be speaking only inside the aircraft, “Smoot, you’re clear to fire your sixty.”

Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba, . . . Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba. Smoot cut loose with two short bursts of his M-60. No jam.

“It’s okay, Mr. Houser.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll see,” I said. I was not convinced. It always worked on the first test fire.

“Two-Five, we’re ready to go down,” I said.

“Yeah, go ahead, One-Two. This area is fine,” replied Foti.

I pushed in right pedal, lowered the collective pitch, and slipped into a tight right-hand spiraling descent. I was looking straight at the ground over my right shoulder. In seconds we had dropped through over 1500 feet of stifling hot air, and we were now at the tops of the trees. The technique was meant to descend as quickly as possible through the “dead man zone” (50 to 1500 feet) and thereby present a target for the shortest time as possible, another maneuver not taught in flight school. I kept my airspeed up at about eighty knots. None of that ten or fifteen knot flying like we did on the mission in Vietnam. These bastards over here were too good for that.

My tight right hand circles were larger than normal because of the increased airspeed.

We still had one or two “old” Scout pilots who were here during the first Cambodian incursion back in May and June of 1970, and they had warned us what to expect. They were adamant that we could not conduct Scout missions the way we were used to. No hovering over a suspected area. No overflying a clearing. Stay in the tree line. No low airspeeds.

I looked at my watch; my left nomex glove was rolled up so that it was visible. It was almost two o'clock. I figured I would have roughly an hour "on station," leaving myself enough fuel for a 25 or 30 minute flight back to Loc Ninh.

"OK, One-two, I'd like you to work these foothills from here to the north and west. Over," said Foti.

"Roger that, I've got numerous trails and roads everywhere. Stand by."

"OK, we're ready to copy."

"Roger, I've got a southeast-northwest road, six to eight feet wide, moderate to heavy use last twelve to twenty-four hours. It's had a lot of shit down it, and recently. It runs on the north side and about parallel with the highway and.....OK, just a minute...yeah, OK, it junctions with the highway down here in at least two places. It doesn't appear to cross it, though."

"OK, what's it had on it?"

"I can't really tell, but a lot of something. I haven't seen any tracked vehicle marks so far. The road is dry and packed down hard, can't tell the direction of travel yet."

"OK," Foti replied.

"I've got another north-south road, six-to-eight-feet wide, moderate to heavy use last twelve to two-four hours. Another road generally east-west this time, six-to-eight-feet wide, moderate to heavy use last twelve to two-four. You're gonna run out of grease pencil and canopy!" I said excitedly.

In the Cobra, the AC (aircraft commander) sat in the back seat and flew while the copilot sat in the front and operated the chin turret. He also acted as secretary. Every bit of information that he received from the "low-bird" was written down in a sort of shorthand with a grease pencil on the Plexiglas canopy. Then later, on the way home from the mission, he would relay the information back to flight operations.

“I have numerous fighting positions everywhere. They’re about three-by-five feet and three feet deep. A few bunkers around the area, probably eight-by-ten, heavy overhead cover.”

“How many fighting positions and bunkers?” Foti asked.

“Oh, shit, maybe thirty fighting positions this general area, maybe five to eight bunkers.”

“Roger,” Foti replied.

I also had been doing this long enough to know that fighting positions and bunkers were like mice: for every one that you could see, there were several more that you did not see. Nevertheless, I was reporting what I actually saw. Someone at a higher level in division G2 (intelligence) would interpret all these reports, combine them with other Scout reports from us and other units doing the same thing and eventually come up with a “big picture” idea of what was really going on.

“I have numerous trails running everywhere. Most 6 to 12 inches, some 12 to 24 inches wide, moderate to heavy use last twelve to two-four hours. I think most of what we’re seeing here is foot traffic. I don’t see anything to indicate bicycles. I still can’t tell the direction.”

“OK, One-Two, move your circles so that you follow that one road to the northwest,” Foti advised.

“Roger that. These fighting positions and bunkers have been here awhile, but this traffic is recent...very recent,” I said.

It was difficult in the dry season to figure the direction of travel. I assumed it was generally south, but I wanted to find something to confirm that. The ground was not soft enough to pick up on footprints or tire tracks, and yet I did not see any dust. A lot of dust would have indicated very heavy use and also helped me with footprints.

I was also looking for tramped-down grass next to the narrow trails. Bicycles were heavily laden with supplies and not ridden but pushed

by someone walking next to them so that the bicycle was on the trail, not the person.

I began to change my right hand circles so that my overall movement was northwest. We followed the road for a few more minutes until it intersected one running north. We followed that one for two or three miles. Everywhere we looked there was more of the same: roads, trails, fighting positions, bunkers; a lot of people had been through this area in the last few days. But which way were they traveling, and where were they now? We continued to work the same area for several more minutes.

“OK, One-Two, break to the northeast here. I want to bring you up to altitude and move you,” Foti instructed.

“Roger, Two-Five.”

“Look sharp, you guys, we’re coming up,” I warned Kiser and Smoot.

I started a climb to the northeast. This was a critical time in this type of flying, too high to use the tops of the trees for concealment but too low to be out of range of small arms fire. Fortunately, we did not take any fire. I leveled off at 2000 feet (indicated altitude) and flew northeast for a few minutes. I did not recognize anything; it is easy to get disoriented when you are low level and cannot see any landmarks. We were still over foothills. I was not able to see the river or Highway 13; they had to be farther south. I wanted to see one or the other, preferably both to get my bearings. No luck.

“OK, One-Two, I’m going to put you down right here.”

“Roger that,” I answered.

It was about 14:30 (2:30); we had been cranked a little over an hour. We had another 25 or 30 minutes left on station. It seemed as though we had been here forever. I was soaked with sweat.

This area was very much the same as the others: more trails, fighting positions, and bunkers. The fighting positions and bunkers all

seemed to be old and I did not see any sign of recent use. But, needless to say, they were already there if the NVA needed them.

“I have a southeast-northwest trail, 12 to 24 inches, moderate to heavy use, last twelve to two-four hours. Make that heavy use,” I told Foti.

“O.K., One-Two, I want you to move more to the southeast now...”

“Wait a minute, I want to work this trail a little longer,” I said.

“What do you have?”

“I don’t know yet...numerous fighting positions, three-by-five-feet deep. A few bunkers, eight-by-ten heavy overhead cover. I have a 12 to 24 inch trail coming from the east intersecting the trail I’m on now. Moderate to heavy use last twelve to two-four hours. I’m gonna stay with the first one. Something’s down here.”

“What do you have?” Foti asked.

“I don’t know. It just doesn’t look right,” I replied.

This trail was different from the others that we had looked at. There was something about this one. I was not sure yet what it was. There was something different. I was getting excited.

“Curtis, what’s wrong with this?” I asked Smoot.

“What do you mean, Mr. Houser?” Smoot asked.

“I mean something is different about this trail!”

“I don’t know, Mr. Houser. I don’t like any of it,” Smoot said hesitantly.

“What have you got, One-Two?” Foti was getting impatient.

“More fighting positions, more bunkers, another trail coming in from the east. There’s dust on this trail, and its getting wider! This son-of-a-bitch has had heavy use, and I mean lately!”

The trail curved more to the east. I saw something on that last pass just to the side of the trail, something out of place.

“Curtis, did you see that?” I asked.

“What?”

“I’m not sure yet, just off the side of the trail. I’m coming back around.”

“Two-Five, I’ve got something down here just off the side of the trail. Now where the hell was that?” I said to Smoot.

“I got it, Mr. Houser, come right, come right!” Now Smoot was excited.

As the thick bamboo parted with the rotor wash, it exposed a pile of sticks, but they were not sticks. Everything was always larger on the ground than it appeared from the air. It was freshly cut bamboo, a whole pile of it!

“Two-Five, I’ve got a pile of freshly cut bamboo! It’s cut in four-to-six-foot lengths. This shit is new, brand new! So are these bunkers. My God, they’re all over the place and they haven’t been here long! These are not like the ones that we have been looking at; these are brand new! They’re gonna use this bamboo to build something, and they don’t like to carry that shit very far!”

“O.K., One-Two, watch yourself.”

“They’re here. I know they’re here somewhere, I can feel it. They’re watching us right now!”

“I got something over here, Mr. Houser!” yelled Smoot. Now he was really excited.

“Two-Five, we’ve got another pile of bamboo down here. The underbrush in this whole area is trampled down!”

“Spider hole!” yelled Smoot.

“OK, we’ve got a fresh spider hole, with about a one-by-one-foot entrance! It’s brand new! Hell, I’ll bet it wasn’t here two days ago! There’s another one...there’s two more! They’re all around here!” I yelled to Foti.

“I got them over here too!” said Kiser.

“Smoot, you and Kiser stay alert now. I know they’re here somewhere!” I said loudly over the intercom.

Kiser was still clutching his smoke grenade, ready to throw it out as soon as we took fire. I could not see Smoot, since he sat directly behind me, but I knew he was getting anxious too. They should have shot at us by now. What were they waiting for? They always heard us and then saw us before we saw them. That was the nature of Scouts. We were bait.

The trail wound around a small hill and suddenly opened into a clearing. There in the middle of the clearing, looking like an ant hill, was a bunker under construction.

“Holy shit, I’ve got a brand new bunker down here! It’s still under construction! It’s more like an underground building! Very heavy overhead cover, walk down entrance with steps! Looks like the roof must be supported with logs! They’ve got boards and bamboo lying all over the place! We must have caught them by surprise!”

“Watch your ass, One-Two!” yelled Foti.

“Look sharp now, you guys!” I warned Kiser and Smoot.

The whole area is trampled down, three-by-five fighting positions everywhere, new ones! We’re gonna recon by fire!”

“Roger, be careful,” said Foti.

“Smoot, start shooting up that tree line around the clearing. Kiser, watch your side. Be sharp,” I warned.

Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba...Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba...Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba, Smoot started ripping into the tree line.

“We’ve got a lot of brand new three-by-five fighting positions just inside the tree line of this clearing. Spider holes all around,” I told Foti.

Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba...Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba.

“O.K., hold your fire and get a frag ready,” I yelled to Smoot.

Reconning by fire with the M-60 often made the gooks think that they had been spotted. The hope was that they would then return fire, giving away their position, thinking that we already knew where they were and could see them. Of course, it did not always work. The more



experienced NVA and VC knew what we were doing and did not take the bait.

“You got that frag ready?” I asked Smoot.

“Yeah, I’m ready!” Smoot yelled, as he held a fragmentation grenade out his right cargo door.

I headed for the entrance to the bunker. Fifty meters from the entrance I pulled the nose back and flared the aircraft to slow the airspeed.

“Ready...drop!” I said as I pulled in power and dumped the nose over to gain airspeed and get clear. I turned my head around in time to watch the frag hit next to the entrance and roll down the outside of the bunker. “Ka-boom!”

“Fuck, we missed...get another grenade!” I yelled into the mike.

Hitting an opening from the air with a grenade was a real challenge. Even with this comparatively large opening, the timing had to be exact. We had done this many times, but it was still hard to do. The best way was to come to a stationary hover and drop it in the hole, and we often did that in Vietnam, but I was not going to do that here. I slowed down to about ten knots. We made a wide right hand turn low over the bamboo, and now we were coming up on the edge of the clearing again.

“OK, here we go again,” I said mainly to Smoot. “Eyes sharp, everybody!”

I lined up with the entrance for the second time, fully expecting a figure to pop out of the opening and start blasting away with his AK. We would be most vulnerable during that flare in front of the bunker, suspended in midair a few feet above the entrance, with no airspeed, no altitude, and no concealment.

“Ready.....drop!”

I was sure that we hit it that time. I knew, of course, that we could not hurt the bunker, but we damn sure could hurt whoever might be

hiding inside. We could also get lucky and have this bunker turn out to be where they were storing their ammo or fuel.

“It went right in this time, Mr. Houser!” yelled Smoot, half hanging out of the door so that he could look behind and under us.

I could tell from the fuzzy static noise on the intercom that he was out in the slipstream; the air was blowing over his mike boom on his helmet, and it was hard to hear him.

Ka-boooooom! This report was a much duller explosion than the first one, more of a rumble. We had rolled that one right down the steps. Smoke and dust poured out of the opening in a big cloud.

“That’ll piss ‘em off,” I said.

Still no one shot at us, and no individuals were in sight. I knew damn well they were there below us somewhere close by, watching and waiting for the right moment. They knew how we worked our Pink Team missions; they knew there would be a gunship up above somewhere whether they saw him or not. Only the most inexperienced and foolhardy would shoot at us without an order to do so, thereby giving away their hiding place and drawing the wrath of the Cobra.

That was how smart these NVA “regulars” were. They knew if they fired on us we would drop everything in the inventory on top of them. They were smart enough to be willing to sacrifice a few soldiers and still not be suckered into giving away their position. They were close. They were very close.

“One-Two, we’re getting down on time. I want you to break south. I have one more area I want you to look at before we leave. How is your fuel?” Foti asked.

I turned south and remained low level while I checked my fuel gauge and watch. In the excitement, time had passed very quickly. It was a few minutes after three.

“Roger. I can give you just a few more minutes,” I said.

“OK, stay on that south heading, and I’ll bring you up to altitude in just a minute,” Foti advised.

“Roger that.”

I tried to quickly recalculate my fuel burn rate so I would not cut myself short on the fuel that I would need to return to Loc Ninh. OH-6 fuel gauges were notoriously inaccurate. Most of us relied more on our watches than on the gauges.

“One-Two, go ahead and come up to altitude. I’m gonna put you down one more place. Over,” said Foti.

“Roger, be advised, I only have ten minutes at the most to give you; don’t cut me short,” I said.

“Roger that.”

I pulled in power with the collective and started to climb. We were holding 75 knots and headed generally south. We were probably 75 to 100 feet above the trees.

The initial explosion was not close by nor, was it particularly loud, but the concussion and shock of the impact that followed was crushing. The tiny aircraft jolted violently, as if a giant hand had struck it midair and shook it. I instinctively looked to the right and saw a small puff of smoke rising from the site of the launcher. I thought that we had been hit by a B-40 or an RPG (rocket propelled grenade). It had hit us on the right side, probably in the engine area, and we were on fire.

“I’m hit, I’m hit!” I yelled into the mike to Foti.

Events began to take place in hundredths or even thousandths of a second. I looked at the instrument panel; the Engine Out light was on. I heard the engine and transmission winding down in a low-pitched whine. I looked below us for an open area; there was nothing but jungle. Then to our front appeared a river running diagonally from left to right across our path. I thought that if I could hold enough collective pitch to keep us above the trees until we reached the river, I could then drop down into the “groove” in the top of the jungle canopy, turn right down

the river, and hope that I had enough rotor RPM left for a flare a few feet above the water.

That would be the plan then. The river would save us. We would turn to the right down the river, avoiding the trees and the jungle, and make a flared “ditching” into the river. The water landing would also help us with the fire. My momentary relief was shattered when I found that I had no cyclic control. The cyclic (the “stick”) controls the rotor system that the aircraft is suspended under. Whichever way the “disc” is pointed, the fuselage of the aircraft will follow.

The controls were stiff and would not respond; I no longer had control of the aircraft. We were now just along for the ride. I watched the river that I had hoped would save us pass under us. The jungle was quickly coming up to meet us. Without being able to turn down the river valley, we would overshoot the river and crash somewhere on the other side of it. I looked forward and down through the chin bubble and saw the tops of the trees of the opposite river bank zooming up at me. No longer were the branches and leaves far enough away that they appeared only as a mass of vegetation. In nano-seconds the trees had become branches, the branches had become clusters of leaves, and now I was quite literally counting the individual leaves on the branches. The tops of the trees rushed up to meet us...I knew we were dead.

Then time and motion were somehow suspended, and I had time to think about those things dearest to me, my family, my home, my friends. It was as though God had granted me one last opportunity to remember those things that mattered most to me in my life.

I did not think about death itself. I thought mainly about how my death would affect my family, mainly my mother and small brother. My mother was a very kind gentle person, and she would take my death very hard, as would the rest of the family. I thought about my dad and how he would take the news. My friends would miss me. I realized that the cliché about life “passing before your eyes” at the moment of death

was true. Whoever was the very first guy to say that or write that had obviously been himself about to die very suddenly. My life did pass before me. Maybe not my entire life, but I was able to think about much more, and in much greater detail than time should have allowed.

The aircraft crashed into the trees of the jungle somewhere above the riverbank and exploded on impact with the ground. The inertia of traveling almost ninety miles an hour hurled what remained of the OH-6A, 67-16412, into the river, and it sank to the bottom.

I was drowning! My mind raced to catch up with what had happened, but it could not.

Only seconds had passed since we had been hit with the RPG, and I had seen the tops of the trees racing up to kill us. I had known, and I had accepted that I was going to die in the crash, and now I was drowning! Everything was happening so quickly that my mind could not process all the information it was receiving. What was happening to me? Where was I? Why couldn't I breathe? My mind could not comprehend that I had somehow lived through the crash and now I was drowning on the bottom of the river!

I unsnapped my chinstrap and got my helmet off. I unfastened with one hand the "quick-release" feature of the combination seat belt shoulder harness restraint system. Both shoulder harnesses and the seat belt all came together and locked with one device in the center of my lap. All Army aircraft had that system just for this purpose. As the shoulder harness disconnected, the "chicken plate," or protective body armor that I had been wearing, fell off and away from me, as I had hoped it would.

Some months before I had started wearing body armor. A few of us had decided that if we ever went down in water, the weight of the protective vest and the difficulty to get out of it would probably drown us. After you put your head through the opening, there were two Velcro straps that wrapped around the front of the vest. The actual "plate" was

not metal, but instead a piece of laminated ceramic form-fitted to the shape of a generic chest. There was another plate for your back, but no one ever wore it. Each plate fit into a large pocket also closed with Velcro flaps.

I had decided that all I really needed was the chest plate. I had taken it out of the vest and threw the vest away. The plate had a nylon strap at the top perfect for using as a handle to carry it back and forth to the aircraft. Every day I rested my chicken plate on my lap against my chest and positioned the shoulder harness straps over the plate to hold it in place as I fastened my belt.

It stayed in place fine and afforded me some protection and a sense of security. I realized, however, that if I took a direct hit with an armor piercing round, the plate would be of little use.

I heard bullets exploding behind me. The tremendous heat from the fire was causing the 7.62 mm M-60 ammunition in the cargo bay to “cook off,” The random detonations shook whatever was left of 412. How could anything burn like that underwater? There must have been air trapped back there somehow and the fuel was feeding the fire.

I did not know how long I had been underwater. It seemed it had taken me an eternity to get out of my helmet and then the shoulder harness and belt. My lungs were screaming for oxygen. I finally climbed out of what I thought was still a doorway and started to swim to the surface. I do not even know how I knew where the surface was. I tried to kick my feet in combat boots and a flight suit. I could not see the surface. I thought, “My God, how deep am I?” My lungs were burning. It was the same feeling I’d had had as a kid trying to swim the length of the park pool underwater. I did not think that I was going to make it; my lungs were going to explode.

After what seemed like forever, I broke the surface of the water. Because I was so desperate for air I did not look above me first, as I had been trained, to see if was clear of fuel and fire. Thankfully it was,

and the huge gasp of air that I took in although extremely hot was life-saving. I had somehow managed to surface just at the edge of the clear water that was not yet burning with fuel. Everything up river from me was burning with JP-4, and the advancing edge of that fire was almost to me.

My throat was scorched and burned. My lungs ached, and I could barely see; everything was fuzzy and out of focus. The relative silence that I had experienced underwater had now been replaced by the loud cracking and popping of AK-47s and .30 cal. machine guns. Everywhere the jungle was burning and at the same time alive with machine gun fire. It was difficult to distinguish between the sounds of the weapons firing and the crackling and popping of the jungle burning. There were tracers everywhere, but they did not seem to be coming at me; they seemed to all be going up into the air.

I tried to make my legs work to swim to the south riverbank. North Vietnamese soldiers were already running out of the jungle on the north bank, but they were all firing up apparently at the Cobra. I could not see Foti, but I could hear the distinctive sound of the gunship, and he was close. I reached the shore and started to drag myself up the riverbank, grabbing tree roots and grass for handholds. The bank was steep, and I kept sliding back down into the water. I was sure that I would be seen. I managed to reach the top of the bank and crawled into the nearby brush.

I pulled my Smith & Wesson revolver out of my shoulder holster. It looked awfully small. I wished that I had my M-16, which was now somewhere on the bottom of the river.

By now the NVA had begun to fire everything they had at the Cobra. I recognized not only the distinctive sound of AKs and .30 cal. machinegun fire, but also the heavy thump-thump-thump of at least one .51 cal. machinegun. I moved on into the brush another fifty meters or so and hid behind a large bush.

I was terrified, and I'm sure I was in shock. I could not believe that we had been shot down. I could not believe that I was here on the ground. My mind raced to catch up with the reality of the moment. Not the moment of five minutes ago --- that might as well have been ten years ago! I felt the bitter metallic taste of panic trying to take control. I fought it. Where were Kiser and Smoot? Did they make it out too? Why weren't they here? Why hadn't I seen them?

I ached all over; I was sore and stiff. My face and eyes were burning. I began to look myself over. I touched my face; it was bleeding and badly burned. I noticed that my new Seiko watch was missing. There was a two-inch wide flash burn on the top of my left wrist where I had rolled up my flight glove to be able to see my watch. That was a mistake and a bad habit. I was bleeding from a small cut on the bottom of the same wrist, apparently where the watch had been torn off.

As I surveyed the rest of my body, I suddenly realized that I was blind in my left eye. I touched it to see if it was still there. It was. I closed my right eye; I was getting some light through the left, but I could not see anything with it. Then I closed my left eye and checked the right one. I could see with it, but everything was fuzzy especially up close. I could not find any broken bones. I did not think to look to see if I had been shot.

I heard Foti and Osborn coming down the river low level. The sky was filled with AK-47 and .30 cal. machinegun tracers. The tracers zigzagged back and forth across the sky in the direction of the Cobra. I came out from my hiding place behind the large bush and waved my hands and arms while I jumped up and down.

Foti and Osborn were not firing yet. They had slowed their airspeed in order to look for us. They were close enough for me to see the pilot's helmeted heads in the canopy as they made a low slow pass over the crash site. I knew that they had not seen me, and I moved back behind the bushes. I thought about firing a pen flare but realized that even if



they saw it, they would undoubtedly mistake it for another tracer (even though it was red and NVA and VC tracers are usually green) I left the flare gun in my holster.

Foti made another low and slow “dry” pass down the river. I again ran out from behind the bush, waved my arms wildly and jumped up and down. Again their aircraft was surrounded by tracers and again they did not see me. They were so close! Why couldn’t they see me? I wanted to yell at them, “Hey I’m right here!” I had the sense to know that the only people that could possibly hear me yelling would be the “bad guys.” I probably could not yell anyway; my throat was scorched and burned.

Foti continued to make low passes down the river. I thought each one was slower than the last one. With each pass, I came out from behind my bush, revealed myself, and jumped up and down waving my hands and arms. Each time they dodged tracers and trees, and each time they failed to see me. “Hey, guys, I’m right here! Please, I’m right here!” I knew, of course, what was happening; there was just too much to look at and too much to absorb for them to see me. I was sure they would also be shot down. They could not keep making those low slow passes and not get hit. I could not tell how fast Foti was flying, but I knew it was damn slow for a Cobra. Foti and Osborn made seven to ten passes altogether, and then I did not hear them anymore. I knew they had given us up.

The realization struck me that they were not going to see me or pick me up. Instead, in all probability, I would be killed or captured in the next few minutes right here, right behind this bush, on this river, in the middle of nowhere in Cambodia.

I looked at the .38 cal. revolver in my right hand. I did not intend to allow myself to be captured. I pulled the hammer back with my thumb cocking the weapon. I thought to myself, “So this is how it ends.” I was not going to let the NVA capture me so they could torture me or keep

me in a tiger cage buried in shit until I died. As long as I had the revolver, I still had the means to keep that from happening. But should I use it now? There was no other way out of this. They were probably all around me. It was going to be over in a matter of minutes, maybe seconds.

I realized they had probably figured out what had happened to me and where I was hiding, and they were probably watching me right then. I tried to look around my immediate area. But I could not see out of my left eye at all, and everything was blurry and out of focus through my right eye. I discovered that if I cocked my head and sort of tilted it up, I could partially see through the bottom of my right eye. I did not see anyone around me anywhere. I wondered if that meant that they were not there yet, or I just could not see them. I decided that I was not going to take my own life yet. I could do it...and I would do it,...but not yet. Not yet.

I looked all around me as best I could. I did not know if the NVA were on this side of the river yet, but I assumed they were. I was probably surrounded. Why hadn't they rushed me? I had to leave myself enough time so that when I saw them coming for me, I would be able to use my weapon on myself. I might try to take a couple of those bastards with me, but I could not take the chance of being surprised at the last minute and have my gun taken away from me. My .38 was the only guarantee I had against capture. My fear was not that they would shoot me and kill me. My fear was that they would *not* kill me.

I had to make a decision: should I stay here close to the crash site or try to move deeper into the jungle? If I moved further into the jungle, it would be harder for my people to find me. What about Kiser and Smoot? I did not want to move farther away from them, but I would not be able to stay here for very long. If I stayed here, I would be surrounded for sure. I probably already was. Foti and Osborn would

give up looking for us soon, if they hadn't already. And who could blame them; there was no wrecked aircraft for them to see. The jungle was on fire; the river was on fire with JP-4; everything was on fire. They had made more low and slow "dry" passes looking for us than anyone had a right to expect. As soon as they determined there were no survivors, they would start blowing the hell out of this place with a vengeance.

I heard another aircraft overhead; this was one at altitude. I could not see it, and I could not tell if it was our C & C Huey or if we were beginning to get help. Maybe we were getting help already? But what could they do that Foti had not already done? I was not aware of any open areas around me for someone to slip in and pick me up. That only left hovering over the river, and that would be suicide. No one was going to attempt a rescue anywhere unless they saw me or made contact with me. I could not communicate by radio with any of our aircraft because my survival radio was now on the bottom of the river.

I now recognized the distinctive loud popping sound of the rotor blades of a Cobra in a high-speed dive. Foti was initiating a "gun" run. I knew this would eventually happen. Foti and Osborn had given us up for dead, and now they were going to make the NVA pay for what they had done here today. That was why I had not heard them for a while. They were not going to make any more low passes. They had climbed up to altitude and established a racetrack pattern, and now they were coming in on their first attack. Paul Foti would be flying from the back seat and firing rockets while Don Osborn, sitting in the front, would operate the chin turret firing the 7.62 mm minigun and the 40 mm grenade launcher.

A few minutes earlier I would not have believed that I could have been more afraid than I already was. Then the first rockets began to hit -- 17 pound warheads. "My God!" I realized for the first time how

terrifying a rocket attack from a Cobra gunship really was! The rocket explosions were deafening, even though they were not actually impacting close to me. At least not yet. The trees and underbrush around me already popped and crackled from the fires that had been started by my crash. The exploding rockets were starting new fires. The constant sound of AK-47s, .30 cal. machineguns, and .51 cal. heavy machineguns had never diminished. Foti's first attack on the enemy did not seem to faze them. It was like throwing rocks at a hornet's nest. However, it did seem to me that the enemy firing was all coming from the north side of the river.

A gunship was in another gun run, but this could not be Foti again; it was too soon. This had to be a different Cobra; someone had joined 25. Someone else was in the fight. Yes! Then I realized that there were at least three Cobras up there, maybe more. I knew that Foti or the C & C bird, or probably both, had radioed back to Loc Ninh to "scramble" all of our aircraft.

A "scramble" meant that we had an aircraft down somewhere. Back at Song Be we had a siren just for that purpose. I had hated to hear that siren go off because it always meant that one of your buddies was in trouble. Our policy was to run to the closest aircraft, crank it up, and take off as soon as you had a crew. It did not matter whether it was your aircraft or your crew -- just get in the air and listen to the radios for a heading and location.

The rockets were getting closer, but of even more concern was the minigun fire. The minigun in the nose turret was used to cover the "break" after the gun run. The most vulnerable part of the gunship's attack was when he pulled out of the dive. It was then that he was most susceptible to ground fire since his rocket tubes only pointed forward. The minigun was used to spray down the area and "keep their heads down" as the aircraft broke off his attacking dive. The electrically powered spinning six barrels of the minigun spit out 7.62 mm at the

rate of two thousand rounds per minute. It was indiscriminate. It did not know the “good” guys from the “bad” guys, and my people did not know that I was alive.

The Cobras were firing everything they had on their attacks: rockets, miniguns, grenade launchers. The fear of being captured here was now being overshadowed by the fear that my own people were going to kill me and not even know it. Suddenly I was startled by a metallic tinkling sound coming through the tree branches above me. It scared the hell out of me! I realized that it was the “spent” brass cartridges ejected from the minigun on the last pass. They had fallen through the tops of the trees and were bouncing off the branches on the way down. These were the empty shell casings, not the bullets, but that meant that my position was directly along the axis of their attack. There was no choice now; I had to move.

I started through the bushes and high grass and on into the jungle. The sun was beginning to get low. It was already dark under the thickest part of the jungle canopy. It would be dark everywhere soon.

The jungle here was more like a forest. There was room between the trees to walk, but the grass and the weeds were thick and difficult to move through. I thought that I was traveling generally west, and I needed to be going south. At that moment I was more interested in getting *away* from the immediate area than I was in getting *to* somewhere. I could not understand why the enemy had not found me yet. I walked with my revolver raised and cocked. I had never lowered the hammer from when I had first taken it out of the holster earlier. I was sure that I would run into the NVA any second. I hoped that I would see or hear them first. They would be hiding behind the next bush, or they would be around the next bend in the trail.

The vegetation the first one hundred meters from the river had been sparse trees and bushes, more forest than jungle. After the first hundred meters or so, the jungle began to get thick quickly. I did not know how

far I had traveled or what was in front of me, but the sounds of machine gun fire and exploding rockets were getting farther away, and that made me feel safer. I did not know how I would find Kiser and Smoot, but I had made up my mind that I had to put distance between myself and the crash area. Of course, that also meant that I would be getting farther away from the rescue team that would eventually be put on the ground.

That presented another problem. How would I signal the rescue team? I did not have a radio. They would be ARVN's. I certainly did not want to startle them; they would be more nervous and jumpy than Americans. How would I get their attention without being shot by them, but at the same time not draw the attention of the wrong people? I could not speak Vietnamese. "God help me figure these things out." I did not have any infantry training. "Shit!" I wondered if I should have stayed near the crash site and tried to find Kiser and Smoot.

I suddenly came upon a river. I did not remember seeing another river in this area, but, then, other than today's flight, I had never seen this area. Was this the same river I had crashed in earlier or was this a different river? If this was the same river that I had crashed in, I might be traveling in circles! I had been following the sun as I traveled, and I was sure that I had been traveling generally west or maybe southwest. I did not believe that I was traveling in circles; the sun was in the same place and I was still moving away from the sounds of battle. If it was the same river, it must have turned ninety degrees or more and come around in front of me again. Is this the same river? Was I so shook up and confused that in the thickness of the jungle I had not been paying attention to the sun and had been traveling in a circle? I did not think so. Either way, I needed to cross the river.

I stayed in the trees above the bank and surveyed the river as best I could with my limited vision problem. I did not see anyone or any movement on either side of the river. "Damn." I hated to leave the trees and walk out into the open. As much as I did not want to do that, I still

felt the urgency to get away from the area of the crash. I felt as though I were being chased or followed, but I did not hear anyone. I had to keep moving west or southwest, at least for now, and that meant crossing the river. I walked out of the bushes at the top of the bank and quickly waded into the water; I had no idea how deep it was.

I took off my shoulder holster and held it and my revolver above my head as I tried to keep my footing on the slippery rocks. The water was high on my chest almost to my neck. I did not want to have to swim. The current was not fast, but about halfway across the river I stepped in a hole and went under. I came up choking and swam until I could touch the bottom again. Somehow I managed not to lose my gun or holster, but both were soaked again, and I was no longer sure if my gun would even fire. Up until that moment I had not even considered that my revolver might not work. Actually, The Smith & Wesson Model 10 would probably work fine, but the ammunition might not.

I crawled out of the river and hurried up the bank and into the bushes. I was still traveling on adrenalin. I do not remember ever running, just walking quickly. I was already very tired. I was sore and burned and blind at least in the left eye and almost in the right. I felt beaten up as if I had been in a motorcycle or a car wreck.

I heard jets at altitude, but I could not tell what direction they were going or where they were holding. It was impossible now to see through the canopy of the trees.

I had worked with them enough to know that they would be in soon. Right now they would be getting their instructions from their FAC (forward air controller) who would have gotten all the pertinent information from Foti or the C & C bird. All that was left was to decide which direction would be best for their runs and what their barriers would be.

I heard the first jet come in screaming in his dive. There is no sound quite like a jet engine sucking in air, mixing it with fuel, and

transforming that explosion of fire into pure power and thrust. The bombs began to hit almost immediately. The earth shook with the concussions. I did not know how far I had traveled from the crash or if I was far enough away to escape what was about to happen. I looked for something to hide behind, but there was nothing but trees. I wanted a hole. I realized that the bombs were actually hitting quite a distance away from me. I did not want them any closer.

I could not tell what type of “fast movers” were up there, but we usually worked with F-4 Phantoms. I also could not tell from the sound alone whether they were dropping napalm or “hard bombs,” My guess was napalm, but I did not smell it.

I sat there in the shelter of the trees and listened to them put in three airstrikes, three separate attacks by two fighter-bombers. Any doubt that I may have had about leaving the area of the crash site was now gone. It was obvious to me that had I stayed near the aircraft and the river, I would now be dead. If Kiser and Smoot were still huddled by the river hiding, they were now dead. At least if we had been killed by the Cobra’s rockets, our people would probably eventually find the bodies and our families would be notified.

If I had to die over here, I wanted my mother to know how I died. If I died right now, she would never know that I had survived the crash and that I was still trying to get away. That bothered me. For some reason it was important to me that she knew the exact circumstances of my death. However, now she would never know. She would be told that I died in the crash. She would never know how I died or where I died or when I died. Or that I had not given up.

I knew that did not make much sense. What real difference could it possibly make whether I died here where I was standing or back at the river? Whether I died now or as a result of the crash? But it made a difference to me. I wanted her to know that I had survived the crash and that I was still trying to get away when I was killed.



I looked down at the leaves surrounding me and thought, “All these leaves that no one cares about or even knows are here, will still be here after I’m dead. That doesn’t seem right.”

I started to walk again, and the sounds of the bombs and the burning jungle began to fade away. I do not know how far I walked. The terrain varied, but it was mainly thick forest, so I tried to stay on the trails. I came upon a large thicket of thorns. The thicket was probably twelve or fifteen feet wide by maybe twenty feet long.

I looked all around me as best I could with my one “good” eye. I was still blind in the left and most things were still blurry through the right. Tilting my head all the way back so I could look through the bottom of the eye helped; things seemed to be more in focus at a distance. Near vision was worse. I stood perfectly still. I did not see anyone around me, and I did not hear anything. The jungle was almost silent now, and darkness was closing in quickly.

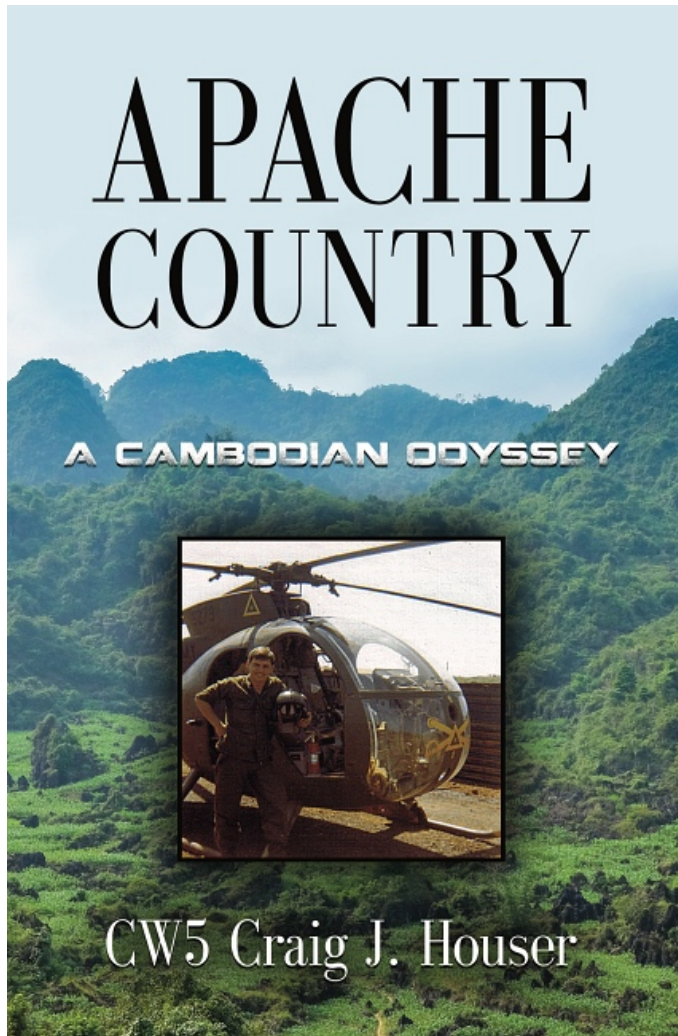
I began to carefully and quietly push aside some of the thorns and make myself an entrance into the thicket. For the first time I noticed that my nomex flight gloves were missing. They would really be useful right now. I did not remember taking them off. They would not have come off in the crash, but when did I remove them and where were they now? I checked the leg pockets of my flight suit. No luck. I noticed my pant leg on my flight suit was torn. I looked in the hole but found no blood. That was good, but where the hell were my gloves? Don’t tell me that in the excitement I took off my gloves and left them lying on the ground somewhere. “Shit! When did I do that?” I needed the bad guys to think that I was on the bottom of the river.

I worked quickly, separating and pushing more of the spiked stems apart, crawling deeper and deeper into my “cave” of briars. My work reminded me of a VC “sapper” working his way through concertina wire around a fire support base. I was continually stabbed and scratched by the thorns as I worked my way deep into the middle of the thicket;

all the while I expected someone to jump out of the bushes or come down the trail.

I knew the thicket of thorns did not offer me any real protection, but on the other hand, it would be dark soon and it would be impossible for someone to see me hiding inside the thicket. It would also be impossible for someone to get close to me without me hearing him. I would at least have some warning. I thought that no one would be willing to climb in those thorns as I had on the off chance of finding an American pilot hiding in there. I had tried to be careful not to leave any telltale clues that someone had disturbed the natural growth of the thorns.

All I wanted to do at that moment was sleep. I would worry about tomorrow tomorrow. I was terrified and hurt all over, but I was also exhausted. I curled up into the fetal position and prayed. Sleep came quickly.



*This is a book about survival. It is about a 21 year old Army Scout pilot shot down during the Vietnam War on a Scout mission inside enemy held territory in Cambodia. He along with his two crew members were shot down, he alone survived.*

## **Apache Country: A Cambodian Odyssey**

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