

The Tootsie Pop War



By Eugene Carroll, as told to Sarah Coomber in November 2017

This is a story I've kept to myself all these years. Maybe I shouldn't have.

It was late in 1968. I was 18 years old and in Vietnam for my first tour, where I became an Army helicopter door gunner, specialist 4th class.

My first crew chief was Ron Jernigan, and we were sent TDY — temporary duty station — from Pleiku in the central highlands of Vietnam to Lane Army Airfield, west of Qui Nhon in Bình Định Province.

We were sent there to support Korean troops. Those Koreans were a tough bunch, highly disciplined. I remember there were parts of the jungle that the Americans had already gone through and found nothing. But when the Koreans went through the same area, they found underground tunnel systems with food, weapons and sleeping areas.

The Americans did their perimeter duty inside the fences. The Koreans? Outside the fence. The Koreans' idea of doing perimeter guard duty around the airfield was to put on white shirts and carry a .45 pistol. The white T-shirt was an invitation to the Vietnamese to attack. They never got attacked.

Our job was to keep the Koreans supplied, insert them into the jungle and take them out of the jungle with whatever they found down there. We were like the Uber drivers of today, but we were flying helicopters.

Helicopters were what drew me to the Army. In 1963 or '64, my dad was one of the leading engineers on the North Cascades Highway. He worked on the east side of Rainy Pass and would take me with him on horseback when he was throwing out stakes for the center line before the survey crew came through. I went on these trips with him from the time I was 9 until I was 16.

Around that time, Dad was being promoted. He and the guy he was replacing were taking a helicopter tour up to Washington Pass before the construction of Washington State Highway 20 had begun. They were riding in a Bell 23 helicopter left over from the Korean War. The pilot was A.K. Platt, a crop duster. I knew him, because he used to spray my house with Malathion, DDT and all sorts of other stuff when I was a kid. Anyway, at the last moment, before they took off, Dad hopped out of the helicopter and grabbed three sets of snowshoes from his car.

Good thing, because while they were touring the site, the intake manifold fell off the engine, and they crashed in 12 feet of snow. The three men put on the snowshoes and started down the mountain. Meanwhile, my uncles mounted a rescue, taking a snowcat from Wenatchee to Winthrop up towards Washington Pass.

That entire night I stood at the window, dreaming of helicopters, death and my dad. I still remember my home's wood-frame window, the scent of lead-based paint, the window cracked open and the cold incoming air, waiting through the night to learn if my dad was OK.

That started my love affair with helicopters. I got brain lock. When I heard about Vietnam and that they had helicopters in Vietnam, that's what took me there. I knew it would harm my soul. I knew before I went we were just cannon fodder. But I went anyway. I gave up my girlfriend — she was a swimsuit model for Sears, beautiful person. But I knew I wasn't coming back. It's not that I let go; I just stopped hanging on.

And I wouldn't have missed it for anything.

I flew in UH-1H helicopters with the 119th Assault Helicopter Company. These were lightweight ships, armed with door-mounted machine guns manned by two pilots, the crew chief and door gunner.

That was me, the door gunner. My job was to watch the tail rotor and the blades, to help the pilots keep them from hitting the trees. We trimmed a lot of tree branches while dropping into the jungle. I also was assigned to pepper the area with gunfire before we made the insertions, clearing the area before we dropped troops into these areas.

Now, before we arrived at Lane, when we were still at Pleiku, I had run into my crew chief, Ron, at the perimeter bunker line and caught him eating a Tootsie Pop.

Tootsie Pops were part of my being a kid. They reminded me of home and the joy of eating a Tootsie Pop while riding my bicycle on a hot summer day.

Thousands of miles from home but not that many years past those carefree days of Tootsie Pops and bicycles, I asked Ron to give me one of his Tootsie Pops. But the one he was sucking on was his last. I bent down and picked up the wrapper he had dropped on the ground and took it back to barracks. I wrote a letter to the company, asking them to send some Tootsie Pops to me in Vietnam.

I didn't expect any response, really. I was just shooting in the dark to see if something would happen. I had written a letter once before, when I was 10 or 11 years old, as part of a contest for a refrigerator. I won that time, but it would have cost more to ship the fridge to us than it was worth. We opted out.

Soon after I sent my Tootsie Pop letter, we were sent to Lane Army Airfield.

Not long after we got there, Ron and I bootlegged six sheets of plywood and built a little cubicle for ourselves in the barracks, a place where we could sleep and lock our stuff up. Well, you couldn't really lock anything up in Vietnam, but we had our two bunks inside, and the cubicle gave us a bit of peace anyway.

One day while we were there, the mail arrived, and in it was a box of Tootsie Pops. The company had sent a gross — 144! All those flavors and colors — chocolate, orange, cherry, grape, lemon and raspberry! I hid the box under my

bunk and took out only a couple each day. I was going to try to stretch out my consumption of these reminders of home.

Meanwhile, not everyone liked our setup. Especially Sgt. Dominic Tumminello. He wanted Ron and me out of our cubicle, because he wanted to move in. He got pretty insistent about it.

The story was — and everyone thought — Tumminello's family was connected to the Mafia, and he went into the military to get out of the family business. The rumor was he was already a "made man," if you know what I mean. He had done things. Dominic was about 5 feet 16 inches tall, with a 24-inch waist and 96-inch-wide shoulders. He was built like a wedge, he was Italian, and I was terrified of him — and everyone else was too.

One day, Ron and I were right outside the cubicle, and Dominic grabbed me by the throat, making his case for us to move. A fight ensued. There was a barrel from an M16 machine gun propped against the wall — it was no longer usable, and I was planning to trade it out for a new one. I was able to reach that barrel. I brought it up and hit Tumminello alongside the head. He went down, and I pinned him to the floor with the barrel across his throat. I was choking him to death.

Next thing I knew, Ron was there with his cocked .45 pistol pointed at my head. "I'd rather kill you than see you go to jail," he told me. I released Tumminello with no argument.

I took my sidearm and ran down to the nearby town to hide out for a couple of days. I was worried Tumminello was going to kill me.

When I got back to the base, I found that our roles had been reversed. Now Tumminello steered clear of me — and Ron and I kept our cubicle.

Life went on. I continued going on my missions, watching rotors, peppering the jungle before dropping off passengers, returning to base and treating myself to a Tootsie Pop.

I enjoyed the hell out of those Tootsie Pops each and every day — until one day when I came back from a mission and looked under my bunk. Every one of those Tootsie Pops was gone. Vanished.

I was spitting blood, I was so mad. All I could think of was our hooch maid, the Vietnamese woman who did our laundry and housekeeping.

Someone told me that a bunch of Vietnamese were headed for the base gate with my Tootsie Pops, so I called up to the M.P.s at the gate and told them to shut the gate. I was on my way down to retrieve my goods.

When I got there, some 35 or 40 Vietnamese were doing their exit security check and preparing to leave the base. Every one of them had a Tootsie Pop stick poking out of their mouths.

By that point, I was already getting over it, but the M.P.s wanted to show the Vietnamese that they were the all-powerful M.P.s. They announced to the Vietnamese that they would be confiscating all clothing that had originally been property of the U.S. military. Didn't matter whether it was pants or shirts or underwear. If it had ever been property of the U.S. Army, it wasn't leaving that base.

Some of the Vietnamese walked home butt-naked that day, because all they had were military hand-me-downs and their last few licks of the last of my Tootsie Pops.

Eugene Carroll spent one year and 16 days on that tour. He was supposed to return home April 30, 1969, but wasn't told his tour was over until May 16, 1969 — his birthday. Forty-eight hours later, he was in Seattle.

He made his way back to Wenatchee, his hometown. But after his experiences in Vietnam, he found it unbearable to be back in the old familiar surroundings of his childhood. They had come to seem foreign to him. He signed up to return to Vietnam later that year for a second tour — eight months. After that, he was done, so done with the whole thing.

Through the years, Eugene has run into ghosts from that past life. There was the wounded man he had pulled aboard his chopper in Vietnam and then ran into again in 1979 or '80 at the Port of Vancouver. Then there was the man he encountered in 1986 in Anchorage, Alaska: a familiar wedge-shaped figure working on the roof of a house. They locked eyes.

“He came bounding down and wrapped his arms around me,” Eugene recalled. It was Dominic Tumminello, the sergeant he had fought to keep his cubicle in Vietnam. The years apart had turned them into brothers. “It blew me away,” Eugene said.

Eugene Carroll doesn’t eat candy anymore, but he does keep a few Tootsie Pops in his car. He says his granddaughter, Amelia, enjoys them.

That makes him happy.