

Chopper

C.W. Boles

2015

It doesn't take long before you fall in love with a helicopter.

The ponderous, heavy, and wholly improbable flight of a cargo plane, or the enclosed cocoon of a commercial airliner are too similar to driving in a delivery truck rather than tearing down the highway in a four-seat convertible.

The chopper has its own rhythm, and moves impossibly in all directions—or none at all; still as a kite, if not quite as silent.

Floating above the war; that's how you see it. Not only floating, but careening at the treetops, unconcerned with jungle combat, which you know from chewing the fat with your buddies, is relentlessly hot, sticky, oppressively humid.

Above it, you're always in the sun, but never a slave to its heat. Altitude in a chopper is like being on the good side of a giant fan all the time. Even when you're hovering, the blades move the air all around you, pulling away the heat and circulating the coolness. You can get lost in the drone of the engine, the whirring of the rotors, the groaning of the metal as it fights against gravity.

Even when you fire on the jungle below, you don't think you're shooting at the Viet Cong. You never see them, you only point and aim your guns where the guys on the ground say they're taking fire from.

You don't care if you hit them or not; the body counts are the responsibility of those who called you in to help them. All you think about and feel is the giddy joy, the invulnerability of mechanized flight. Nothing can touch you up here.

When you're flying over an area where you're shooting almost straight down into the trees, or at a high angle into a tree-line, you come out of the glare of the sun, suddenly visible. You know it sounds and looks impressive and dangerous and deadly to anyone on the ground.

When you swoop down on a combat zone, you're invincible. You're fast, you're in a box of armored steel (despite the open doors), and you've got superior firepower. You have the best pilots in the world, and the best equipment. You hoot and holler. You can't help being in love.

Until some VC marksman with a light machine gun, something like the M60 you have mounted at your doors, gets a bead on you. The racket those bullets make as they slam into the undercarriage and the walls and the ceiling of the chopper is unmistakable, and horrifying. When they hit your M60, your great machine gun is ripped open like a splintering twig. When their bullets hit flesh, they force hunks of blood and meat to splatter the interior walls, sometimes getting swept up and out in the air currents made by the rotors.

Getting hit by a bullet is one thing. It hurts like hell, but the pain tells you that you'll probably survive. When you don't know you're hit, where you only feel numb, those are the ones that are sure to maim and kill. You've already heard those stories from your wounded buddies, but that's only part of the panic.

When the chopper is hit, everything changes immediately. You're no longer in an invulnerable and indestructible airship dealing death from above without any serious response from the enemy.

Now, you're in a lumbering box, something that moves just too god damn slow no matter what the pilot does, a huge easy target, a sitting duck, dangling, huge, the nearest and most visible item in the sky. There's no cover; if it's been hit once, it will be hit again—and again.

Now, there's no place to fly to; no retreat fast enough. In all the possible directions a helicopter can move, none are safe anymore. There's no means of escaping the rest of the enemy platoon or what must be a whole fucking regiment that's about to find the one target in the sky they can all see and find in range.

When you start to fall, you feel the need to piss, shit, and puke all at the same time. There's no way to steady yourself, no way to trick your body into staying calm. You know you're falling and there's nothing you can do about it.

The horizon slips and your belly cramps; your diaphragm heaves, trying to keep your heart and lungs together and intact but abandoning your guts, pulling your insides in both directions at once. Your ass cheeks tighten involuntarily even as you know you're about to shit yourself.

There's no way you can close your eyes. The sudden surprise of your imminent death is just too fascinating.

You know it's possible to survive a helicopter crash; you've heard those stories, too. But you know somehow that such things only happen to other guys. Now, you hate this helicopter, this epitome of technological hubris, this enormous metal coffin that you're inexorably trapped in.

You hate it now, in these few seconds, much more than you ever loved it for all the weeks and months you've been in it. You blame it for killing you. You can't blame the enemy; all he did was chance upon this gift of an irresistible target, this machine that encapsulates everything he loathes about America.

It's not his fault that you were in the best and easiest thing to shoot at, to hit, to destroy. His joy at killing you is certainly as great as yours was at the thought of killing his comrades just a few minutes before.

And the bullets, adding a sickening staccato accompaniment to the screaming alarms of the chopper controls, keep smashing into the metal, your flesh, your mind. Even as you're falling at 32 feet per second per second, you know you're not falling fast enough to dodge them, and you find it appallingly unfair.

C.W. Boles is a musician, animal lover, and aspiring storyteller living in Northern California. This is his first published piece of fiction.

fifth Estate

C.W. Boles
Chopper
2015

<https://www.fiftheastate.org/archive/394-summer-2015/chopper>
Fifth Estate #394, Summer 2015 — Technology

fiftheastate.anarchistlibraries.net