

# *KAWHOOMP!*

**By Lydia Fletcher**

Stephen Fletcher joined the Army because he knew that sooner or later he'd be drafted anyway, and so he figured he might as well get a jump on things. In August of 1967, Fletcher went to Vietnam as a reconnaissance observer in an OV-1 "Mohawk" aircraft. His duty was to fly reconnaissance missions, keeping track of enemy troop and supply movements.

The week that Ted Talbot came to Vietnam for his first tour of duty was the first time Fletch was shot down over the South China Sea. This in itself was not such a momentous occurrence – lots of pilots crashed in Vietnam. But Fletch's crash was particularly impressive to Talbot because Fletch had ejected from his Mohawk and lived to tell the tale when his partner had not. Since the survival rate for ejecting from Mohawks was eighteen percent, this meant that anyone who could eject and survive was pretty damned lucky in anyone's book. To Ted Talbot, Fletch's survival meant that he had found a flying partner.

In description, Ted Talbot was a long, tall, skinny drink-of-water who appeared to be every inch the classic country boy. He was a major, just arrived in-country, with eighteen years of service behind him, and only a couple of more before he would be able to retire. This anticipated retirement instilled in Talbot a pretty laid-back, nonchalant attitude about being in Vietnam.

Not long after his arrival, he began a habit of asking for Fletch as his flying partner when given the chance. They hit it off, and as a lucky coincidence Fletch happened to work in the Operations tent, so he got into the habit of assigning his name with Talbot's every time his number came up for a mission. For nearly six months, they were a team, flying hundreds of

missions together.

At that time, it was customary for pilots to stop flying two weeks before their tour of duty was over. The rationale behind this was that they needed time to turn in their gear, take their last physical, and get their paperwork processed so they could go home. The unofficial rationale was that it wasn't very fair to risk their lives unnecessarily just before they left the country.

And so, twelve days before he was scheduled to return to the States, Fletch found himself standing in line to collect his mail from the sliding window cut out of the side of the Quonset hut that served as a mailroom. A lot of guys were congregated around the window, waiting to get their mail before they headed off to get some lunch. It was about eleven o'clock in the morning when the lanky Talbot strolled up smiling at his good friend Fletch and asked if he wanted to go flying that afternoon.

"Are you kidding? I'm short!" Fletch said, indicating he was on his way home.

"Come on, let's go flying," Talbot persisted.

"No way, I'm getting ready to clear. I'm outta here in twelve days," Fletch replied.

"We could take a run up the fence," Talbot said, meaning they'd fly up the Cambodia-Vietnam border. "It'll be great, you'll see."

"No way, Talbot," Fletch replied, shaking his head.

"Come on, just one last flight, for old time's sake."

"No, I'm going home!"

They went back and forth like this for a while, with Talbot badgering Fletch to go with him, and Fletch emphasizing the fact that he was headed home and his flying days were over. Nothing Fletch said, however, could deter Talbot – he seemed dead-set on having him for a partner that afternoon.

“Okay, I’ll tell you what,” Talbot said finally, “we’ll take an easy run up the fence, and you can bring your camera and take some final pictures.”

That was the hook. It was a well-known fact that Fletch carried a camera with him everywhere he went, and that there was nothing he loved more than snapping pictures. Fletch began to waver, and Talbot knew he had him. It didn’t take much more persuading to get Fletch to finally take the bait.

“I don’t have any survival gear,” Fletch said, “I turned all mine in, and I don’t want to have to go back to the equipment fascist and ask to get some just for today.”

“Come on, Fletch, just go down there and tell them you want some stuff to go flying this afternoon,” Talbot said, making it sound like a piece of cake. Fletch rolled his eyes, but Talbot persisted, heading him toward the supply hut, “No, really, let’s go get your gear and we’ll screw off!”

At two o’clock the plane roared down the runway and took off into the blue sky, soaring as gracefully as a bird as soon as they were off the ground. They made an arc over Vung Tau and turned west toward Cambodia. They were going to fly up the border along a region of Cambodia called the “Parrot’s Beak”, so called because it curved out toward the Mekong Delta. It wasn’t more than fifteen minutes to the Parrot’s Beak, and Fletch and Talbot were soon flying up along the fence. The sun shone over the almost idyllic jungle, the green leaves dense below the Mohawk like a thick, soft carpet. It really was a perfect day for flying.

***KAWHOOMP!*** The sound startled both men, and on his display panel, Fletch saw that they had been locked onto by targeting radar and hit. He looked back over his shoulder and saw smoke pouring out of the right wing under the plane. They turned the plane back toward South Vietnam, intending to try and land the Mohawk at Tay Nihn, a nearby airfield. Then they went

through the checklist to determine which of the plane's systems were still functional.

Simultaneously, Fletch got on the radio and contacted a nearby Cobra helicopter, which flew toward their position. The smoke was blacker than ever and spewing in great clouds from the wing. In just a few seconds, the Cobra swung in behind them.

"How bad is it?" Fletch asked the chopper pilot.

"Pretty bad. The wing's really torn up, and there's a fire inside spreading toward your fuselage," the pilot radioed back.

"We're going to try and land at Tay Nihn," Fletch radioed.

"It looks like your landing gear may be gone on this side," the Cobra pilot warned.

Talbot pulled the lever to try and deploy the landing gear. The gear on his side locked into place, but the gear on Fletch's side, and on the nose, failed to register on the instrument panel. They knew they couldn't land that way, and besides, they were losing altitude fast. There was no alternative except to eject and let the plane crash in a rice paddy somewhere.

They were at about a thousand feet when they passed over the Tay Nihn airstrip with the plane still falling fast. Just past the airfield, they dumped the extra fuel out of the tanks under the wings, having had to delay until they passed over a nearby village. By now they had gone full circle and were headed back over Cambodia.

Fletch radioed the Cobra to back off so they could eject, and at about 350 feet they punched out. Fletch yanked down on his loop, which pulled a canvas cloth over his face to protect it from the shattering Plexiglas top of the cockpit. Exactly 1.57 seconds after punching out, the first drogue chute opened, stabilizing him and pulling the other, larger chute out after it. He felt himself floating, and watched as the doomed plane fell away. Talbot floated up into the air beside him, sailing up on the breeze. Both men came to ground in a rice paddy, where they

were greeted with the angry *zip zing* of Viet Cong bullets.

Fletch pulled the small radio out of his survival vest pocket and reported the fire to the Cobra. The helicopter swung down over the two men and rattled off its mini-guns, pouring 6,000 rounds a minute into the nearby trees. After that, there was only silence.

Talbot crawled his way over to Fletch as the Cobra banked and landed a short distance away. The pilot jumped out and ran over to where the two men were standing, knee-hi in the muddy rice paddy water.

“You guys okay?” he yelled.

“Yeah,” Fletch replied, pulling his camera from around his neck. “Take our picture!”

“You guys are crazy!” the chopper pilot retorted.

Fletch and Talbot struck a pose, and the pilot snapped their picture, all of them laughing at the sheer surrealism of the situation.

“We’ll ride back to Tay Nihn on your skids,” Talbot said to the Cobra pilot.

“No need,” he replied, shaking his head, “I already called for a slick.”

A few minutes later the Huey arrived to pick up Fletch and Talbot. The first thing they had to do when they got back to the base was see a flight surgeon, who would check them over for injuries. After an initial quick examination, the surgeon told them they’d have to be x-rayed, so they sat waiting for the technician to arrive.

Fletch reached into a pocket of his pants and pulled out a package of soaked cigarettes. He showed them to Talbot, and then tossed them away. A nearby medic offered them each a cigarette. It was the best cigarette they had ever had, and they enjoyed every second of it because they knew they had just cheated death.

“You know,” Talbot said, “a funny thing happened last night. I had a nightmare where I

went flying today with a FNG (f--- new guy). We got shot down, but as we were getting ready to punch out, the guy panicked and we both ended up dead.”

Fletch listened silently.

“I woke up in a cold sweat, went out and smoked a cigarette, and then finally went back to sleep,” Talbot continued, “but damned if I didn’t have the same nightmare again. Me and this FNG went up and he panicked and we both died.”

“Really?” Fletch said, wondering where all this was going.

“So I got up again, had another cigarette and a beer, and then tried to go back to sleep,” Talbot kept going. “Finally, about 4 am I fell asleep, and damned if I didn’t have that dream again! Only this time I went up with you, and when we got shot down you were cool as a cucumber and we both walked away.”

Fletch stared incredulously at Talbot, who was calmly smoking his cigarette and shaking his head at the mysterious, but prophetic, turn of events.

“Well You son-of-a-bitch!” Fletch said.

### **Author’s Note**

This story is based on an actual event in the life of my Dad, Major Stephen C. Fletcher. He served in Vietnam from August, 1967 through December, 1968. He was assigned to the 73<sup>rd</sup> Surveillance Aircraft Company, 210<sup>th</sup> Aviation Battalion, 12<sup>th</sup> Aviation Group, 1<sup>st</sup> Aviation Brigade.