This excerpt depicts a true experience. The pilot who actually flew this mission was Warrant Officer Bill Statt.

Within minutes, the crew was onboard and proceeding toward a train wreck. They didn’t know what to expect on this mission since there was no radio contact with the men at the site. A gunship had called in the crash after catching sight of it from the air.

Soon after leaving Da Nang and heading north toward Hue, the railway steeply rises upward toward the Hai Van Pass. The name means Pass of the Ocean Clouds because the peak of the mountain is in the clouds while its foot is close to the sea. The rail line curves through tunnels and hugs the edges of sharp inclinations to climb over 1,500 feet to the summit before descending toward Hue. The US and South Vietnamese Armies regularly transported supplies via the railway, making the trains frequent and prized targets of the enemy.

The Dustoff crew flew for about thirty minutes before spotting a dark, sleek locomotive that had been pulling about ten boxcars and ten flatcars stacked with pallets and lumber. One section of the train had been blown apart, and the remains of several cars were twisted at odd angles where the tracks ran along the edge of a nearly vertical embankment. As Warrant Officer Stanton circled the area several times, the thundering thumping of the Huey’s rotor blades was almost deafening as the sound reverberated off the rock-ribbed walls. Looking down, John noticed a number of South Vietnamese soldiers standing on the mountainside guarding a perimeter, their M-16s silently aimed at an invisible enemy. When the helicopter passed by again, several ARVNs appeared on top of one of the flatcars and were frantically gesturing to the Dustoff.

“They want us to come down,” Long stated as he observed the waving men. “I don’t see any wounded,” the copilot declared. Without radio contact, the crew had no way of knowing what the situation on the ground was.

“The initial call said they had casualties,” Stanton related. And after a pause, “Well, we didn’t come all the way out here just to turn around.” “Anyone in the vicinity is certainly aware we’re here,” the copilot commented, referring to the amplified sound intensity of the chopper echoing against the mountain.

“What’s the best way to set this up?” Stanton questioned over the intercom. Staring out the open cargo bay door, John thought this had to be a mission impossible. He didn’t see how they were going to be able to land along this narrow passage where the tracks ran along the natural ledge of the mountain landscape. They hadn’t brought the hoist, and at this particular location, Stanton couldn’t bring the helicopter close enough to land directly on the flatcar because the Huey’s rotor blade would strike the adjacent rock cliffs. John’s stomach flipped when he looked beyond the tracks and saw waves crashing and breaking into foam far below.

Warrant Officer Bill Stanton was only 21-years-old, but other crewmembers recognized him as a rare example of man and machine melded into one. Somehow Stanton managed to lightly perch one of the chopper’s skids lengthwise on top of a stack of plywood along the outer edge of the flatcar.
Several more ARVNs must have clambered onto the flatcar from the opposite side, and they now approached the helicopter hauling a litter with a patient belted to it. John reached up to the intercom controls on the ceiling of the cargo bay and flipped the switch to “live” position, so he would not have to key his mike to speak to the pilots and crew chief. In open mike position, his helmet mike would remain on and transmit every word he spoke while leaving both hands free to load patients. John kneeled at the open cargo bay door and watched the South Vietnamese soldiers bring the patient closer. Even if the ARVNs spoke English, it would be impossible to verbally communicate with them, because all sounds were lost to the Huey’s reverberations.

The South Vietnamese soldiers exerted much force to lift the stretcher at a difficult angle, straining to push it toward the cargo bay. John realized that the ARVNs could not raise the litter high enough, so he lowered himself out of the cargo bay and onto the skid while Stanton held the helicopter in position. With his back to the ARVNs, John bent his knees and twisted his left arm back and downward, trying to grab a handle of the litter. He wasn’t wearing a safety strap and his right hand’s grip on the smooth, wide lip of the small side door didn’t provide a particularly strong handhold. Maintaining a Huey in a hover was no easy task, but Stanton kept the bird relatively motionless while John strained to reach hold of the litter. As the ARVNs struggled to push the stretcher upward, the rotor wash swept debris in their faces and blew their uniforms snug against their skin. The strong wind dislodged one of the ARVN’s caps, and out of the corner of his eye, John caught sight of it tumble beyond the skid and fall toward the distant, swirling froth and boulders beneath them.

In any other circumstance, the spectacular view on this sunny afternoon would be beautiful, but at this moment, it was terrifying. John knew the pilots had the same view through the chin bubble, the curved windows along the floor of the cockpit that allowed them to see the ground below, and he knew it took intense concentration to keep this chopper in place. Plus, they were hovering out of ground effect, which made the pilot’s job technically even more difficult. Stanton was constantly adjusting the controls to maintain height, position, and direction while fighting the wind currents coming off the ocean. Despite the intermixing of updrafts and downdrafts from the mountain, Stanton held a stable hover.

From his sideways position, John caught a glimpse of two more ARVNs trying to climb on top of the flatcar. They were lugging a second litter. From John’s vantage point, all activity on the other side of the train car was hidden from view. Taking a breath, John forced himself to keep his focus on trying to get the first patient—strapped to a litter—onboard. When the ARVNs shoved upward, he finally was able to clutch the litter handle. John wrestled to pull the handle up while crew chief Long—on his hands and knees on the floor of the cargo bay—leaned out and grabbed the other handle, making sure not to pull too hard and wind up falling out the opposite open door. Finally, they were able to slide the patient up against the pilots’ seats, allowing room for the next litter. If the patient had been a large American soldier rather than a small-stature Vietnamese, they might not have been able to accomplish this tricky maneuver. Noting that the soldier was bleeding from his ears, John turned his attention back to the train car. In the back of his mind he couldn’t help but think that somebody had just blown up this train, and he wondered where the enemy was now—possibly on the mountain above them, positioning an RPG to blow up the rest of it. Shoving that thought out of his mind, John forced his concentration back to what he was doing. Keeping his mind focused on what was right before him was the only way he could overcome thoughts of worry and fear.
The same effort continued as the ARVN's then lifted the second patient. Balancing the stretcher at an awkward slant, they aimed it toward John’s feet. John again bent down on the skid, stretching to reach the litter handle. Before grabbing it, he glanced down at this patient and realized the man did not have a head. John was looking down into a dark cavity where a blood-smeared flap of skin—all that was left of a neck—was folded in on itself where this man’s head should have been.

Immediately straightening, John spoke into the open microphone of his helmet, “Mr. Stanton, the second patient is not alive.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes, sir. He has no head.”

“Then we won’t take him; we’re not evacuating the dead,” Stanton directed.

John waved the ARVN's off and gestured for them to pull back, but it was obvious they wanted John to take the litter as the group of South Vietnamese soldiers shouted and motioned in protest.

“They’re not too keen about us not taking this guy,” John exhaled into his mike.

“We’re not taking their dead,” Stanton insisted.

It was the aircraft commander’s call and John was relieved they wouldn’t have to sweat to load a second litter onboard while hovering in this precarious position. The strenuous effort could not be justified for the dead.

Clambering back up into the cargo bay, John signaled all clear and Stanton tipped the bird away from the mountain. Relieved to be in motion again, John started an IV on the patient as they headed to the Provincial Hospital in Da Nang. They certainly never had training for the mission they just flew. Like many of their missions, it was OJT—on-the-job-training. But they had pulled it off, and no one had gotten hurt.

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