

DAN ROACH

DESERTERS TO THE RESCUE

After completing eight months in the field with Delta Company, I was reassigned as their company executive officer (XO). Now I was stationed in our company's rear at LZ Sally. Sally was a small fire support base about 10 miles north of Hue and west of Highway 1 in I Corps. There was a short air-
strip associated with Sally that during the Second World War it served as a Japanese airstrip. The short earthen airstrip couldn't handle anything larger than a Caribou.



I was XO for only a short time when on 14 January 1969 I was visiting with two NCOs in charge of our Battalion helipad. I was working on that days resupply mission to our company when a Huey suddenly dropped out of no where and landed on our helipad. One of the choppers crewmen leaped from the helicopter and ran over to us shouting that they needed help with a downed chopper. They needed heavy duty nylon slings to lift the Huey and free the injured crew trapped inside. I looked at the heliport crew and immediately retrieved the necessary rigging equipment. Within a minute, the three of us were in the air and on our way to the crash site.

I later discovered that the crash site was near the village of Huong Can. As we approached the crash site, I could see a busted up UH-1 resting on its right side in a rice paddy. The three of us exited the aircraft with our equipment and started for the downed UH-1. As we approached the crash site, we could see a ring of at least three Cobra gun ships circling us. I could also see that we were very close to a village and a crowd of Vietnamese were starting to form. As I climbed over the fuselage I could see that the co-pilot was dead since the main rotor had sliced through the cockpit removing the top 1/3 of his flight helmet. I could also hear the pinned crewman talking to a medic.

We went to work rigging the downed Huey for lift off. I guess I got the honors since I was an officer and the two NCOs (noncommissioned officers) thought I knew what I was doing. I put my Ranger mountaineering skills to work as I looped the heavy duty sling around the main rotor shaft. I was completing the rigging when someone shouted that a CH-46, "Chinook" helicopter was on final approach to our location. There are a few vividly memories permanently etched in my memory bank and this is one. I can still see, feel and smell the JP-4 exhaust as that Chinook was bearing down on me as though I were the landing pad. Nose down and both rotors beating the humid air as it came straight at me. Soon I was fighting cyclone rotor winds. As they subsided I became engulfed by the huge belly of the aircraft; and, as it reared back a large metal hook was exposed. Just behind the hook



was an open hatch from which the crew chief's head and shoulders were exposed. He was directing the pilots verbally through the mouthpiece of his flight helmet. By then the world around me had erupted with



flying debris from the crashed Huey as the Chinook's powerful blades created an incredible downdraft. I was in the eye of the storm and focusing on one task; seating the

sling in the hook. At first I was standing as I forced the sling into the mouth of the hook. Soon I was crouching as the huge helicopter continued its downward encroachment. Then I was to my knees and then on my side as the 24,000 pound aircraft started pressing me against the fuselage of the crashed

Huey. I finally rolled to the side and off of the fuselage as the Chinooks crew chief frantically got the pilot to lift their aircraft. Slowly the gap between the helicopters widened, the sling tightened and the crashed Huey slowly rolled back onto its skids.



We then assisted the medics in removing the final crewman. He was going to be fine. As soon as the medevac ship was airborne, the Chinook slowly lifted off with its sling load, the crashed Huey, and headed for Camp Eagle. During the final moments of the rescue, I found myself walking about the crash site scanning the debris. I spotted a strange piece of material submerged in a couple inches of rice paddy water. I picked it up in my right hand and examined it. It was cold, brownish grey and organic; I then realized that I was holding a piece of the pilots brain in my hand, and I could see the top 1/3 of his flight helmet just in front of me. As the reality of this chilling discovery rocked me to the core; I crouched to my knees and reverently released the material to the rice paddy from which it came. I prayed at that moment that the pilot was at peace and in the loving arms of his maker.

As I stood, I couldn't help but notice that the crowd from the village had increased to about 100 in number. As the security ring of circling Cobra gun ships drifted away, the crowd was now headed to the crash site. There we were three American soldiers all alone, no weapons, no radio, no map, in an area not familiar to any of us and we are standing in the middle of their rice paddy. As the three of us started to regroup and plan our exit strategy, the silence was broken by the faint but familiar "whop ...whop ... whop" of a distant Huey making its way toward us. Before it's skids could touch down, we were loaded and on our way back to LZ Sally in the same helicopter that initiated the adventure.

Once back at Sally we waved and signaled our satisfaction for a job well done as the Huey departed our LZ. After a few words, the helipad crew and I departed shaking our heads in disbelief of our two hour experience. As I turned away from the helipad, I seemed to awaken from a dream that was too odd to be real. "Oh, well this is Vietnam. "



I made my way back to my company area to let them know where I was but I couldn't help thinking that I just spent two hours with two guys from the helipad that were perceived to be two of the world's greatest "screw offs" and they had just preformed with outstanding courage, dedication and heroism. I was putting them in for the "Soldiers Metal" an award more prestigious than the Bronze Star and set aside for those special situations where a soldier displays unusual heroism while not involved in actual combat with an armed enemy but while risking their life to save the life of another. **

Just after lunch, that same day, I was still high and in disbelief of the experience when I was cornered by the Headquarters Company Commander. His name escapes me so I'll call him Cpt. Remf (*rear area use your imagination*). As I recall he was a medium sized pudgy arrogant captain that had spent his entire combat tour in the rear area counting beans and taking great pleasure in making others lives miserable. I truly believe that he had a tough job since many of his soldiers were reassigned to his company since they weren't working out in the field. It would be a lot like herding cats or commanding a company of cats. He most likely was an excellent garrison commander back at Ft. Campbell but in Vietnam was impotent as a combat commander.

As Headquarters Company Commander, he was shelved in a good place where he could do the least amount of damage while providing satisfactory service. He informed me that I was witness in a misconduct case involving two of his men that went AWOL earlier that day by deserting their post. He also said that the two soldiers attempted to cover their desertion with an outrageous story involving a helicopter crash and rescue and that I was there with them. He continued to inform me that he finally had the goods on these misfits and was pursuing a military courts-martial. He needed my help to substantiate his charges of misconduct and desertion.

I respectfully explained to the captain that the men, indeed deserted their post and that they were requested to respond immediately to a life or death rescue operation. I could see that the captain didn't want to hear what I was saying and he became livid. He informed me as a lieutenant that his men went AWOL, I witnessed it and he was taking appropriate action. The conversation was getting heated and I was concerned that there were no witnesses, and I knew that the captain wasn't going to appreciate my next statement. I then told the captain that while he was processing his Article 15 that I was processing his soldiers to be awarded the "Soldier's Medal." At that, his livid became more livid. "You can't do that, they were AWOL", barked the captain! I told the captain that I was sorry I couldn't help him and that I was continuing to process the two soldiers for the "Soldier's Medal." At that the captain threatened to "kick my ass." and I obliged him by informing him that all he had to do is throw the first punch in front of a witness.

The captain stormed off and I went to see my friend the chaplain and told this story to him. The chaplain also roomed with the Battalion's Operation Officer so I knew my bases would be covered from the other end. I also went to those two brave deserters that were AWOL with me that day and told them that I put them for the Soldiers Medal and personally thought that would negate any court-martial action.



LESSONS LEARNED FROM THIS EXPERIENCE

1. Trust your intuition.
2. Individuals will make a difference when they take on an honorable challenge.
3. Be alert, resourceful, open to possibilities and flow with the situation.
4. Be an advocate for others.

LIEUTENANT ROACH FOR THE LAST 38 YEARS

1st Lt. Roach was platoon leader for the 3d platoon of Delta Company, 1/501, 2nd Bde. (brigade) from 30 March 68 to around October 69. In October Lieutenant Roach swapped assignments with Lt Lamenzo as Delta's XO. On several occasions, while XO, (executive officer), Lt. Roach returned to the field in the capacity of temporary CO until his ETS in March of 69. For those of you that may have difficulty placing Lt. Roach, he was a stocky "5'8" and one of the squad leaders, who shall remain nameless, tagged him "Lt. Tim Conway" after the comedian from the Carol Burnett Show. He was 27 in August of 68.

Dan Roach was born and raised in San Francisco, earned Eagle Scout, attended San Francisco City College and graduated from Cal. State, Humboldt with a Bachelors of Science Degree in Forest Management. Dan worked his way through college as a seasonal forester/firefighter with the U.S. Forest Service. After graduation Dan enlisted in May 1966 as a college OP and headed to Ft. Jackson for Basic and AIT and then to FT. Benning's Infantry School and 93d Company. On 23 April Dan was commissioned as a 2nd Lt. and went directly to RANGER School.



After being "tabbed" (getting his Ranger Tab) in May '67, Lt. Roach was assigned as an instructor for the Mountain Ranger Camp's Patrolling Committee, at Dahlenega GA. The Patrolling Committee anticipated incorporating airborne operations into their tactical mountain maneuvers so Lt. Roach was sent to Airborne School at Ft Benning on 17 July 1967. At Airborne School, Lt. Roach became the "Student Company Commander," graduated and returning to Dahlenega to put his new wings to work. Also, his "Jump Pay" was the amount needed to make payments on his first new car: a red 67 Camaro RS/SS 350 convertible w/white bee stripe. In the Fall of '68 Lt. Roach received orders to Vietnam and in February drove his Camaro, from Georgia to San Francisco; he still has the Camaro and drives it occasionally.

1st Lt. Roach reported to Vietnam in March of '68 as a replacement officer and by choice wrangled an assignment with the 101st when it was still Airborne. On 30 March '68 Roach was at LZ Sally's Bn. Hq. listening to Delta Company's battle involving two KIA's Murphy and McPherson. By late afternoon Lt. Roach was in the field and briefed by Captain Holland and became the new "3-6" and the rest is history.



Part of that history is that Dan's sister gave his name and APO address to a local S.F. radio station that was running a Christmas Card program to "support our troops." Dan received several Christmas Cards in '68, one of which was from a young woman named Helen. Dan returned to San Francisco, took three weeks off, met Helen and then started working for the U.S. Forest Service in

northern California as a forester. In October of '69 Dan and Helen were married in San Francisco. Father McTaggard, a Catholic priest and Army Reserve Chaplain, performed the ceremony. Mr. and Mrs. Blakely, Bill's mom and dad, attended the wedding.

Dan and Helen have been married for 38 years and have three sons. The oldest Jesse (35 yrs) is a fire engine captain with the U.S. Forest Service. Shane (32 yrs), the middle son is a smoke jumper for the Bureau of Land Management in Boise and Seth (17 yrs) is a freshman at Cal. State Long Beach. Dan retired from the U.S. Forest Service in October 2001 after 37 years of government service. He also had a second career as a "Weekend Warrior" with the California Army National Guard. Dan was a Mechanized Infantry CO for several years, a Public Affairs Detachment commander and retired a Major. He was also a Scoutmaster for almost 20 years in Willows as his sons went through scouting. All three sons earned Eagle. Dan and his sons have backpacked over 400 miles and canoed over 300 miles including two canoe trips to British Columbia and two National Jamborees at Ft. A.P. Hill, VA in 1989 and 2001.

Dan has a small family owned business called **RoachWorks** where he continues to provide training in meeting facilitation, team effectiveness, instructor and leadership training to teams and organizations. Dan and Helen have two grand children and live in Willows California. E-mail, droachca@earthlink.net.

*** In addition to the two soldiers, Lieutenant Roach, for a most unusual act of heroism, received the prestigious Soldier's Medal.*



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