

## MEMORIES OF A SOLDIER

There are times when the past is vivid and so easy to recall and then there are occasions when it is oh so difficult. As the years pass that time so long ago that we shared in the delta of Southeast Asia is for me a defining period. I left behind a wife, seven months pregnant, and the life of an immature civilian to serve my country in a noble cause. Each of you can easily tell a similar story and each of you is, I am sure, just as proud as I am.

The sights, the smells, the noise, the heat, the dirt, and the ever present fear. Can I do this? Will I cower? Will I make a terrible mistake that is fatal? Will I do my best or will I fail? These thoughts haunted me then and I, like you, vowed to do my best. Our small world at Bearcat stood in the shadow of our mission and the world outside our perimeter. The business of war is exciting and frightening. Just to get through the day was a relief, but then you knew it would all start again and so it would be for the longest year in our young lives.

Thoughts of home and that empty feeling it can bring were pushed aside as you do your job, day and night, day after day, you just do it. Do it better than “they” do it and think of tomorrow, never looking back. Tomorrows missions, what will they be, Song Be, Bam Me Tuet, French Fort, Dong Tam, or so many places without names that are now just something green or brown with a river or road winding through the area. This was our world and the memory of some missions brings a smile and sometimes I smile through the tears.

The long day over, up north of us somewhere, and the FM radio comes on for the trip home. A due south heading as the rover comes into view, the crew is cleaning up in the back and the boys up front are finally able to relax a little. The intercom crackles interrupting the music and the A/C Pachyderm three wants to know if this baby floats. Oh boy, what did he say? Silence! “Chief, he says, does this baby float?” Ah, yes sir, it floats. “What say we give it a try, I’ve never landed in the water.” Silence again from the back as I’m thinking, is he joking or is he just crazy. I’m trying to remember the required inspections after a water landing and wheels and bilge come to mind. Hours of work to remove flooring and wheels and pack bearings, yeah, he must be crazy. Persistent he is and again my ears crackle as he says, “Hey guys, let have a little fun.” Okay sir, how about we make a deal about the inspections? You help out with the wheels while we do the floor and the bilge. As the nose lowers and our airspeed slows, he replies, “Deal.” Down we go, now the nose is coming up along with the wash from the river and in we settle. What the hell are we doing I’m wondering as we actually float. This thing floats! Left, right ahead we go. I look aft and a wall of water is flowing in through the tongue in the ramp. The tongue, why didn’t I think to put it up? Pull Pitch, pull pitch, I call as the A/C looks in the rearview mirror and see’s what we see in the back. Nose up and we shudder to pull free of the river. He never mentioned how much power he pulled to get us up. But “107” was vibrating! South again now as I lower the ramp and the water the countryside all the way home. Fun, you bet, and a long night or wheels and bearing and flooring and bilge. And true to his

word he took his stool, and the can of grease and went to work. No one asked about the log entry or questioned us about our fun at the end of a long day, somewhere up north.

Why do we remember some events and others are lost until someone jogs our memory? For each of us there are surely different reasons. Missions or experiences that are funny, sad, fearful, unusual, or that require that something extra, are for me, easy to recall. The routine is just that, routine, and often not memorable. Once in a while an event will cause one to reflect and one mission on an otherwise routine day did just that. A request from a Special Forces camp at Song Be is relayed for the extraction of a child and is to this day, vivid and sad. As I lowered the ramp a Special Forces Captain approached me carrying an infant. This three or four month old little girl he told me was sick. She was dying and he couldn't help her. He had tried all he knew and nothing had worked. "Please take her to the hospital in Saigon" he yelled as he handed her to me. I cradled her in my arms, raised the ramp and took a seat in the rear. On the way to the hospital I couldn't help thinking of another little girl of the same age, far away in another world. My daughter would be eleven months old when I returned home and often when I would take my daughters' picture or just hold her, I would remember that little girl in Vietnam and I would wonder about her. I still do to this day. So long ago and so far away and I still see that child. Some things we never forget.

As our reunions come and go, and the memory fades a little each year, let us all try to remember our good fortune and always be thankful for this wonderful land we call home.