

RUFUS
by
Candy Roscoe

Looking almost like children with their noses pressed to the cloudy glass, the men peered curiously out of the window as we drove up, each trying to get a glimpse of who might be in the automobile arriving at the Ramada Inn in Enterprise, Alabama. Each wondered not only who might be arriving, but in the deep recesses of their minds they wondered if they could even remember who this next man might be. Was he someone they knew? Was he someone they would prefer to forget? Worse yet, was it someone they knew quite well from a war that occurred 35 years before—someone with whom a beer had been drunk—a sorrow shared—and had they forgotten?

It was the first reunion of the Pachyderms. They were a group of men who had piloted and crewed the Chinook helicopters throughout foreign terrain during the escalating days of the first war brought to the dinner tables of the American public back home. They were kids then. Most were only 18-19 years old when they had been drafted, but all of them had subsequently enlisted into the Army. Each man knew that he would be catapulted into the war that was Vietnam. Old men in the group were at most only 25 when they met in the winter of 1966. They had many stories to share—memories to be jump-started—and friendships to be reinstated. They wondered if they could, and perhaps in some cases, even if they should remember. Excitement reigned. Phil's eyes scanned the faces of the aging warriors hoping to find one that was familiar. None was. It's no wonder that the faces were unfamiliar. The men were all in their late 50's and early 60's. Most were no longer lean. They were gray, balding, and in various stages of health. All of them had difficulty hearing well, thanks to the noise of Chinook engines. Nursing his left knee Phil stepped out of the SUV and as quickly as he could joined the Pachyderms. Two of them instantly recognized Phil when he removed his hat and spoke his greeting—Jessup and Ski. With old soldiers identified themselves.

The first question Jessup asked was, "What happened to Rufus?" Phil told me to retrieve the worn page from the ancient photo album as he checked in. The treasured pictures were of very young men and a black and white, mostly blue-tick beagle. Both Jessup and Ski studied the pictures closely, laughing and pointing at details shown in the background that had long been forgotten. The pictures quickly passed from Jessup and Ski's hands to the rest of the gathered pilots and crew members of the 200th ASHC, Assault Support Helicopter Company. They wanted to know what had become of the dog they all had loved so very much. The reunion had begun.

Their story, and the story of a mixed breed dog, begins in the United States during field maneuvers held in the driving, skin-splitting sleet of January at Fort Benning, Georgia. Most of these young recruits had been able to go home for Christmas only to be greeted with their orders to go to war. The field maneuvers were designed to be the last combat training they would receive before having to face the real enemy somewhere on the other side of the world. Their task was to fly, dismantle, and reassemble their Chinook helicopters, or ships, by day and by night. They would be flying above combat zones with supplies and they had to know what to do if they were hit by enemy fire. Repairs had to be made in flight, if possible, and cargo had to be handled safely and efficiently. The Army was trying to do its part, but the men knew that when

they were in combat, the responsibility was theirs. They didn't talk much about where they were going. Instead, they talked about the work they had to do, griped about the Army, or complained about the unusually cold weather they were having in Georgia that winter of 1966. Some were homesick and a few wrote daily letters to wives, girlfriends, and family. These young men lived very closely together in tents that housed eight helicopter crew members. They worked together, ate together, fought together, and as the Army training continued they bonded together to make solid teams. The pilots were separated from the crews, but this caused no resentment. If there were any regrets amongst the flight engineers and crew chiefs it was because they had been assigned to the Chinooks instead of the Huey's in the first place. Only later would they learn that they had been hand-selected for the CH-47 crews. All of them had achieved very high scores on training tests and the Chinook was slated to become the workhorse of the Vietnam War. They were too young to know that they would eventually become extremely proud of their service to the United States, specifically because they were Pachyderms.

The cold made their work especially difficult since they couldn't escape. It was extremely cold in the air and miserable on the ground. At night they were exhausted, but still found time for cards or horseplay before going to sleep. But this time didn't last long because they were up at 0400 the next morning for more flight training and take-it-apart and put-it-back-together-again—routine that would be vital for their survival in the months that were to come.

Spec. 4, Phillip T. Roscoe had just settled into his bunk for the night when he heard the insistent cry of a small animal outside of the tent. Whatever it was, the critter was in distress. Its cries were persistent and it scratched tenaciously against the canvas of the tent. Roscoe knew he'd get little to no sleep if he didn't take care of it. Phil and his tent mate, Daryl Garrett, went to investigate. Shivering and cold, a tiny black and white puppy, barely old enough to be weaned, was trying to snuggle her way into the soldiers' tent for warmth and shelter. Roscoe slipped the small dog into the pocket of his warm flight jacket and the two men quickly returned to the tent. They fed the puppy with C rations, placed her on a towel and went to bed for the night.

The eight soldiers amused themselves with her playful antics. She would growl and pounce on shoestrings and chew on dirty socks. When Cephas Sanford, more affectionately known as the Tennessee Hillbilly, saw her he said that she looked like his dog back home, Rufus. The name stuck. Cephas, who was constantly teased because of his slow Tennessee drawl and backwoods humor, was a crack gunner. In spite of the good-natured banter that was aimed at Cephas, the men respected him and relied on his knowledge and expertise in the outdoors. Sanford said that Rufus was part blue tick beagle—"a huntin' dawg"—but mostly she was a mutt. John Harney, Roscoe's crew chief, agreed and the others took their word for it. All in all, there was nothing special about the puppy except that to the soldiers she represented home, and took their minds away from the war they would soon join.

That week Rufus belonged to everyone. She played no favorites and slept with whichever soldier was willing to share his bunk. Collectively they took her into the weather when she needed to be outdoors, and collectively they shared their Army rations with her. When she wasn't scampering around the tent, she lazily slept in someone's lap or the crook of an arm. She was easily housebroken and she never strayed far from the tent. When the soldiers returned from the day's duty, Rufus would be waiting for her evening of fun with the boys. They looked forward to seeing her when they came in. Cephas declared, "That there dawg is a smart 'en!"

Of course, everyone agreed that Rufus was the smartest puppy to have ever lived and the soldiers loved her.

Shortly, the field maneuvers were over and it was time to break camp. They would be returning to base for only three days before flying the Chinooks across country from Ft. Benning to Stockton, CA. The men stepped over Rufus as they packed their duffel bags and ignored her invitations to play. When Daryl wouldn't play with her, she moved on to Sanford or Bennie Birch. She growled at Robert Bennett, Jim Thalaker, and Jessup. Roscoe was busy packing his Army issue when she attacked his shoe lace. He stared down at the puppy he had rescued from the cold Georgia sleet. Impulsively he reached down and again put her into his coat pocket.

"What 'cha plannin' to do with the dawg?" Sanford asked in his Tennessee twang.

"I'm taking her back to base with me," Roscoe answered, stuffing the last of his belongings into the bulging bag.

"You can't do that," Daryl said matter-of-factly. "You know dogs aren't allowed on base."

Sarcastically Roscoe answered, "What are they going to do? Send me to Vietnam?"

Sanford whistled under his breath, and John Harney said, "It might be fun at that....Do you think we can get away with it?... Roscoe's right! What can they do to us—we all have orders for 'Nam."

"Y'all better put cotton in them ears," Cephas said. "Them helicopter noises will deafen the dawg."

Birch produced cotton from the medical kit, and they all watched Sanford pad and tape the puppy's ears. Rufus didn't like this procedure at all. She yelped, whined and scratched while Roscoe held the wiggling puppy still.

"It's only for a little while, Rufus," Roscoe cooed soothingly to the struggling puppy. "You have to settle down so that we can take you with us. We won't hurt you. You can't stay out here in the cold. You will die if we leave you."

Gradually the dog calmed down and seemed to accept the cotton wads and duct tape as part of her fate. Nevertheless, Roscoe confined her tightly in the jacket pocket where he could feel her small body shiver as the bandaged head poked through the flap.

The Army could never have devised a more apt plan to bond eight men into a fighting unit. They had entered into a conspiracy; they plotted and giggled at their plans to keep the dog on base without being detected. Like little boys they schemed until a plan took shape. They knew they could get away with it. They could fool the U.S. Army if they were careful! Rufus took her last walk in the Georgia woods and the men loaded their gear into the Chinook for the short flight to base.

Fort Benning

Sanford removed the packing from Rufus' ears as soon as the engines were shut down. She barked rather shrilly for nearly ten minutes while Roscoe and Birch slammed cargo around to cover the racket. Cephas rapidly handed the dog to Phil then joined Birch in noise making. Roscoe lifted the pup to his face. "We have to have a heart-to-heart talk, Rufus," he said to the dog suspended in mid-air. "You are going to have to behave, or I can't take you with me."

As if she understood what he had said, Rufus' yelping stopped. Again, Phil slipped the dog into the now familiar pocket where she quickly became nothing more than a sleeping bulge.

Roscoe retrieved his gear and man and dog went to the barracks. No plan existed beyond taking her to base, but one was beginning to form in Roscoe's mind.

The barracks contained many soldiers from the 200th ASHC, all of whom had orders for Vietnam, but only the eight tent mates knew Roscoe had the dog. Roscoe entered the barracks and found his bunk. When he began to unpack his gear, Rufus was removed from the pocket. "Stay!" Roscoe ordered.

Rufus gazed back at him with innocent, clear, round, brown puppy eyes and sat still. Roscoe began to unpack his Army issue, and the pup began to explore. Daryl was the first to return Rufus to Roscoe's bunk; Harney was the second. Cephas took her for a walk then she was placed inside of Phil's boot for the night. She stayed.

The next morning the Executive Officer, Major Kendall, was in the barracks when it was time for Rufus to be taken outside. At first she whimpered, then she barked.

"Is there a dog in the barracks?" the officer roared.

"Yes, Sir!" Roscoe standing at attention answered him.

The XO crossed the floor to Phil. "Where did it come from?" he demanded.

"Bivouac, Sir," Roscoe answered.

In exasperation the XO asked, "Why did you bring it here?"

"She's my private property, Sir. The flight crews adopted the dog as our company mascot until we ship out for Vietnam, Sir," Roscoe explained, finally verbalizing a plan that had been forming in his head for several days.

The officer shook his head. "You can't have a dog in the barracks. For that matter dogs aren't allowed on base! I don't want it in the barracks—it'll shit on the floor. Get rid of it." He was leaving the building when he turned to address the soldiers who were still standing at attention. "How many of you knew the dog was in the barracks?" he asked.

Slowly seven hands rose, then a few more followed. Much to his astonishment, soldiers Phil had never seen before had joined the plan to keep the dog.

The barracks was unusually still while the XO pondered what to do. It was a pause that a Mack truck could have driven through. The officer shook his head. "You can't have a dog in the barracks...it's against regulations. The dog can be nowhere near the mess hall. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Sir!" Roscoe answered.

"And...the dog has to be outta here before you ship for 'Nam. Is that clear? I don't want to have to waste a dog."

"Yes, Sir!"

Rufus was moved outdoors. Her make-shift bed was carefully tucked under the building, partially to protect her from the weather, and partially to hide her from the company commander. Occasionally she would venture out on her own, but instinctively she never strayed far from the soldiers who cared for her. They took turns playing with her, and there was enough food stolen from the mess hall to have fed fifteen puppies. The XO gave little more thought to the animal, believing that someone would get rid of it when the soldiers shipped out in two days.

That night, there was a poker game at the non-com club on base. Roscoe, Garrett, Thalaker, Sanford, Harney, and Birch were playing in a remote corner of the noisy, smoky room, drinking beer. Conversation turned to Rufus.

"What'll happen to the dog when we ship out?" Birch asked.

"Nothing," Roscoe answered.

“What do you mean, nothing? Garrett almost shouted. “They’ll waste her. The army has no need for a puppy like her!”

“Nothing is going to happen to her,” Roscoe repeated, “we’re going to take her with us to California.”

Dumbfounded, Thalaker asked “How do you plan to do that?”

Roscoe quietly responded, “She’s my personal property. You heard me tell the XO. I’ll manage to get her there.”

“Cain’t take a dawg on them Chin-ooks that fer. Not even with cotton in them ears,” Sanford observed taking a deep puff of his cigarette. “Don’t look to me like you’ll do much gittin’ that pup outta here—lessen you want to make her deaf.”

“If we could get her aboard one of the Hercules, we could fly her out there with no damage to her hearing. They aren’t noisy like our ships,” Harney observed.

Garrett brightened, “Bet those guys would do it for nothing!”

“How do we do it, though?” Thalaker asked.

A soldier at the next table folded his hand and tapped Birch on the shoulder. “Let me introduce myself.” The stranger offered. “I’m Jim Bailey and I think I can help you.”

“Help me do what?” Birch answered guardedly.

“Help you get your puppy to California.” Bailey replied.

“What puppy? Garret asked in a feeble attempt to appear confused.

“The puppy you guys have hiding under our barracks. I’m in there too and I know what the XO said,” the stranger said. “I think you call her ‘Rufus’. I want to help.”

“Oh! That puppy.” Garrett exclaimed.

“How can you do that?” Roscoe asked.

“I’m the supply sergeant for this company. I gotta fly on a Hercules to California in front of you. I’ll take her with me. Just put the dog in a box she can’t get out of. Only cargo we got is two OH-11 observation helicopters. Be no problem at all.”

“I’ll pay you,” Roscoe offered.

“Nawh. Only thing is we leave in the morning. You guys don’t leave here for two more days,” the supply sergeant said.

“Oh,” Roscoe said, his face falling. “Who’d take care of her until we get there?”

“I’ll look after the dog myself ‘til you get there,” Bailey replied. “I like dogs, and I’ll be fun to see the XO when he finds out the company mascot made it to Stockton before he did!”

The conspirators were excited. The poker game was put on “hold” until Rufus’ traveling box was readied—a boot box with holes cut in the lid so she could breathe. Early the next morning, the poker players from the night before collectively took her for her morning walk. Carefully they placed her in the box and secured the lid with shoe strings and duct tape and delivered her to their new friend.

Stockton, California

The Chinooks flew in pairs across country stopping for re-fueling and to avoid storms as the CH-47 flies at a maximum height of about 3,000 ft. They stopped for one night at a desolate, small air force base in Texas. Major Kendall was always in the first pair, and Roscoe’s ship followed somewhere behind him. It was a couple of days later when the XO landed at the

Stockton Army Depot. He was greeted by Jim Bailey and Rufus. The XO didn't recognize the supply sergeant, but he did recognize the dog.

"Tell the GI who claims that dog that I want to see him in my office, NOW." The XO bellowed.

"Yes, Sir," Bailey responded. "Haven't seen him yet. He should be right behind you.

"You just tell him to meet me in my office," the XO said as he turned to walk toward the office building.

Not long afterward Roscoe landed. He and Harney went to find Rufus. It was easy to find Bailey's office because of the racket Rufus was making. Bailey had placed the growing puppy in a milk crate beneath his desk. Rufus jumped out of the crate and ran excitedly to the door, yelping with her tail creating tight, small circles in the air. Later Bailey would remember the incident and remark that it was uncanny how that dog would always know when Roscoe was near.

Harney and Roscoe greeted Bailey and scooped the dog up for her first reunion of many with the soldier who claimed her as his own. "How did it go?" Phil asked Bailey.

"Bad news, Buddy," Bailey replied. "Major Kendall has already seen the dog and he wants you in his office immediately. Want me to come along since I'm responsible for getting her here?"

"I want to go too," Harney chimed in.

"Okay, Guys," Phil said, "but the dog is my personal property if we are in trouble. There's no need for all of you to go to the brig with me. Where's the XO's office?"

Phil tucked Rufus firmly under his arm. For her part, Rufus was quiet, alert, and shaking with excitement. It was as though she, too, was ready to take any punishment meted out to the GIs. Bailey led the way. The men and the dog waited only briefly before they were ushered into a small, but orderly, temporary military office. Rufus sat at Phil's feet, as though she were also at attention.

The Major stared at the dog as he told the soldiers to stand at ease. "How did you get the dog from Fort Benning to here?" he asked.

"Bailey here won him in a poker game, Sir." Harney immediately responded.

"Yeah, and since I'm supply sergeant for the company...I...ah...brought the company mascot with me on a Hercules. I...ah...figured that it would cheer the guys up if she met them here since we all have orders for "Nam and all...ah..."

Kendall's stinging glare caused Bailey to stop in mid-sentence. The XO stared at Rufus who ventured a small tail wag for his benefit. He was unimpressed. Still scowling the Major returned his gaze to Roscoe. "This true?" he asked.

"For the most part, Sir," Phil answered.

"Explain yourself, Soldier," the XO barked as he leaned on his desk.

"Sir, you said yourself that you didn't want to waste the pup when we were at Benning. We couldn't find a home for her since we were there for such a short time. We knew we were coming to Stockton, and Garrett has family not far away who said they'd take the dog. We were only trying to do what you told us to do and find Rufus a good home..." Roscoe rattled on without stammering.

Meanwhile Harney's head was slowly bobbing up and down in semi-mute agreement. Rufus didn't move.

“Stop!” Major Kendall grunted. Harney’s head stopped mid-bob. “I give! Find the dog a home.” The XO’s words were short and clipped. “Keep her out of the way, but she has to be gone before we ship out.”

Kendall audibly sighed as he told the soldiers to stand at ease. Rufus took this as her cue. She squealed and trotted to his feet. He picked the pup up and Rufus wagged her tail in tight little circles. Kendall held the dog at arm’s length and addressed her. “Rufus, welcome to Stockton. Don’t get in any trouble.” He then tucked the dog under his arm. Walking around the desk he handed the pup to Roscoe and scratched her head between her floppy, black ears. “Now get outta here, and find her a good home,” he ordered the men.

As soon as the three soldiers were outside, Roscoe said, “Now, how are we going to get her to Vietnam?”