

Rescuing My Father

Copyright 2004 by Lori Mayfield

Stiletto One, my dad's code name the night he got shot down in Vietnam, didn't send out a distress call 15 years later. He didn't know how to cry out for this kind of trouble. He'd been captured—a prisoner of his own inner demons of depression and tortured by feelings of being a failure.

There wasn't a suicide note. Instead, his final message was to make a summary of the finances, place the divorce papers my mother served him two days prior on top, stuff his clothes in plastic trash bags, shine his black military shoes and pin the medals on his uniform to be buried in. His military achievement was the lone morsel of pride he would take with him to his grave.

I found my father the next morning in the garage lying on the front seat of his Cadillac dead from carbon monoxide poisoning. At just 18, this left me in a wake of anger and profound sadness that my dad would inflict such shameful act onto our family.

I would dilute my grief in alcohol and anything mood-altering. But even the best designer drugs weren't tailored for this kind of pain. One rehab center and years of therapy sessions later, I'd drudged up all the stuff no one ever talked about in our family. At best my feelings towards my father and memories of him had transcended into forgiveness and pity.

Then this past year, the helicopter pilot who braved clouds of intense anti-aircraft missiles and gunfire to pluck my father, surrounded by Vietcong, from a dark and rainy rice paddy in Vietnam, would bring me a side of my dad I'd never known and resurrect memories almost forgotten.

Former Lt. Ron Clarke hired a private investigator to find our family. Having been recently nominated for the Medal of Honor, he needed eyewitness account verification for a proposal to the Pentagon.

I had the honor of meeting my father's hero and have him recount the events of July 27, 1966 a few months ago. We met in Big Bear, CA, now home to Clarke, at the First Mountain bank conference room where he serves on the board. He hugged me like a long-lost friend. At 66, dressed for the occasion in a slate blue suit, he struck me as a humble man with an understated presence that at the same time commanded admiration and respect.

He began by saying "I've thought of this often in the past 36 years." I hung on every word as he told the story with the clarity and detail as if it had happened the day before.

My father, stationed at Ton Son Nhut, Saigon in the 16th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron of the Air Force, had only been in Vietnam about two weeks and this was one of his first night missions into North Vietnam. The way recon missions worked was he would fly to an assigned area, descend to a low altitude then drop flare cartridges which put off light to photograph the area in the dark. Each mission he was designated a different call sign that would identify him over the radio.

This fateful night, my Dad was given the code name *Stiletto One* and ordered to fly just above the DMZ in North Vietnam into the most heavily defended area. Or as Ron put it “it was well fortified, very well fortified.”

Fifty minutes into the mission, my dad arrived at the target, descended to low altitude and began dropping the light-emitting cartridges that activate the R-F4C’s camera. On about the fifth drop, he felt a rumble in what my dad described in a letter as “about like running over a rock in your car at 60 miles an hour.”

My father’s letter goes on to say “almost immediately, I lost stability augmentation — like power steering on a car. Within half a second I lost all instrument lights and the aircraft inverted. Both engines had flamed out. Although strapped in real tight to the seat, I was thrown upward against the canopy. My only reference to the ground was the anti-aircraft artillery fire still shooting up at me. I attempted the primary ejection handle above my head but my helmet prevented it from being pulled far enough to eject. We were getting pretty close to the ground, so I made a fast grab for the alternate ejection handle beneath the seat...it worked at a rapid rate.”

Ron described the Martin Baker ejection seat system “it opens the canopy of the plane and blasts the seat (pilot attached) out like a rocket...the plane was going at about mach one speed. Having to use the secondary ejection handle meant your dad’s arms and legs went flailing when he was blasted out.”

“I separated from the plane and almost immediately the chute opened.” My dad’s letter read.

Ron added “your dad told me, he was so low to the ground when he ejected, the parachute swung only once, twice...”

Dad’s letter goes on, “I saw the plane crash and then I hit the ground. I hit pretty hard as the wind was knocked out of me—my nose and mouth were bleeding [he’d bitten off part of his tongue]. My back and ankle hurt badly [his tailbone was broken and his ankle sprained]. Within a few minutes I was able to get up and start walking away from the crash site not knowing what direction. I fell a couple of times but each time managed to get up and keep moving.”

He waded through the water of a shallow rice paddy and came along a hedgerow to try and conceal himself.

“Before long, five or so minutes I guess, the thinking process started and I remembered my emergency radio. There was no answer the first nine tries. I could hear lots of bull frogs and mosquitoes...otherwise it seemed like it was just me out there.”

On the tenth try *Coyote 101*, an F-4 Marine pilot answered. “It was heaven sent to hear his voice. Within five minutes he had my position and three B-57s set up an orbit over me.”

At that time, the Air Force didn’t fly search and rescue helicopters at night. Normally, a downed reconnaissance pilot would try and evade the enemy as best he could and wait for daylight for an attempt at rescue.

But *Coyote 101* sent out a distress call that was picked up on board the USS *Ranger*, a Navy aircraft carrier operating off shore. Lt. Clarke was alerted and quickly rallied the crew of

his Sikorsky SH3A helicopter (a bird not properly engineered or equipped for land rescues). Taking off during a heavy rainstorm into the night so pitch black in darkness out at sea they had only instruments to guide them. They continued through the storm clouds and pouring rain for an hour inland. Unable to distinguish water from land as they approached the shore, they radioed one of the B-57s to drop a bomb at the water's edge.

Clarke said he saw a tremendous explosion down below and waves crash up and wash over it along the shore. Knowing my father was within a few miles he got on his radio. "Stiletto One, this is Indian Gal, do you copy?"

My dad said, "affirm."

Ron said, "Give me a short count" so his automatic direction finder could locate him. Instead of giving him a count, (my dad didn't want to talk for fear of being heard by the VC) he keyed his transmitter to warble. The needle spun and Ron maneuvered the helicopter in the direction indicated.

Ron recalled, "the second we crossed the beach, my co-pilot looked out and said 'Here it comes.' and for the next 27 minutes it was solid tracers, solid tracers!"

From down below my father's letter recounted, "From the instant he came into view, the ground fire started... that was probably my lowest point...It seemed to me that I was completely encircled."

Ron said, "I can still envision it. We were showered with anti-aircraft gunfire and missiles. They could see us, but we couldn't see them except for their tracers spaced every 6 shells. I was getting great big fire...50mm"

One of the helicopter gunners, Jimmy Conrad, was thrown across the aircraft and left hanging out the cargo door tethered from his restraining belt. From that vantage point he could see tracers criss-crossing in front of the helicopter; he looked back and could see just as many criss-crossing in back of the aircraft.

Ron said, "If that 50 millimeter hits you, you're gone"

So he called for back up from B-57s who dropped 1000-pound iron bombs and according to my dad's letter "were really moving the sand and dirt."

Ron said, "A napalm bomb hit, a wave of fire rolled and engulfed an entire hut in the rice field."

One of the articles that hit the Associated Press quoted my dad as saying in reference to the anti-aircraft gunfire the helicopter received, "I wouldn't have blamed him if he'd made a 180-degree turn and gone back home."

But Ron and his determined crew dodged 27 solid minutes of explosives and gunfire. His two gunners emptied 3000 shells from their M-60 machine-guns trying to extinguish the anti-aircraft artillery for that one millisecond opportunity. Ron said, "I grew concerned that my gunners were shooting too close to where I thought your dad was and I asked them to back off."

Amidst the spray of gunfire tracers that lit the dark sky like millions of fireflies, Ron spotted one miniscule but constant light source on the ground.

"Stiletto One," Ron radioed, "do you have a flashlight?"

“That’s affirm,” my father said.

“I’ve got you.”

Sensing the VC noose tightening in only a few hundred yards away, my dad shut off his flashlight, it dropped to the ground.

Clarke pulled back on the cyclic which virtually brought the vehicle to a complete stop in the air, plunging straight down out of the sky like a spider but Ron lost sight my father. He saw in his rear-view mirror what looked to be a water buffalo running. Something jumped a hedgerow, stumbled and came towards the chopper.

Ron called back for full throttle just as what appeared to be a man (though he wasn’t certain it was my dad or a VC) rushing the chopper. Ron paused and said to me “your dad had one chance, one chance.”

My father dove into the helicopter right as it was lifting off the ground doing a belly-flop and sliding across the thousands of empty shell casings almost all the way through and out the door on the other side.

The other helicopter gunner, George Armstrong yelled, “Here they come, let’s get out of here!”

Dad grabbed hold of the bottom of the canvas troop seats as the chopper blasted straight up back into the sky. Just as the bird lifted, the VC came up over the hill. The anti-aircraft ground fire resumed full intensity and continued until they got out to sea.

As they headed across the water, the sun peered up from the horizon, the rain stopped, and my dad was taken to the USS Ranger, now teaming with press.

Ron said he’d replayed this event in his mind again and again over the years. It was not only the pinnacle of his military career but of his entire life.

What weird irony the two people who’d been near my father at the most desperate times of his life would now meet face to face.

On the one hand I felt as though I owed him an explanation as to why my father would waste a second chance at life. Surely a life that had been spared should have had all the more value placed on it and amounted to more than this. I felt like we cheated Ron of his bravery and heroism.

On the other hand I was envious that this man across from me got to rescue my dad and I didn’t. I’d also played my dad’s final hours and desperate need of help over and over in my mind and wondered if I could’ve saved him.

It was about the same hour he flew that reconnaissance mission over the Demilitarized Zone of Vietnam at 0300 hours and got shot down. My father waited until we’d gone to sleep and tiptoed past my bedroom to lock himself in the garage. Ron had gotten a radio call, flares and a flock of bombers hovering protectively over my father to make his rescue. When it came to inner-personal battles, my father didn’t know how to cry out for help. Ron had B-57s dropping napalm bombs on my father’s enemy. This night, my father had become his own enemy.

Why he killed himself wasn’t any one simple reason. It was a lifetime of things that had just accumulated —like an emotional inbox gone unattended to.

He had an easier time expressing anger than love. And most of his life he expressed it to those he loved most. In fact the day before he killed himself he told me “I never intended to play favorites with my children, but I want you to know that you were my favorite and I treated you the worst.” In the end, my Dad’s anger turned inward.

When I asked Ron how he felt to find out the man he risked his own life and three of his crewmen’s for would ultimately choose to commit suicide. He said, “very sad, very sad indeed, yet I’d do the same thing all over again.” Then Ron asked me “Were there at least a few good memories from those last years?”

I didn’t have a proper response. I showed him pictures of who I said was probably the most thankful for my Dad’s rescue, my little brother, Greg (born two years after my Dad returned from Vietnam) and his new bride, Jennifer.

I needed to go home and do a search and rescue of my own.

I was so moved by Ron’s personal sacrifice of saving my father for the 15 extra years we got to have him. I needed him to know how profoundly grateful I was for what he did and for him to know my father’s life wasn’t a waste. But how do you write a thank-you note to someone who saved your father’s life—a life then ended by his own hand?

My father’s military footlocker had been collecting dust in my mother’s garage in Phoenix. Inside was a treasure of letters, newspaper clippings from across the country detailing my father’s rescue, maps and photographs of Vietnam —pieces of a puzzle that would put together a more complete picture of my father.

My last memories of my dad were of a broken man. His letters from Vietnam revealed him at his most together—daily accounts of how much he missed and loved us, his personal insights after being shot down and his heartfelt intention to be a better husband and father, along with his gratitude to those who rescued him. Over 200 letters from war brought to life the most peaceful side of my father. I could begin to recall that time when my daddy adored me, and me him.

I wept as I read sentiments like, “Today is my lovely daughter’s birthday, oh how I wish I could be there with you all” on the day I turned four. The undercurrent in the letters spelled out his uncertainty about making it out alive. In the face of having his life taken from him, seemed to be when he most cherished it. Like the letter that read, “it was so good to hear your voices when I called last night but boy, does it choke me up when ol’ Lori gets on that phone and asks when I’m coming home.”

I remembered when he finally did come home. And for the first time began to recall *just* the good memories we had growing up. Those precious times when he really was the kind of dad he talked about wanting to be in those letters. And those are the ones I now savor when I remember my dad.

Ron Clarke became my father’s hero in 1966 when he rescued him in Vietnam. He became my hero this year when he returned to me the part of my father I can be most proud of.