

My Struggle with Adrenalin Addiction

Preface

This article is for, and dedicated to, all combat Veterans no matter what country they are citizens of, what service they were a member of, or campaign they fought in. The only prerequisite is having been in combat. I define being in combat as anyone who has fired at the enemy and been fired upon – no matter the weapon used. Also suffering a wound or having received the Purple Heart is not a prerequisite either – but it sure proves you were in harm's way.

All of you who have been in that situation make up a small band of brothers who relate to each other like no other group of warriors can and know exactly of what I speak. One of our warrior brothers, a US Army infantryman who fought in the Korean campaign, came home from that conflict and to put it mildly – had a real rough time adjusting to civilian life again. I know all of you can relate to that right now. To make a long story short, he healed over time and during that time had the inspiration to write *The Warriors Code of Honor*. His thoughts on what it was to be a warrior, the relationships found and developed with other warriors, the loss of those friends and warriors, and what it means to be a warrior from his point of view. Granted his point of view is as an infantryman but his thoughts and feelings are pretty much universal to all warrior experiences. So forty years after coming home from Korea, he wrote *“The Warrior's Code of Honor”*.

The preface to the Code was written by me upon my being made aware of The Code and the authors need to clean it up and distribute it to as many Warrior Veterans as possible. So please read it and then read the information afterwards. The intent is to make you aware of how the Code relates to you. After I first read it, light bulbs went off like crazy in my head – because it helped put my whole post-Vietnam life in a context that I was unaware of. It really helped explain how my experience as a Warrior in Vietnam had forever changed my life and why. I hope it does the same for you.

My Adrenalin

Now that you have read the Code, I present my experiences with it so that maybe you can relate to how it affected me. The main thing in reading the Code that jumped off the page for me was the whole section on adrenalin. The following is my experience with adrenalin, pre-Vietnam and post-Vietnam:

Pre-Vietnam Adrenalin

Like most of us Baby Boomers I was brought up in a middle class family in San Anselmo, Marin County, California. At that time Marin County was both agricultural – lots of dairy farms – **and a suburb of San Francisco. Back in the 50's and 60's** San Anselmo was just like any other small town USA community. Those of us who lived there were into love of God, Country, and the values that made America great.

My dad served in WWII in the Army, and served as a radioman and sometimes carpenter in the South Pacific. I always had it in my mind that one day I would serve my country too. Actually at the time the draft was in place so the prospect of serving always loomed over our heads for those of us who graduated from high school in the mid-sixties – for me that was in 1965. To avoid the draft I attended junior college for 2 years but struggled with math. Algebra and geometry were not my strong suits. The war in Vietnam was raging and scarring and concerning all of us in the country, let alone those facing the draft and military service.

Prior to Vietnam my adrenalin rushes were what I would consider now to be pretty mild and tame ones. Like any kid growing up in the “Nelson Family/Father Knows Best” 50’s and 60’s we always found ways to get into trouble and look for excitement.

But then, as mentioned above, the math got to me and I decided that it was time to do my duty to God and Country. It was a decision I made on my own. Most of my friends on the **other hand did their damndest to avoid service. They all lied, cheated, or wore women’s underpants to their draft physicals to get out serving.** I was not brought up that way.

But what service to join **because I really didn’t want to get drafted and have no control of how I spent my time in the military?** Do I really want to go to Vietnam? How can I avoid that? What service will be the safest? Well since I was a surfer why not stick with the ocean. So the Navy was my choice and maybe I would end up on a ship and not see anything but the coast of Vietnam. So then is it going to be three years or the reserves? Three years was a long time and the reserves was a year of inactive reserve time, two years of active duty, and then another year or two (depending on what “A” school one attended and for how long) of inactive reserve time. So it was the reserves.

During that first year of inactive reserve time I was talked into going back to school and then sign on for officer training. It took them a while to convince me to do that but I finally agreed that that was a good plan for my Navy and educational career. No sooner had I made the decision then my orders to head down to Long Beach and board an Oiler as a deck hand appeared at the reserve training center. My reaction to that was, ‘**What happened with officer school?**’ I got the usual *‘sorry but that aint going to happen now’* routine. So my reaction to that was there was no way I was going to become a deck hand **on an oiler and become a boatswain’s mate. What “A” school can you get me into and for the longest time?**

It turned out that the Navy was looking for Radioman – but they **didn’t say where.** It turns out that that was a key point. **The “A” school was 20 weeks down in San Diego. Great – 20 weeks on the surfing beaches of SoCal – can’t wait – sign me up.** They did. I went and graduated from that, then got orders to NIOTC. What the hell is that? Naval Inshore Operations Training Command up at Mare Island in Vallejo. So again – what the hell is that? Uh oh - river boats, the brown water Navy? What are they and what do they do? **No one was really sure at the “A” school** but they handed me a copy of Stars and Stripes that had an article and pictures about riverboats which pretty much filled me in on what the next year of my life was going to be all about.

The delta of the Sacramento River mimicked the delta of the Mekong so we spent 8 weeks training on the boats that we would eventually crew in Vietnam – steaming up and down the canals of the Sacramento. The intent of the training was to train a whole replacement crew for a crew already in country and due to be relieved. The boat I was trained to crew on as a radioman was a Command Communication Boat – a CCB. All the boats in our division of river boats were converted Mike boats – you know the boats you saw being used on D-Day in WWII that unloaded troops and material on the beaches of Dunkirk where the flat bow of the boat was dropped near or on the beach and the troops piled out and swam to shore. Those boats as originally designed were powered by two 671 diesel engines and weighed 25 tons. Our CCB had the same two engines but now weighed 110 tons – lots of **added plate steel, bar armor, and weapons to counter Charlie and his RPG's.**

Upon graduation from that we immediately were put on a plane to Saigon that flew out of Travis AFB. Here is where the irony of my decision making process really kicked in. Had I **just taken the orders to become a deck hand on that oiler I wouldn't have come any closer** to Vietnam than seeing it from a long ways off shore. And to top it off we were told that Radioman were primary targets in Vietnam. Go figure.

Vietnam Adrenalin

The first adrenalin rush of my Vietnam experience happened on the very first day of my going to Vietnam – it was 05 May 69 and we had just left Travis on our way to Honolulu. On our second leg of the trip to Saigon after we stopped in Honolulu to re-fuel and upon take off from Honolulu, an engine blew out on the Braniff jet. There was a loud bang which none of us were ready for. The pilots dumped all the fuel on board and we had to return to Honolulu and they had to fly in a replacement engine. That all broke our hearts as we were all put up in a hotel while the fix was made. Next stop Saigon.

To make what could be a very long story short – I am now a 3rd Class Radioman in River Division 13, River Assault Squadron 131, and a crew member on CCB-131-1 along with all the guys I trained with back in Vallejo. We are operating out of Dong Tam – a combined Navy/Army base on one of the main channels of the Mekong River. We are working **directly with the Army's 9th Infantry.** We work together. We haul the 9th guys to ambush points and insert them and act as fire power when the shit hits the fan. It did and often. Lots of adrenalin; way too much adrenalin.

The following is an article that I wrote for River Currents, the Mobile Riverine Force Association's quarterly newsletter. The MRFA is an organization that was created for all of us who served on the river boats – both Navy and 9th Infantry. The article is about my largest adrenalin rush whilst in country.

“The Mine Explosion”

The article in the winter edition of River Currents had the article titled “The Mine Explosion”. **Boy did it bring back memories that I had long since forgotten** – like the mosquitos, the heat and humidity, and the action that those of us there encountered with Charlie. In addition to what was already covered in the original article here is what I remember:

I was on the CCB mentioned, **although it wasn't CCB-152-1, it was CCB-131-1.** I (Pete Oakander) was the radioman on board. The Boats was Frank Dettmers, The gunners mate was Rich Lierman, the engineman was Jim Zervos, and our coxswain was Bob Land. We had some others but their names escape me now. I do remember the long transit down canals and jungle that none of us had gone down before. We were not sure if we could make it.

One of the events that I do remember once we got on station was running into a modified **tango boat that the SEAL's had. They were operating down in the Song Ong Doc** by themselves – mixing it up with Charlie – a ballsy bunch of guys – and how they got down there only they know. It was the first time I had ever seen a mini-gun in action. They had this 3 barrel mini set up in a turret amidships of their boat and gave us real show by letting it rip. Down in the SOD every direction was a free-fire zone so it was just point and shoot.

The other thing I will never forget is **their liquor supply. I don't remember how that subject came up but we swabs do like our booze and the selection they had was like going to your local liquor store. We didn't indulge as we were on patrol and it was during day light which doesn't make sense now as we normally operated at night – but hey that was 40 years ago.**

That fateful day, October 23rd, 1969, was when the mine went off. Here is what I remember. There were about six or seven boats. We were all beached bow forward and all lined up in a row next to one another as the original article pointed out so that we could walk between boats and stay off the beach and out of the mud. The Mike boat was on our port side and the Tango on our starboard. It was mid-day. **Charlie boats (CCB's) were the only boats in the force that had air conditioning that I was aware of.** They were there to keep the bank of radio's and the officers happy. **Each Charlie had two Lister generators whose sole purpose was to keep the air conditioners running.** The below deck operations compartment had four **air conditioners. One of the Lister's no longer worked and the remaining one was on its way out too.** It only had enough power to keep one of the air conditioners running – barely. But down there in that heat and in the middle of the day it was a real bennie. To keep the generator from having to work any harder than it had to I made sure that the hatch for access topside was dogged down good and tight. I personally took a sledge hammer to it to keep it shut because the crew kept trying to access the compartment through that hatch and let all the cool air out. The only other way was to access it via the coxswain flat or from the engine room - both of which were usually avoided.

It was noonish. I was sitting on the raised supposedly concussion proof platform on the deck of the compartment, listening to a little East West by Paul Butterfield on my headphones and just beginning to write a letter home when KABOOM!!!, all hell broke loose. There were a bunch of us down in there taking advantage of the cool air the air conditioner was providing. It was weird because the compartment went pitch black and yet I could see everything and everyone. The blast pitched me into the air and head first into a single side band radio that was on its way back to the deck. I got to my feet and went to the dogged down hatch and threw the dogs open by hand and pushed like hell to get the hatch open. Up top it was havoc. There was a bunch of stuff piled on the hatch and bodies lying everywhere. We had a contingent of Vietnamese Navy guys who were on board as a part of the Vietnamization program. I worked my way to the stern of the boat and the force of the concussion caused all the fire extinguishers to release. Too bad because as I work my way to the stern to look down into the engine room I passed some fires that were ignited

and the engine room was a cauldron of smoke, water, and battery acid. The 671's were split in two at the transmission. The batteries were all split open. The magazine was wide open and ammo everywhere all while water was pouring in. Within minutes the stern was on the bottom. We got the fires out and then turned our attention on the Mike boat and the Tango. It was the Tango that was in the most trouble. I remember the Tango being tied on to our boat and it was starting to turn over onto its port side. Guys were down in the well **deck and scrambling like crazy to get out. I remember one of the guys who didn't make it** out when the boat turned over. We were all yelling like crazy and then his head popped out of the water. The Mike boat took a big hit too but it being so heavy it held its own although it did sink stern first too. It was amazing that no one got killed because as I remember there were people in the water.

But after reading the original story – the guys I saw in the water were probably Dale Walker and Don Blankenship who got pitched in. I also recall though that there were some of the VN Navy guys in the water swimming around. There was a lot of confusion. One of the first things we had to do – **and it wasn't our radios on the CCB that were used** – all junk - was to **call the hit in and get some helo's down there and set up a perimeter. Charlie had to be** sitting out there somewhere watching the show. The Doc who was with us started gathering those that needed to be medivaced out and pointed at me to get in line. My reaction was why? He says don't you know. I say know what? He says the back of your head is split open **and you need attention. I say can you do it I don't want to leave the boat. He says yea and stitches me up. My adrenalin was going strong enough that I didn't even feel the stitches.**

Once the helo's arrived and got all those needing to get the injured out – the rest of us got to work doing what we could to get things back together. The sunk boats – Tango, Charlie, and Mike – **weren't going anywhere. We got through that night and the next day one of** the boats made its way down the Song Ong Doc to the coast where either the repair ships Satyr or the Askari were **anchored in support of our operation. Don't remember which one** it was. To get us all afloat was going to take a bunch of pumps and the plugging of a bunch of holes. We got Charlie 1 floated and water tight enough to get us towed down to the repair ship where they immediately lifted us out of the water and put us on a barge. The ships crew welded up all the holes and buttoned up the boat.

This is when we learned that the possibility existed that Charlie 1 and its whole crew was going to be sent to Subic to get the ship repaired. Naturally we were all excited about that and the possibility of getting out of Nam for awhile. For the time being they put Charlie 1 back into the water and hooked her up to one of the inter-coastal re-supply ships for a tow back to Vung Tao. **I don't remember the name of the ship. The whole crew went along for** the ride and it took a couple of days to get around the tip of Vietnam and back up the coast to the mouth of the Mekong.

We arrived there during an afternoon and the ship anchored there for the night. We of the crew had to maintain an anchor watch on our boat. I happened to be on watch that afternoon and noticed that the bow of our boat was starting to lift out of the water. I ran like hell up to the bridge to report the situation and then the Captain and I ran back to the stern. We got there just in time to see Charlie 1 sink – with only its bow sticking out of the water. It was decided that an air pocket was keeping the bow above the water line. Now what to do? Well a bunch of messages back and forth and the decision came down to cut

Charlie 1 loose and leave her there. I think we may have put out a marker buoy and then we headed to Vung Tao. That was the end of the story.

They helo'd us back to Dong Tam – no trip to the Philippines – and the crew was split up to man other boats. I ended up becoming one of the staff radiomen for RivDiv 13 and was stationed in Dong Tam for a while before they moved the squadron headquarters out to the Benewah. I stayed there right up until the day of the invasion into Cambodia when the Benewah and all the boats headed up river to the border to go after Charlie.

There were actually two lessons learned with this event. The original article mentioned one of them – the spacing of beached boats – the further apart the better to avoid mine damage. The other and even more important was the fact that the squadron made the error of beaching in the same spot twice. The mine must have been placed after the first night **beach. Had to be or Charlie wouldn't** have know where to place it. He did so on the assumption and hope that we would beach again at the same spot. He lucked out. Or, Charlie had some swimmers who somehow got the bomb in place while the boats were in place I gotta believe that that could never have happened.

As one of the staff radiomen I was privileged to see a lot of radio traffic come across my desk. Months later, while on the Benewah, two messages came across about Charlie 1. The first was that it was determined by EOD that it had to be at least a hundred pounds of explosives to do the damage that was inflicted to the boats. I agree with Don Blankenship though – it sure seemed like a lot more than that to lift the sterns of a Tango, a Mike, and a Charlie boat clear out of the water. And **cracking a 671 diesel in half ain't no easy feat.** The second was that the Navy sent a group of divers down to check Charlie 1 out and they **couldn't get a good look as a family of Moray eels had taken up residence and they decided** to leave well enough alone. That was the last I heard of her and to this day she may still be a navigation hazard at the mouth of the Mekong.

I don't know what medals those of us who were there got – but once I got back home and was attending reserve meetings – I think a lot of us on the boats were reservists – especially radioman – I was notified that I was to receive the Purple Heart and the Navy Commendation Medal for my services. I am more proud of having received them today then I was then – back then all I wanted was out and to get on with my life.

Naturally there were other adrenalin rushes. The last one is worthy of note because it mimicked the first one on the way over to Vietnam. On the trip home I flew on a United Airlines stretch jet that was full of returning Warriors. Again after refueling in Honolulu on our way to Travis AFB we had another incident. A tire blew on takeoff. Now nothing was mentioned about this or did any of us know about it until the captain came on the intercom and announced the fact about an hour before landing. The reason he did so was because when the tire blew, a chunk of rubber hit the hydraulic lines that operate the flaps **on the wing (I don't remember which wing it was). Without full use of the flaps, which the** plane uses to slow the plane down when landing, the plane is going to land at a greater speed than designed for or more importantly have a safe landing. So we were all instructed on how to prepare for a possible crash landing by ducking our heads between our legs and yada da yada da da. My reaction to all of this was I just spent a year fighting a war, getting my ass shot at, eating WWII vintage C-rats for many moons, wounded, burned out, and

now this!? WTF over? To top it off we were now going to land in San Francisco because they had more emergency vehicles than Travis and the powers that be were worried about a **returning plane full of Warriors crashing and all that that implied. I really don't know why** they were worried – all the anti-Vietnam protesters over in Bizerkeley would have probably cheered. My folks were waiting in Travis and no one told them about the landing switch or why. Typical!

Post Vietnam Adrenalin

I am home. It is 06 May 1970. I decide that I need to finish college. I sign up for the GI Bill and apply to go to Chico State to finish up the BS degree in Biology that I started 3 years ago and that I want to complete – or thought I wanted to complete. And then I got a phone call from my old high school buddies. Three of them are renting a big old chalet up in Squaw Valley for the winter and there is one more room in the house available and it has my name on it. That sounded so much better than going back to the regimen of school that I jumped on it immediately.

I really didn't want to have to answer to anyone after coming home. I had had it with authority and anyone telling me what to do. So I became a ski bum – freedom! This was the winter of 1970/1971.

The first thing I had to do was get a job now that I had a place to live. I had ski bummed the winter before I went into active duty in the Navy at Tahoe City with my friends Paul, Hilary, and Frank so I was into the skiing trip and the fun and freedom that it represented. This time it was Paul, Edel, and Mike and Marsha (newlyweds), and myself. I got a job at the River Ranch, a small hotel/restaurant as their maintenance man, which during the winter meant that I was a snow shoveler/plower. I got pretty good money and food and was happy. The breakfast cook and waitress decided that they wanted to move back to Colorado. I was asked if I had any cooking experience and was I interested in becoming their breakfast cook. I said yes I was and yes I can cook, but I am no chef. They said great we would train you. So now I am a cook at one of the best restaurants on Lake Tahoe and I am getting \$500 bucks a month, all the food I can eat, and a season pass to Squaw – heaven.

The cook who trained me was a Swiss trained chef named Peter Lehr. We got along great and he really taught me a lot. In fact I got so good at it that I cooked for him on his nights off. It was a well known hotel/restaurant famous in the Bay Area for its escargot. Peter used 21 herbs and spices to make it. So I would go to work early and cook breakfast for the guests, do dinner preps for Peter, make myself a bag lunch, and head to the slopes for an afternoon of skiing. I stayed on at the River Ranch all through that summer.

That fall Paul and I moved to Winter Park, Colorado. Two of the waitress working at the River Ranch that summer were a couple of hotties and talked us into moving to the Rockies. Powder snow compared to what they call Sierra cement was one of the draws to make the move, but there were obviously others.

There I got a job cooking dinners at the High Country Inn. Again all the food I could eat, a good salary, and a season pass. Life was a party up until sometime in January or February of 1972 when while working one night at the Inn that I got a phone call from a Tahoe friend named Vic. He wanted to know if Paul and I wanted to go to work for him. He said he

couldn't talk about it over the phone. I said, well then you had better head on up this way so we can talk about it. This was a phone conversation that became very pivotal to my future, although at the time I didn't know or realize the impact of it. It needs to be pointed out to readers of the following that you may not agree and may take offence at what you are about to read. I am not apologizing for that – it just the way it was at that time – for me it was fun and release! What I did over the next bunch of years had nothing to do with morality or what was right or lawful. I in no way felt that I was one of those that the DEA said was contributing to the decline of society and youth. In fact my attitude (and the attitude of all of those that were involved) was, “Yes, we fucked the Feds again”.

Remember that after Vietnam I had had it with authority – not that I became a bad guy criminal – outside of smuggling and smoking pot - I was a good citizen. If you are shocked by this then you should also be shocked by the actions of our government and corporate world and their hypocrisy in allowing the tobacco and liquor industries to carry on with their “business as usual” while they are contributing to 400,000 smoking and cancer related deaths per year and the rampant alcohol addiction related to that industry. So no apologies and no regrets. Read on! So Vic flew up from El Paso and we met him in Denver one day to talk. The story he told us all back in Tahoe was that he was into smuggling gold and silver out of Mexico, but his real source of income was smuggling pot out of Mexico. He wanted Paul and I and my truck to help him do that by acting as a re-fueling depot out in the deserts/dry lakebeds of the old southwest. He would pay us each \$1000 bucks to do it per load. Well when I heard this there was no doubt in my mind where I was headed.

The year in Nam taught me a lot about myself and showed a side of me that I did not know existed. There was a wild adventurous side like the cowboys of the old west. This was like the best thing that could have happened. Especially having grown up in the Bay Area and having been a connoisseur of fine smoke. It didn't take much to talk Paul into it either. I think he figured that if I was ok with it then he was too. So we said the hell with skiing, packed up the truck and headed to El Paso. There are a multitude of stories I could tell you about the adrenalin rushes that were associated with smuggling pot out of Mexico. But there was one especially that put my experiences in Vietnam and the smuggling in a context that gave me a huge wakeup call about just what it was I was doing and how dangerous and stupid it was.

The Trip to Columbia

This one could be the basis for a movie – but believe me it was very real and very true. This one was scary for many reasons, as you will find out by reading on.

Vic decided to kick his smuggling activities up a notch by bringing cocaine across the border. This was a big step with a lot of implications. It was like moving from the minor league into the big leagues. This was still the early 70's and coke was just starting to become the hot new drug on the market. We decided to give smuggling it in a try. I don't remember the particulars of who was behind this adventure and it really isn't important. This is how it went:

The Columbian end was all taken care of. Our guy Armando (last name?) was the connection who we were to meet up with once we got there. Getting there was the hard

part. We used a Beechcraft A36 Bonanza for this flight. We had it specially equipped with an extra fuel pump to transfer fuel from two 30-gallon drums we carried in the back of the plane to the main tanks. Once we left our last fuel stop and the Texas coast it was to be a non-stop flight all the way to Columbia. We had a 50 cal ammo can filled with \$80K for the payoff. We carried a **pistol each and a couple of M16's. We took off from El Paso and** flew to Corpus Christi, Texas. We refueled and topped off there. We hung out until the late afternoon to start the next and final leg.

Across the southern part of the country is an air defense zone that is patrolled by aircraft and radar. We wanted to pass through this zone at dusk to avoid detection. To do that we also passed through it low – at wave top height. We got past that and headed on a direct line from Brownsville Texas to Baranquilla Columbia, which meant we passed over the top of the Yucatan Peninsula – roughly bisecting it.

The flight across the gulf was pretty routine – the hard part was to stay awake. Upon approaching the Yucatan Peninsula we saw ahead of us a huge thunder cell. Thunder cells **and small planes don't mix. We decided to try to fly around it at as high an altitude that** we could handle. That was risky and as it turned out a waste of time and fuel – this thing was big and nasty. So, we decided to go under it – just as risky but by this time it was raining under it and the threat of a down draft was diminished by the fact that it was raining. Still scary. We made it!

Upon coming out on the other side we went back up to altitude and continued on our heading. We had been flying all night and now it was getting light and we could see the swell on the wind chop on the Caribbean and realized that we were fighting a head wind. And sure enough our fuel gauges were telling us the same thing. It became apparent that we might run out of fuel. As we continued on it became damn certain that we were. It was now about 7AM local time and we could see our destination out in the distance. We were flying at about 12K feet (we were not carrying oxygen but increased altitude to give ourselves some glide room in the event we ran out of gas).

At about 10 miles as the crow flies, sure enough the engine sputtered out. We were freaked **because there was a whole lot of the Caribbean Sea below us and we didn't want to have to** ditch the plane. With our glide ratio and the fact that we were pretty light – not having the weight of fuel – we saw a river entering the ocean south of Baranquilla. We headed for it on as shallow a flight path as we could maintain. As we approached we came to the realization that we were going to make it.

At first we saw a two lane highway and thought that we could land in it. It being morning the highway was real busy with traffic and we figured that that would be a disaster to try to bring ourselves down in that. We also spotted some dry looking river bank a couple of miles upriver from the road. We headed for there. I looked dry and wide enough to land and at this point we had no choice – the ground was coming up fast. We saw more dry river bed a little further in from the main river channel – like a tributary channel at high water – which was long and wide enough to land. That was going to be it. We made an approach turn and by the time we came out of the turn we touched down and rolled to a stop up against a tree line.

Neither of us said anything for a while – our hearts were pounding and we were both lost in our own thoughts of wow – that was close. This was just the beginning though. We both realized that we had better get our shit together and get outside and figure out where we were and what we were going to do now.

It has to be pointed out that airplanes are not usually painted in camouflage colors unless it is a military aircraft. Ours was a nice bright blue with yellow trim – it blended in real well with the surrounding jungle – not!!!!. So we had to try to cover it up as best we could. We started cutting up tree branches and covering the wings and stabilizers. We also took the money and guns and stashed them in the jungle away from the plane so that if we were **discovered that stuff wouldn't be found also. Then Vic and I had a discussion about what to do.** He spoke fluent Spanish and it was decided that he would try to make contact with Armando to get some help. I would stay with the plane.

I held back on one small pistol and kept it in my back pocket. Before Vic took off we walked around the dry lakebed and noticed other tricycle wheel patterns in the dry riverbed. We did not make these ourselves on landing. Others were using this same dry riverbed to land on also. So Vic took off. I was left with some food and water and I sat under the wing of the plane out of the sun and waited it out. It was early morning when Vic took off **and it wasn't until the afternoon that he returned.** When he did I was elated to have him **back and was eagerly waiting for some kind of good word about our fate. He didn't** have much to offer. He made contact but he was going to have to go back in to make it all happen. In the mean time I would have to stay with the plane. But before Vic took off for the second time and while we were sitting under the wing talking, a local fisherman walked by on his way to the river to drop a line. He talked a little and then went on his way and **we or I didn't think anything more about it.**

So Vic took off and it's **getting dark and I move into the co-pilot seat** because the **mosquitos are starting to come out. I have no idea what time it is and I'm sort of dozing off** when I notice a group of lights (like flame torches) out in the distance. There are a whole bunch of them (20 or so) and they are fanned out around the plane forming a half circle about 100 feet out. They gradually move in on the plane – continuing to encircle what they could of it (one side of the plane was up against a tree line). Eventually realizing that they were not going to be challenged they ended up surrounding the plane. I ended up getting out of the seat and stood on the wing. They were attempting to talk with me and I having taken 3 years of Spanish in high school but having since forgotten most of it **didn't** do a very good job of communicating with them.

For some reason I jumped down off the wing which probably wasn't the smartest move because as soon as I hit the ground they jumped me and threw me to the ground. It was light enough to see **people's faces because of the torches they were carrying and I** recognized the fisherman from earlier in the day. Upon getting thrown to the ground my glasses fell off. I was in a sitting position on the ground with some guy holding me down from behind while the fisherman stood over me with a big knife in his hands and was **waving it across my throat. He was yelling at me about "contrabando contrabando" and I was yelling "no muerta – no muerta" (don't kill me, don't kill me).**

They pulled my belt out of my pants loop, I could see that my glasses were crushed under a bunch of feet and while I was on the ground being threatened the rest of them were ransacking the plane. They were looking for whatever they could find that was valuable to them. Luckily the back cargo **doors of the plane were locked and they or I couldn't get** them open. It all became a blur because I realized that they were not going to hurt me and all of a sudden they all took off.

I was freaked totally out. I wanted to get to the rifles but didn't want to compromise the cash. They immediately found the little pistol and took it off me before throwing me to the

ground. It wouldn't have done me much good against all those guys anyway – the M16 on the other hand would have. The problem with using the guns though, was that where we ended up landing on the riverbank was just outside the small town of Cienaga – and all night I could hear what sounded like fireworks and music coming from the town. And just east of Cienaga, on the coast, was the town of Santa Marta – the home of the French prison made famous in the movie “Papillon”. I had seen that movie and knowing that it was right there didn't make me feel very comfortable – I had visions of the crabs getting into my prison cell and that was not a real good visual. Eventually I stood up and tried to regroup. My glasses were shot (I had some dark glasses that would help later), I lost my belt, but I was ALIVE! My worries were several fold, like what did they take out of the plane and more importantly were they hiding out there waiting for Vic to return – the fisherman knew there were two of us. That was really worrying me.

I got back into the plane praying for Vic's return. And then I lost it. I wanted so much to be out of there and home back in Colorado that I essentially had a breakdown. I lost it. What really pissed me off about myself was that after Nam I told myself that I would never put myself in harm's way like that again. You could make the case that all this smuggling stuff was all about doing just that – **but until this point it didn't hit me that way.** It sure did now. I promised myself never again. I was and still am willing to take risks as long as they are well thought out risks. My philosophy has always been to plan for the worst that can happen and hope for the best. The only caveat to that is what do you do when Captain Fluke (Mr. Murphy) comes along. **Captain Fluke is the event that you can't plan for – it's the old “shit happens” cliché. You can plan, plan, plan; yet you can't plan for everything –** there is always the potential for some weird thing to happen.

Being the survivor that I am (again that goes back to Nam) I got over crying and being pissed off with myself to realize that I have to get my shit together and figure out what I am going to do – because eventually Vic was going to return and how was I going to warn him about what happened and that I and the plane may still be surrounded by the bad guys. So I sat there for what seemed like forever, calmed down but worried like hell about what was going to happen next – God knows that there already was enough.

It was still dark when I heard a whistle – and then another – **and finally a yell “Pete”.** It was Vic. I yelled back telling him that I had been jumped and to keep an eye out for bad guys. At that point I heard Armando kick in like he was Columbian police officer and barking orders in an attempt to discourage the bad guys from sticking their heads out.

I told Vic to stay put and keep calling my name because it was still pitch black outside and I decided that I was going to make a run for it to where he was standing. So I ran and he yelled and we were reunited and God was I relieved. I told him what happened. We walked back to the plane and took an inventory of what had been ripped off. We got the guns and money – **they didn't find those.**

Armando and I took one of the empty 30 gallon drums and walked back into town. I was rolling the drum on the ground and I was really dragging my feet because I was totally exhausted. Armando had the cure for that. He said stop, dug into his pocket and retrieved an envelope and a knife and dipped the knife into the envelope and filled up the blade with this huge line of coke and told me to snort this and all would be well. It worked – pure toots straight from the lab.

We continued on our way and now I was carrying the drum instead of rolling it along. He told me that in case we get stopped by the militia or police that I was to say nothing. I was

a pretty dead give-away with my red hair and light complexion that I was not a local. As we were walking into the outskirts of Santa Maria we were stopped by an Army/police patrol. Armando did the talking and convinced these two guys that we had run out of gas down the road and the only thing we had to put gas into was this drum. They let us go and we found a taxicab and hired him to take us out to a local airstrip – the one we were supposed to land at if we hadn't run out of gas. We dropped the drum in the trunk and off we went. At the strip we told him to wait while we filled up the drum about a third of the way or so. We then placed the drum back into the cab and had the guy drive us down the road to get as close to the planes location as possible. We did that and told the driver to keep his mouth shut – not that we could do anything about it anyway.

Armando reloaded my nostrils and we proceeded to roll the barrel to the plane. It was now daylight and when we got back to the plane we wasted no time in dumping the fuel into the wing tanks in order to get out of there ASAP. Like I said earlier the bad guys ended up not taking anything absolutely necessary to get us and the plane back out of there. So we piled into the plane and got it started – and man the sound of that engine starting up was sweet. We taxied to the end of the dry riverbed and took off.

It was a real bumner to realize just how close we were to our original destination. It was a very short flight. We landed and immediately refilled all the tanks including the 30 gallon drums. I was so thirsty and hungry that I consumed about a half a dozen sodas. There was no food. The contacts that we were supposed to meet were long since gone. When we were late to show they got worried and got out of there.

So we went back empty handed except that we were ALIVE! We (Vic and I) took off and headed north for home. Armando stayed behind to clear himself out of there. The ride home was uneventful except that it was one hell of a long ride after all that had just occurred.

It is interesting to note that we left Santa Maria with the same amount of gas that we had when we left Corpus Christi for the flight down. This time the same amount of fuel took us all the way back to El Paso – a much longer flight. It was now a tail wind that helped us do that.

We arrived back in El Paso totally pooped and with one hell of a tale to tell. This was not, as it turned out the end of the story though. We were home safe and sound but Armando had a different tale to tell. When we left him at the airstrip, he headed back to his room that he had rented in some hotel to gather his stuff and then work his way to the airport in Baranquilla. Along the way to the airport and on the same road that we had spotted from the air as a potential place to land he was stopped at a roadblock. The police were stopping all vehicles – they were searching for us as it turned out. The two policemen that stopped us earlier that morning while carrying the 30 gallon drum were the cops at the roadblock and they recognized Armando.

The story goes he had to shoot his way out of that and he got away by running up river (the same river we landed along side of). He stole some poor **bastard's** boat and rowed across the river into Baranquilla and made his way to the airport. He got there and out of the country before the police had set up a search there.

The police found out about us landing on the riverbank, probably from either the taxi driver or the guys who jumped me that night. They knew we got aviation gas at the airstrip. They calculated the range that that gas would give us and set up a search for us

within that radius. What they didn't know, and weren't told, was the fact that we had landed there and totally refueled the plane. They probably knew we landed there, but the guys there denied that we had bought more fuel. The reason they were after us is that this was the same time that Che Guevara was operating in the mountains south of Santa Marta. The police thought that we were gunrunners – selling guns to Che. That was why we saw evidence of other planes landing on the dry riverbank and why I was drilled by the bad guys about “contrabando”. They were looking for guns too. They had no idea that we were down there on a toots run. We were told that they looked for us for about a year to no avail, they couldn't figure out how we got out of there. We were long gone!

As I said that was just one of the adrenalin stories – but it topped the list. It wasn't very much longer that Paul and I bailed out of the smuggling business. Things were getting real dangerous. There was competition for loads, talk of sugaring airplane gas tanks, and the old west cowboy vibe had gone.

We headed back to Colorado and skiing. That didn't stop the adrenalin rushes though. I then got into dealing pot. I did that for a year or so. I actually ended up buying loads off of Vic and driving them to places in Minnesota and Wisconsin. There were tales doing that too. Eventually reality set in and I knew I had to settle down and do something realistic.

I moved from Colorado back to California and the Lake Tahoe area. I got into doing underground construction and worked on a new housing development in Alpine Meadows – right up the road from the River Ranch restaurant where it all started. I did that for the summer of 1974 and then moved back to San Anselmo – home – and began a career as a carpenter and then as a General Contractor.

More Adrenaline Rushes

But again the adrenalin rushes didn't stop because now instead of smuggling and dealing pot I ended up growing it as a side line to my construction career. You always have to keep all irons in the fire! Naturally I was still smoking pot, snorting coke, and still partying pretty hard. And again there were tales of adrenalin rushes - mainly trying to keep the younger juvenile delinquents from stealing my plants. I and a few others ended up in the hospital a few times over that adventure.

I will say that all along I never got into trouble with the authorities. When I was in Texas smuggling the cops knew we were doing it, but could never prove or catch us. We were always one step ahead of them. We knew they were bugging our house and following us but all to no avail. When I was dealing there was only one instance where they thought they had us but somehow I talked our way out of it and they let us go. I think they did that because they were thinking they were going to catch a whole plane load of pot and were after the bigger fish. Little did they know. The authorities never got on to our growing it either. Some of the other growers I knew at the time got caught but not us.

Fast Forward to January 2012

It is now January 2012 and all of that is long over. Realize though that the above adrenalin rushes only scratch the surface on the rushes that I experienced since leaving Vietnam. There have been a few rushes in the last 30 years but as life goes on one gets smarter, **mellower, gains more wisdom, and puts one's life in perspective.** It was this last January that the *Warriors Code of Honor* came into my life as mentioned above.

Now you know how the adrenalin portion of the Code affected me. I never thought about all that I had done back then as an adrenalin rush – just adventure. Paul Allen was able to verbalize a lot of what I did and a lot of what you have done in a way that is very unique. *I knew that my experiences in Vietnam changed me. I put it mostly to the fact that I grew up real fast – you had to in those circumstances.* In the process it made me more aware of who and what I was and am. That was fine. My whole philosophy about going to Vietnam, just before leaving, was that if I went and came back home without any permanent injuries, or dead, then it would be a good learning and growing up experience.

I am now 66, retired, and happy with the way things are and ok with my life. I, like all of you, have other issues – mainly health – but I wake up every morning thankful that I do. I got plugged into the VA and they have been very good to me – which some of you may find improbable based on your own experiences with it. I know as I am fully aware of some of the horror stories. I am also a member of the M.O.P.H. and the current Commander of our local chapter. I was encouraged to go after a claim for PTSD by my service office within **the MOPH and tried but failed. I don't have it and know it and have no intention of lying** to claim it – thank God! I do have, thanks to Agent Orange, Diabetes Mellitus Type II and prostate cancer. The cancer is gone and the diabetes is being dealt with.

Getting Help

Now that you know part of my story as relates to the Code you may be asking or telling yourself so what. Well the so what is - what were your adrenalin rushes? All of you who are reading this have experienced them. Did you leave Vietnam and stay in the military in order to maintain the rush – maybe become a SEAL or Special Ops guy? Did you become a policeman or fireman – lots of adrenalin there? How about your sports life? Did you take on sports that took you to the edge – like motorcycle riding, hanggliding, river rafting, parachute jumping, scuba diving, automobile racing, bull riding, mountain climbing, or flying to name a just a few?

How about your professional life crane operator, work on a drill rig, miner, steel erector, logger, deep sea diver, or astronaut? There are lots of ways out there post-service to keep that old adrenalin rush going. I bet a lot of you are doing or did a lot of them without **realizing that your time as a warrior contributed to your choices. It doesn't matter what** your choice of adrenalin rush was the fact remains that they were all similar in that they were founded in combat and being a warrior. We all shared an experience that very few others have in the big picture of those who have really experienced combat. You know as well as I that most militaries are made of 90% support soldiers and 10% warriors. Warriors are brothers in arms and proud of it! We can talk to each other because we have been there and done that. You know as well as I that talking to a non-combat individual is like talking to a brick wall – they just don't understand and get it and never will. That includes family, your VA counselor, some psychiatrist, your doctor, pastor and your wife to name just a few.

(Note: I guess it could be argued that some of the 90% support soldiers also experienced situations that could be considered combat-like; example being bombed nightly, killing on occasion. Most support soldiers/veterans I would not consider to have had combat-like experiences for them to understand. That may be a bias on my part but is the way I see it. To define support soldiers/ people – anyone who has not been in direct line of fire, never

been subjected to a mortar or artillery attack, never had to go to sleep at night and wonder if they were going to have to make a run for a bunker in the dark of night.)

Many of you reading this are probably Veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns as well as my fellow Vietnam Vets and for some of you, your experiences are still too fresh in your mind and all you want to do is forget about them and move on with your life. I **totally understand. For others you may want to talk to someone but can't find anyone to talk to who can understand.** Remember what Paul says in the Code – the friends you had before your time in service as a warrior will not necessarily be the same friends you will have upon your return to civilian life – unless of course they were warriors too at one time. Those old friends are still a part of the **crowd that doesn't understand.**

Some of you may just not want to talk about it at all – just too painful still. I know because it took me 40 years to really talk about my experiences. Yea, there were a few who could relate but not many.

What really did it for me was being talked into applying for VA benefits by family and other Veteran friends. And not for help from the VA but just to do it to get any medical bennies that I may qualify for. In plugging into the VA I also plugged myself into the American Legion and the MOPH because you need the service officers in those organizations to walk you through the VA system and help you get the benefits you deserve.

I never realized what having a Purple Heart would do for me once in the VA system. All of you who are in it know that they never tell you anything about what you qualify for unless you find it out on your own and then ask. Once asked, they will gladly cough up the info but will never volunteer information on their own. *Having a Purple Heart put right into Tier 2 of the VA system which meant a lot.* I was then encouraged to go after any service related disabilities. Exposure to Agent Orange (diabetes and prostate cancer), hearing loss, and tinnitus have given me a 40% disability rating. The VA hospital here in Boise is one of the best in the system so between that and Medicare, now that I am retired, has put me in a pretty good position medically speaking.

Comradeship

The bottom line here and what is pertinent to the discussion is that in joining the MOPH in particular, I met a bunch of fellow warriors who I immediately could relate to. One of the best things I have done. We meet monthly over breakfast and most of the conversation is telling stories and just being able to relate to one another as fellow warriors and now friends. If you are looking for comradeship then I highly suggest you do something similar. It is a very cathartic experience and well worth your efforts.

The following is a partial list of service organizations that you could look into;

- The Marine Corps League
- The Military Order of the Purple Heart
- The Purple Heart Riders
- The American Legion
- The Disabled Veterans Association
- The Vietnam Veterans of America

- The POW/MIA Association
- The Wyakin Warriors Association
- The Wounded Warriors Association
- The Mobile Riverine Force Association
- Some of these are better than others so do your homework to really dial into those that will help you
- Be active in which ever organization you become a member of
- Know that those that are in these organizations love to tell their stories – which means you can now tell yours and be in company with those that will listen and understand

Help

If you need help like, for PTSD, then your only real recourse is the VA. Yea I know what you are thinking but unfortunately that is just the way it is and all any of us have.

(Note: For some of you near metropolitan areas, look on the internet for 501c3 (non-profit) organizations that serve veterans. The number of these are rising. For example; in Denver there is VP2H.org (Veteran's Passport To Hope). They are forming a statewide info base for all veterans to access, internet and hard copy based.)

- Unfortunately the VA and their PTSD counselors have far too few combat warriors among their ranks. You have to talk to them to state your case for a claim but in most cases they have no idea of what you are talking about – for the same reason – they have never been there and cannot identify.
- If you really want to understand the VA system and PTSD then I encourage all of you to **read the book “Stolen Valor” by BJ Burkett. It is a real eye opener** on those so-called Veterans who claim to be something more than they really are, the VA, and the whole issue of PTSD and how it was defined, who defined it, and why. This is not a plug for the book but just an FYI.
- *It has come to the attention of some of us that what is really needed is a national hot line for Veterans needing to just talk to another Veteran or for Vets with PTSD to get help.* Again unfortunately that system is not in place. We know of an MOPH Chapter in New Mexico that has set up a **local hot line for just that purpose but aren't sure how it is** working. There are counselors within the VA system who work with those suffering with PTSD that are aware of the need but do not know how to set it up. Unfortunately Veteran issues and PTSD in particular are not just health issues but also involve politics and **agenda's back in Washington and we all know what kind of a black hole that can become.**
- This document is in lieu of that national hot line. I hope in reading it that you gain some insight into your Warrior experiences, the Code, and your life in general. Know that you are never alone. There is help and comradeship out there but it is up to you to go out **and seek it. Help will not come your way if you don't let someone know you need it.** You have to break down that door on your own first – a tall order I know. Once you can get past that, then there is help out there.

Yours in Patriotism

Pete Oakander

December 9, 2012