

The Extraction of Recon Team Moccasin, September 14, 1970

By Robert Morris

Introduction

This is my story of the first cross-border SOG/CCN mission into Laos that I participated in. My initial thought was that what happened to me would make for an interesting story, a tale punctuated with the humor that sometimes accompanies even the most hazardous situations. While developing the information necessary to supplement my own recollections, I came to realize that the story of that day's mission was a much larger and more serious one than I had been contemplating, a story of events that really deserved to be told. I was surprised when I began discussing the larger project with my fellow aviators to discover that few of them remembered the event at all. One might think that a mission resulting in the death of a soldier and the loss of an aircraft would be easily recalled by everyone, but that was not the case. This fact brought me back to the realization that the level of risk normally involved in those missions was such that, at the time, this particular case seemed to be merely routine. With the passage of time and the luxury of hindsight, what once seemed routine is now recognized as something notable.

I was fortunate to be able to contact enough of the participants so that many pieces of the puzzle can be put into place. By its nature it must always remain incomplete, and even our small cast of characters will not agree on all the details, but that is not so important, for it does not affect the basic thrust of the story. My intent was to illustrate the common bravery that was displayed on so many similar missions by CCN recon team members and flight crews alike, the characteristic that forged the special bonds of brotherhood that hold us together even now. This is not meant as a story of "heroes", but one about regular soldiers who accepted the risks, day after day; they did what needed to be done to accomplish their missions while preserving the lives of as many of their comrades as possible.

I arrived in Vietnam to start my 12-month tour of duty in late July, 1970, where I was presented with the option of being assigned to the unit of my choice from among three or four that were in need of UH-1 pilots. As a newly minted Warrant Officer, I had little familiarity with most Army aviation units, and recognized only the 101st Airborne Division from the list of possibilities. After selecting the 101st as my first choice, I was sent to spend a week or so at SERTS (Screaming Eagle Replacement Training School) at Camp Evans in northern I Corps (the area of South Vietnam closest to the demilitarized zone and North Vietnam), and subsequently joined the Comancheros of Company A, 101st Aviation Battalion at Camp Eagle, south of the city of Hue, sometime around the first of August. For the first couple of weeks, the Company Commander, Major Schneider, decided that he needed sandbags filled more than he needed his newest pilot to get stick time, so I joined the mixed crew of Warrant Officers and Enlisted Men on sandbag duty, helping to prepare for the onset of the rainy monsoon season. A couple of weeks passed before I got to do any real flying, and then only on routine missions that

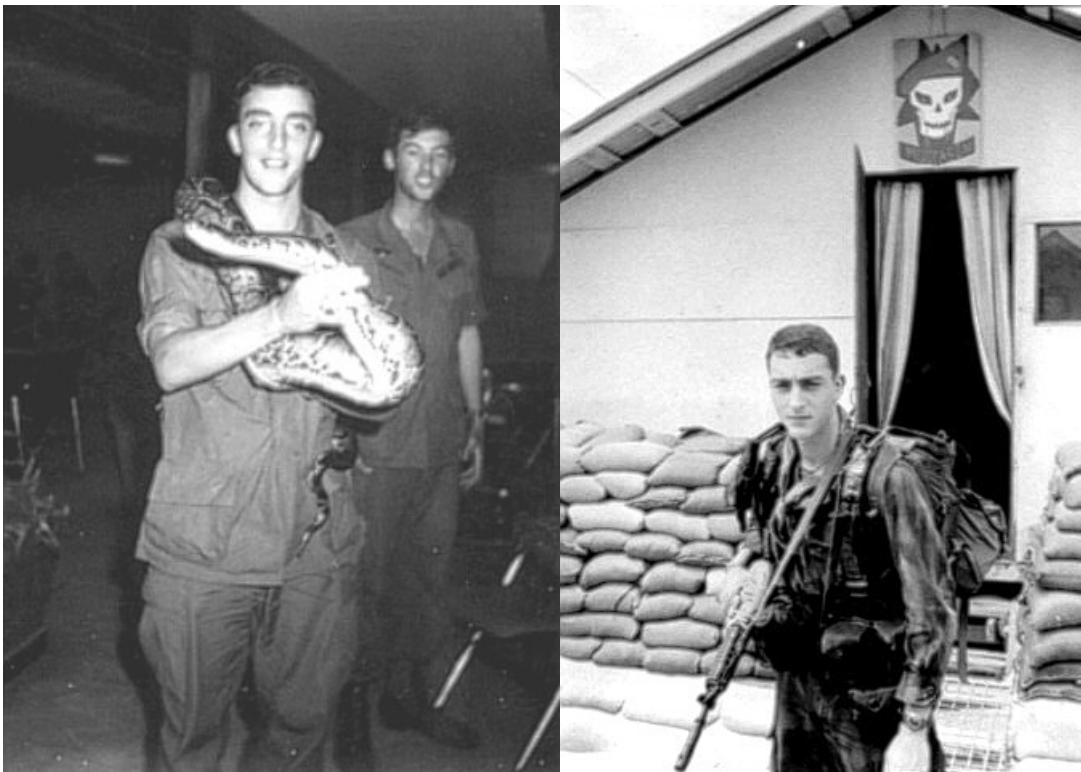
allowed me to learn our Area of Operations and get some experience in how Army combat aviation operations were conducted. This included learning how to interact as part of a four man crew, get all the audio traffic on three radios sorted out in my head, avoid the path of friendly artillery fire, coordinate with the people we supported on the ground, plan the safest approach into a tight landing zone, and learn all the other things necessary to conducting a successful combat helicopter operation. I thought I had done pretty well in flight school, but realized that I had to go to another level, to learn how to coolly and competently carry out helicopter operations in a combat zone. It was this need for seasoning that was the basis for the Company policy that New Guys didn't get assigned to fly CCN missions until they had mastered the basics of in-country flight operations and demonstrated a certain level of proficiency.

During the time that I was learning the fundamentals, I would hear other pilots in our Officers Club talking about their CCN experiences, and I learned to treat the topic with some respect. I knew there had been A/101 people lost on some of these missions, even in the brief period since I had arrived in Nam. I couldn't fully imagine what the operations were like, but it became very clear to me that I'd better have myself together when my time came to fly on a CCN mission.

CCN stood for Command and Control North, which was a Studies and Observation Group (SOG) operation. Missions were usually launched from the CCN locations near Quang Tri, Phu Bai, and the Marble Mountain facility in Danang. An operation might consist of the insertion of a recon team of about six men, maybe half of them Americans and the other half from Southeast Asian ethnic tribes recruited by SOG. The key team members were the One-zero (team leader), the One-one (assistant team leader), and the One-two (radio operator). The team would be flown to the area of interest, often across the border into Laos, to be inserted into pre-selected landing zones (LZs). The on-site operations would be run by a USAir Force Forward Air Controller (FAC "Covey") in a spotter plane such as an O-2 or OV-10 fixed-wing aircraft equipped with marking rockets. He would usually be accompanied by a CCN rider who assisted with coordinating the ground operations. The UH-1H aircraft (sometimes called "gnats") carrying the team would be escorted by AH-1G Cobra gunships ("dragonflies") which would "prep" the landing zones and counter any enemy ground fire that might be encountered. On a few missions, there was additional fire support provided by A-1E close-support propeller-driven aircraft ("spads"), and Covey had the ability to call in additional airpower if necessary. Following a successful insertion, the recon team would pursue their planned objective for a period of perhaps several days, after which another flight would be dispatched to extract them and return them to their base. If a recon team was discovered by the enemy, they would make every possible attempt to escape and evade. If they were not successful in these efforts, the One-zero would call for an emergency helicopter extraction as a last resort. This was known as declaring a "prairie fire".

On September 13, 1970, Recon Team (RT) Moccasin was assigned the mission to insert into a location in Laos, west of the A Shau Valley, in order to observe a particular river junction and the NVA traffic crossing there. The position was on the side of a steep hill,

on the northwest side of the confluence of the rivers. The mission called for more than the usual amount of equipment, including starlight scopes, a transponder, and gear for secure radio communications. In addition, because the team would need to maintain a static position while carrying out their observations, the One-zero, SFC Pierce Durham, decided that he wanted to bring along plenty of firepower. Due to the heavy load of equipment, he asked for a volunteer to augment his team, which included George Hewitt and a Vietnamese interpreter. Walter Martin came forward, and Durham told him that he needed someone able to carry an M60 machine gun and ammunition: Martin agreed to do the job. (When the others heard that Martin was coming along, they kidded him about his dislike of dogs, telling him that on some missions the NVA had used dogs to hunt them down. They joked with him that the M60 should take care of any dog that the NVA might send after him.) The addition of a few indigenous troops (“indigs”) resulted in a recon team of about seven or eight men.



Left: With recon team names of Anaconda, Asp and Moccasin, it's no wonder that CCN harbored a boa constrictor. Friday afternoon feedings with live prey generally entertained a large audience.
Right: George Hewitt dressed in his 1970 business suit. Note that the sign above the door indicates that the building belongs to RT Moccasin. (Photographs are the property of George Hewitt and are used by permission.)

For this mission, the CCN command approached a Marine aviation unit and requested them to transport the team to the selected LZ. Their response was that the high elevation of the proposed LZ would result in lift problems for their helicopters, and so they declined the mission. An alternate plan was developed with lift support to be provided by the aviators of the Army's 101st Airborne Division. The insertion was performed in the

afternoon of September 13. After receiving the team's okay after insertion, the flight departed the area. From the LZ, the team had to walk several kilometers to reach their intended observation point. SFC Durham proceeded to establish an overnight position, directing that claymore mines be set up around the perimeter in case any uninvited visitors came calling. During the night, the team listened to the sounds of generators operating to the west, and passed the information back for use in planning airstrikes. On the morning of the 14th, while observing the river junction, the team saw NVA soldiers heading in their direction and realized that they had been spotted. Due to the characteristics of the terrain, they knew that the likelihood of evasion was remote. The NVA would set up on the hill above them, it would be too dangerous to move down to the river, and trying to parallel the hillside with the enemy holding the high ground wasn't a good option either, due to a lack of heavy foliage cover. The decision was made to call for an evacuation by helicopter.

The crews of the four Company A, 101st Aviation Battalion ("Comanchero") UH-1H aircraft assigned to the CCN mission that day rushed to their aircraft in response to the call: emergency extractions were the missions that prompted the highest levels of adrenaline, and provided the opportunity to do the most good, i.e. to possibly save the life of a fellow soldier. Among the Comancheros, in spite of the level of danger, some were known to fight for the right to be assigned to CCN missions, at times to their own peril. It was unheard of for the Comancheros to decline to fly a mission, CCN or otherwise. Such was the culture of the unit.

That day, September 14, 1970 was the first time that I participated in an extraction of a CCN recon team from Laos. I took the right seat as copilot, with Jim Wallace, Comanchero 24, as the Aircraft Commander (AC) in the left seat. Our Huey would be last in the flight of four Comanchero UH-1H "slicks", tagging along as a chase ship since the recon team could be pulled out by the first two birds if all went according to plan. The idea was that I could get a good introduction to CCN extraction operations, since we weren't necessarily going to do anything other than orbit on standby, in a perfect position to observe. I paid careful attention, for although young and inexperienced, I possessed the typical human interest in my own welfare, as well as of those on the ground, and I understood that our success could possibly hinge on my performance as a member of the flight crew.

Things seemed to be going along pretty well as we flew across the border and continued a few klicks (kilometers) into Laos. After establishing radio contact and getting the team's position marked by Covey, the lead ship established an approach path from the east to pick up the first part of the team, while the accompanying Cobras hosed down the area, which had become hot with enemy ground fire. The lead UH-1 crew, flying aircraft 741, was made up of Frank Tigano as aircraft commander, Mike Victory as copilot, Jeff Makool as crew chief, and Rick Campbell as door gunner. The LZ had a steep slope downward right to left, surrounded by trees and only large enough to accommodate one ship at a time. Due to the conditions, Tigano couldn't get low enough to make a touchdown and had to come to a high hover while the rope and aluminum ladder they carried on board was lowered down on the right side of the aircraft to the team. While

the pax (passengers) were hooking up to the ladder, he experienced a combination of factors that was not unusual for CCN extractions: hot day, high altitude, out-of-ground-effect hovering in an exposed position while taking enemy ground fire! While the loading process was going on in the lead ship, Byron Edgington, commanding chalk 2 (the second ship) in the flight, was forced to break off his final approach and make a small orbit to the left in order to give Tigano the time to complete his extraction. Byron's crew that day included copilot Tom Nietzsche and crew chief Gil Alvarado.

The recon team members realized that the enemy had moved troops up to the top of the hill and that ground fire was now coming in heavily from that direction. Durham had the indigenous soldiers climb the lead ship's ladder first. The first man had hooked his STABO rig near the top of the ladder and two more were climbing it while it was being steadied at the bottom by George Hewitt. Makool and Campbell, in the back of the ship, were feeding information to help Tigano keep the helicopter properly positioned, while trying to assist the team members and provide suppressive fire. As the fourth passenger hooked onto the ladder, Tigano experienced a loss of pedal control, and the crew attempted to signal the last man to get off so as to lighten the load. Campbell's M60 machine gun jammed at about this time, so he reached for his M16 rifle. Hewitt observed an explosion in the trees just above the helicopter that he thought was caused by a rocket propelled grenade. There were a couple of loud bangs, and Mike Victory felt a concussion that seemed to him as if someone had hit the bottom of his copilot seat with a baseball bat. Within seconds the aircraft began to shudder, and both Makool and Campbell sensed that they were going down, even as Tigano shouted a warning. Durham rolled himself down the hill when he realized that the ship was crashing in. As it descended, the aircraft made a 180-degree turn to the right before coming down slightly uphill from the team members' location, the rotor blades coming apart as they smashed into the hillside. Due to the steep terrain, the ship proceeded to roll a couple of turns down the slope, where it seemed to pause with its right side in the dirt. Makool immediately took the opportunity to jump from the skyward side, only to have the ship make another half roll and pin him across the thighs with its landing skid as its progress was finally halted by a small tree that became lodged under the left side. The top man on the ladder, whose rig had been secured to it, was pinned under and crushed by the airframe. Nothing could be done except to provide him with a morphine injection to ease the pain of his fatal injuries. The second man on the ladder was thrown free, but was pinned down by his rucksack and uniform when the aircraft rolled onto his right arm. The other team members were thrown clear. George Hewitt was tossed down the hill, and when he opened his eyes he saw that the tail boom of the aircraft was missing its rotor. Rick Campbell, who had lost his M16 while the ship was tumbling down the hill, jumped to the ground from the back of the ship and landed on Martin's back. Martin handed his M60 off to the unarmed Campbell, told him that he was going to free Makool from under the skid, and proceeded to lift the skid enough to release the pressure from the crew chief's legs. Another team member grabbed Makool by the wrists and pulled him free. Campbell attempted to put out some covering fire with the M60, but discovered that it was out of ammunition, and so he tossed it aside, his head still spinning from the effects of the crash. Martin had moved to the soldier who was pinned by the arm. He used a large knife to cut away the indig's gear and dug under his arm in order to release

him, but the trapped soldier began to panic and severely lacerated himself as he yanked free: he was afraid that Martin had intended to free him by cutting his arm off!

In the front of the downed aircraft, the pilots also had their hands full. They were still in their seats in what was left of the cockpit. Mike Victory's front windscreen was broken and he could see muzzle flashes up in the tree line. When he tried to crawl out the window, the cord connected to his flight helmet jerked him back. When he removed the helmet, he fell out through the window opening and tumbled several feet to the ground. When he stood up, he saw someone shooting at him, so he pulled out his pistol and returned fire, causing the enemy to step back. He then encountered Martin trying to free the team member from under the skid, saw Campbell and asked him about the rest of the crew. Rick replied that Tigano hadn't come out of the ship yet. Victory went back around to the uphill side of the fuselage, where enemy fire was still coming in from the tree line above. He climbed back inside the cargo area and saw that Tigano was stuck in the left seat, pinned between the ground and the cyclic stick. He released the back of the pilot's seat, pulled him out, and noticed that his face was covered with blood. There was a strong odor of JP-4 as the ruptured fuel cells spilled their contents down the hillside. In a dazed state, Tigano began to look around for the crashed aircraft's KY-28 secure radio and logbook. Victory yelled to him to get out, that there was another aircraft hovering in above them, then crawled out and encountered Martin again, who was working with the crushed team member. Martin told Victory that nothing more could be done, and to get on the approaching helicopter. Meanwhile, Tigano was finally able to clear his head and realized what was happening, dropped what he had been doing, and with a rush of adrenaline he climbed out of the smashed aircraft and ran past Victory on his way to the second ship's ladder.

Byron Edgington had started his left turn prior to Tigano's ship going down, and by the time he completed his orbit, he saw the lead helicopter lying on its side, with people scurrying out of it like bees from a hive. He continued his approach in to a high hover and directed the gunner to lower the ladder down on the right side of the aircraft. Following standard procedure, the downed air crew was evacuated first, to be followed by the team members, whose training would make them much better able to survive in case anyone had to be left on the ground. Faces began to appear as men climbed the ladder and boarded. Makool and Tigano were able to get inside, and possibly Campbell as well. Mike Victory got to the ladder just as Tigano finished climbing into the cargo hold. He tried to climb the ladder, but he was still wearing his heavy armored chest protector ("chicken plate"), and also was reluctant to climb any higher while the gunner was firing an M60 right above him. So he sat down on a rung of the ladder and held on for the ride while Edgington tried to coax his bird out of the LZ holding maximum torque and trying to keep the engine RPM from bleeding down. He was able to get out without doing any damage to Victory, who had a close scrape with some tree branches on the way out. As they were departing, Mike saw muzzle flashes that seemed to be coming from all around, and he responded by firing back at them with his revolver. When he ran out of bullets, he threw the empty pistol at the muzzle flashes and then concentrated on hanging on to the ladder, as he had no equipment to clip on with. Edgington's gunner exchanged waves with Victory, who had a lot of Tigano's blood on him, as well as some of his own.

Edgington increased his airspeed and began climbing to altitude to make his way back across the A Shau valley to a firebase where he could get Victory back inside the ship. As the ship climbed, the resulting temperature drop in combination with the wind produced by the forward airspeed made Victory feel very cold. It was no comfort to Mike that as the airspeed increased, he and the ladder were being blown back, closer to the path of the spinning tail rotor blades.

Dave Trujillo was flying in chalk 3 and also witnessed the lead aircraft go down with troops on the ladder. When it was their turn to go into the LZ, they made their approach with their M60s firing, and Dave saw the fuel flowing down the hill as he got closer, and was amazed that the wreck wasn't on fire. His ship was able to extract the first part of the recon team, leaving the remaining three or four men for the last ship.

My relaxed ride in the trail ship had all of a sudden turned serious. During the course of the evacuation, Covey had called in additional gun support, eventually expending eight Cobra loads of ordnance. But we were flying the only remaining lift ship, there would be nobody standing by to pick us up if we went down. Jim Wallace began our approach, instructing me to lightly get on the controls with him, ready to take over in case anything should happen to him. We came to a high hover, let down our ladder, and the remaining men quickly started getting on while our gunners were blasting the surrounding area with their M60s to keep the enemy on the defensive. In their rush to clear the area, the pax hooked onto the ladder and didn't take the time to climb into the cabin. This would have been fine except that we were hauling most of the US troops, who were heavier than the indigs, and they were all on the ladder weighing down the right side of the ship. I could feel that Jim had the cyclic stick all the way to the left, bouncing off the stop, when our gunner was calling for him to bring the ship left and not let it drift into the trees on the right side. Jim made a split-second decision and immediately pulled all the torque he could to raise us up above the trees before we drifted into them. He got us clear of the trees, but the ship didn't fly well, being so far out of lateral center of gravity (CG) limits. We eventually made a slow right turn and got headed back in a generally easterly direction. Jim knew that he was going to have a hell of a time trying to get our pax back on the ground without injury, and without bringing an out of control chopper down on top of them. His next move was purely logical, though somewhat damaging to my pride: he ordered the crew to pull the release handles on the back of my armored seat and drag me out of my chair, and he instructed me to go over and sit on the left side of the cargo compartment. So there I was on my first CCN extraction, fulfilling the lowly, yet important role of a counterweight. It occurred to me that only a few weeks before I had been filling sandbags, and here I was being *used* as a sandbag!

While we were working through our tribulations, chalks 2 and 3 were able to get back across the A Shau Valley to a friendly base where they succeeded in getting all their pax inside. To those who saw him, Mike Victory appeared to be nearly frozen from his ride. With his energy expended, he was too tired to stand up and untangle his legs from the ladder. An American Lieutenant came over and pulled him out from under the aircraft so it could land. The Lieutenant surmised that Victory had been the pilot of a downed ship, and without knowing the particulars, said that he had a recon team that could go out and

secure his aircraft! Victory thought to himself that this Lieutenant didn't want to go anywhere near where he had just come from.

Back in the trail ship, Jim Wallace had decided there was no way that he was going to try to put down our unbalanced load at a small firebase, so we carried our pax all the way back to the small airstrip adjacent to Firebase Birmingham. The team members hanging below us were still in radio communication with the Covey plane, and they heard that one of the options being considered was to put them down in the Perfume River that flowed alongside the firebase. They rejected that idea, and Wallace decided to put them down at the Birmingham strip, where he could flare the ship in so as to unburden the weight of our ladder passengers and correct our unbalanced condition before trying to come to a hover. He set up his approach down the strip, slowing the unstable ship as much as he dared before setting down. Pierce Durham decided that he didn't want to be dragged down the length of the strip, so he purposely dropped off the ladder when he was still two or three feet off the ground. This had the effect of partially alleviating the unbalanced condition, and reduced the amount of dragging that the other ladder passengers had to endure before Jim could finally bring the ship to a halt. We landed and shut down the aircraft, exhausted and dripping with sweat. I think somebody apologized to the team members for dragging them, but they didn't seem to be bothered too much. Like us, they were happy to have survived, and nothing else really mattered at the time.



This was taken from Firebase Birmingham looking towards the coast, and clearly shows the Birmingham strip alongside the "highway" and the river. Left of the strip is the POL point that we so often refueled at after long missions to the west. (Photograph is the property of Steve Nirk, and is used by permission.)

Except for those who were wounded, nobody really remembers very much about the rest of that day. At the hospital, Frank Tigano discovered that metal fragments had pierced his upper lip, sliced his two front teeth in half, and exited out his lower lip. The indig with the lacerated arm had his wound treated and bandaged up. Some others had small metal fragments removed that they felt were insignificant.



A day at the beach didn't seem to be doing much good for the indig who had been cut free by Martin. As noted in the text scribbled on the photo, he may have been thinking, "I hate choppers". Note his heavily bandaged arm. (Photograph is the property of George Hewitt and is used by permission.)

Back at the CCN debriefing, Pierce Durham discussed with his chain of command what had happened to the lost soldier. He was aware that there had been some suspicion that the doomed indig was actually working for the enemy. Durham was now convinced of it: when he had checked the perimeter on the night of the 13th, he found that the man had placed his claymore mines facing in, instead of out towards the enemy. Durham hadn't wanted to pursue the matter until after returning from the field, but fate took the situation out of his hands.

The CCN team members were kept at Phu Bai briefly and then were brought down to the Marble Mountain base where a Lieutenant Colonel gave the teams a lecture about the rate that equipment was being left behind on their missions. A display had been set up to demonstrate how many items had been abandoned in the previous months. This infuriated Durham and the others, who were much more concerned about lost men than abandoned equipment. As an E-7, SFC Durham was the senior One-zero attending.

When he got up and walked out of the meeting, it didn't take long for the others to follow. His expression of displeasure resulted in an invitation to pack his bags, so Durham headed back down to the base at Nha Trang, where he finished out the remainder of his tour as an instructor in recon techniques.



Walter Martin and the "little people" enjoying their day at the beach. (Photograph is the property of George Hewitt and is used by permission.)

People started calling Jeff Makool "Crash", replacing the previous moniker of "On-fire-Makool" he got two months earlier when half his mustache was singed off in another CCN incident. This time the nickname stuck.

Rick Campbell hadn't told his folks about the close call, but when he returned home from his tour of duty a few weeks after the incident, his mother showed him the only article about the war she had saved from the Detroit newspaper. He couldn't believe what he saw: the September article discussed an Army helicopter that was shot down after it 'strayed' over the Laos border.

It was shortly after this CCN extraction that the word spread among the Comancheros that we were to be visited by a CCN officer, apparently regarding our performance on a number of missions over the previous months. On the appointed evening we gathered in our Officers' Club, the "Hideout", where we were presented with a plaque from the CCN group at MLT-2 in appreciation of our efforts. On the brass plate affixed to the plaque it read:

COMPANY A 101ST AVN. BN.
'THE COMANCHEROS'
FOR HAVING YOUR SHIT IN ORDER
THE BEST DAMN GNATS IN SE ASIA

We were justifiably proud of being so honored, and celebrated by consuming more than the usual amount of alcohol that evening.



The CCN plaque that was presented to the Comancheros in 1970. (The inscribed brass plate photographs poorly, so the text has been added digitally for better viewing.)

After returning to base at Camp Eagle, I thought a lot about what had happened during this mission, particularly about how close our ship's passengers and crew had come to disaster. It was sobering, knowing that this was only the first of many anticipated CCN missions for me. Several months later, after responding to a buddy's question about when my Vietnam tour of duty would be over, I was surprised to hear him call me a "two digit midget", meaning I had fewer than 100 days left in Nam. It was only then I realized that for months I had suppressed thoughts of making it home...alive. At the same time, it felt good to know that in the intervening months I had progressed in my development as a combat aviator, and had professionally executed that role on dozens of additional hazardous missions, many of them for CCN.

Early on in the process of researching for this article, it became clear that the flight crews generally didn't remember the names of many of the CCN team members. This wasn't surprising, as the two groups were typically kept separated, the aviators not needing to know the details of the covert CCN operations. Jeff Makool did not know the name of the man who lifted the helicopter skid off his trapped legs in 1970, but eventually was able to identify him. More than 30 years after the event, Jeff was finally able to meet with Walter Martin in person at a Special Operations Association annual reunion, and thank him for getting him out from under the fallen helicopter – making a fitting closure

to this one example of a mission that was accomplished through the cooperative efforts of the Comancheros and the men of CCN.



Jeff Makool (left) and Walter Martin meet again at a Special Operations Association Reunion in Las Vegas in the early 2000s. (Photograph is the property of J.J. Makool and is used by permission.)

Acknowledgments

Input from the following participants was crucial to detailing the mission: Gil Alvarado, Rick Campbell, Pierce Durham, Byron Edgington, George Hewitt, J.J. Makool, Tom Nietzsche, Frank Tigano, Dave Trujillo, Mike Victory, and Jim Wallace. Thank you for sharing your memories and making the assembly of this story possible.

Copyright © Robert E. Morris, 2001, 2017. All rights reserved.

© This Story and pictures are under copyright to their authors/owners and may not be copied or used in any manner without their permission. All Rights Reserved.