

## WHEN THE MOMENT OF TRUTH HAS ARRIVED THE TIME FOR PREPARATION HAS PASSED

Just after sunrise on February 17, 1971, a flight of two heavily armed helicopter gunships launched from the deck of the USS Garrett County (LST-786) at anchor in the Gulf of Thailand. For one of them, a consequential **“moment of truth”** was about to arrive.

The two gunships were from Helicopter Attack Squadron Three, the highest decorated navy squadron of the Vietnam War. The squadron, known as The Seawolves, had **nine detachments of two-gunship units** stationed in remote locations of The Mekong Delta of Vietnam. The detachments or “dets” were normally co-located with navy **SEAL platoons** and **swift boats** near villages on the numerous streams and waterways so characteristic of the Mekong Delta. Together these navy units became known as *The Brown Water Navy*.

I had been in Vietnam about 6 months and assigned to Det-6 for about 3 months. With daily flights, I had become very familiar with our area of operation or “AO” and the 9 other pilots and 10 door gunners which made up our **“happy band of brothers”**. The squadron tactics manual required that both gunships launch with a full crew...pilot, co-pilot, 1<sup>st</sup> gunner, 2<sup>nd</sup> gunner... on each combat mission so almost half of Det-6 was airborne that morning. Our official mission was a “1T2” or target of opportunity/armed reconnaissance which was **code for find and engage the enemy**.

Det-6 had previously been located at Song Ong Doc, a village on the Song Ong Doc River near the river’s outlet into the Gulf of Thailand. Due to the **treacherous actions of a double agent**, a surprise night attack by enemy forces had resulted in the loss of Song Ong Doc (GOOGLE, *Battle of Song Ong Doc*) as a base of operations. As a result, the Seawolves were relocated to the Garrett County at anchor 3 miles offshore and the SEALs and swift boats were also re-located. Since that surprise attack much of our focus had been on **eroding and weakening those enemy resources** that were operating in the area.

To the north, the “AO” of Det-6 included the triple-canopy *U-Minh Forest, or Forest of Darkness*, where an entire French battalion was said to have vanished in the Indo-China War. Out to the east and south were the numerous rice paddies and waterways where villages dotted the area.

In other words, it was a tough neighborhood and often a **“target rich environment”** for the Seawolves and our navy brethren. As we climbed out from the ship and leveled off at 1000 feet, we could begin to see the shoreline, and it appeared that it was going to be just another **“normal day at the office”**.

What I distinctly remember was a very loud bang or explosion followed by a violent motion of the aircraft and then virtual silence. What had happened was a severe compressor stall and complete engine failure. With only one engine, **the laws of gravity quickly came into play** and we were immediately descending at 2000 feet per minute and less than 30 seconds away from **a morning swim**.

During those 30 seconds a number of actions **must be accomplished in the correct sequence or the death** of some or all onboard will surely be the result. *Aviate...Navigate...Communicate...* those 3 maxims are drilled into all Naval Aviators from the first training flight. Lower the collective, lower the nose, turn into the wind, set a 70 knot airspeed and 310 main rotor rpm, communicate the situation with crew and wingman and jettison the rocket pods then pilots and co-pilots doors. All of **this was completed in less than 10 seconds** leaving 20 seconds to review individual and crew action plans.

My thoughts: “I am about to do something that I have trained for in concept **but have never done**” ... land on water; “I really **should have taken** that teaching job”, may have shot across my screen. It is

critical to note passing 200 feet altitude and begin flaring the nose to have 60 degrees nose up by 75 feet then slowing the aircraft to zero forward speed with zero sideward drift. This maneuver is **critical to survival** and is much simpler over land with fixed reference points like trees and buildings. At about 30 feet you push the nose over to level the aircraft and passing 10 feet, with zero forward or sideward motion, very important. At 4 feet, you then pull the collective up *“into your left armpit”* which increases the angle of attack on the main rotor blades thus **using all** of the main rotor inertia to cushion your landing. Do not forget to put in **a lot of** left pedal to keep the nose straight. Sounds simple enough, right?

Believe it or not, the morning adventure swim was just beginning. The next few seconds are critical as a number of actions **must be completed in the correct sequence if you are to survive**. After impact, you first disconnect your radio cords from your helmet, then reach up and grab the hand hold over the door opening, then, with the other hand, unbuckle your lap belt/shoulder harness. Take the **deepest breath of air** you have ever taken, just before you submerge.

You then pull yourself up by the hand hold while turning your back to the door, jettisoned earlier, and **place your feet in your seat with legs bent**. You are already under water and the aircraft has rolled right. You then use your leg muscles to **push yourself out** the door opening and clear of the sinking gunship. So far so good, right?

Now we have a new set of actions that **must be completed in the correct sequence if you are to survive**. After ensuring that you are clear of the sinking aircraft you pull the CO2 cartridge lanyard which will inflate your survival vest and then follow the bubbles to the surface...**where the air is**. As you clear the surface you quickly check yourself over and **look for your other three crewmen**. There were two immediately visible and then the right door gunner popped up. We both had a little farther to swim. I then noticed the right door gunner was thrashing in the water and **appeared to be in distress**.

I quickly swam over to assist and discovered his CO2 cartridge had **failed to function**. The real problem was he **had forgotten** about the oral inflation tube. So I blew about six breaths into his oral inflation tube, got a thumbs up, and he then completed the inflation procedure.

So there the four of us were, bobbing around in the warm waters of the Gulf of Thailand **with our wingman faithfully circling overhead** with no water rescue capability. The Associated Press release read, “An **uneventful rescue** of a Seawolf gunship crew conducted by a CH-46 helicopter crew from the USS Mars”, a supply ship.

So now, **50 years later** I am rather amazed at the ease with which I recalled these events and those specific pilot emergency procedures. That is because these procedures “are” a part of me and when *the moment of truth arrived*, **I was prepared** to greet the moment. This is why we must become “one” with God’s Word by “hiding it in our heart” so we can skillfully wield the Sword of the Spirit as needed.

The more important question now is, **what life lessons** can we glean and perhaps utilize from this “*morning swim*” experience so long ago and so very far away? I would like to offer some suggestions to perhaps **assist you** as you encounter life’s unexpected challenges:

1. **Life is** marked by “pop quizzes”. Like in school, they seem to be always be unannounced...often the grading criteria is “pass/fail”. You have either been paying attention to important information or you have not. Remember, our old pal Peter advised, “Be alert and of sober mind.”

2. **When** adversity happens it is best to **have “stick to” brothers** close by. “A chord of **three strands** is not easily broken” comes to mind. Who are your brothers who would swim over and **keep you** from

drowning in an unanticipated life crisis? **“Two”** really are better than one. Ecclesiastes 4:9...Jesus sent them, **“two by two”**. Mark 6:7. *Navy Seawolves* were just using wisdom by having a “2 by 2” tactic.

3. **Prepared** is an essential quality when a critical “moment of truth arrives” **for you** and those you **love** and are **responsible for**. The concept of “I’ll merely rise to the occasion” is...**merely fantasy**. The reality is that **we sink** to our level of training, our level of preparation, and respond from that **reality**. It may be a fun place to visit with the kids, but **Fantasy Land a dangerous place to live** your life.

4. **Life** sometimes seems filled with **complexity and uncertainty**. The acronym “*VUCA*” was established (GOOGLE, “VUCA”) in the mid-80’s to describe operating in the combat environment: **V**olatility-**U**ncertainty-**C**omplexity-**A**mbiguity. Unknowingly on 2-17-71, and in a combat environment, we deployed our own response to VUCA---**V**ision-**U**nderstanding-**C**larity-**A**gility. This may be useful for you in your 2021 challenges in the *VUCA*.

5. **When your engine explodes** in a health or relationship crisis; or **you land in the water** with personal finances or a career crisis, have **a plan**, have some **brothers**, and execute the plan. King Solomon said it like this: **“Let your heart keep my commands; For length of days and long life and peace they will be add to you.”** Proverbs 3:1-2

6. Our old pal Jim Rohn says that, “we all have **our choice** of pain. The **pain of discipline**, of making sacrifices to grow and improve our ability to serve, or we can choose **the pain of regret**, of taking the easy road of self-serving status quo. The pain of discipline may weigh pounds whereas the pain of regret may weigh tons.” The writer of Hebrews gave this counsel: **“No discipline** seems pleasant at the time but **painful**. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for **those who** have been **trained** by it”. Hebrews 12:11

7. February 17, 1971 could have ended **very differently** for me and my brothers. However, like in Genesis 14:14, when the moment of truth came for Abram, he armed his **“trained, prepared”** men...we also were **trained and prepared**. Our old pal Peter said this, “Be alert and of sober mind”, 1 Peter 5:8a. Maybe a little inspiration from a favorite poem will assist, *“When its ten against one, and hope there is none, buck up little soldier and chortle”* ---Robert W. Service. We know that our behavior will **influence** those around us, so “buck up little soldier and chortle.”

Remember this, no matter how adverse the circumstance **it probably could always be “more adverse”**. I have often thought “what if the engine had failed 10 minutes later?” We would have been over land and in a very bad neighborhood. Instead of a morning swim it could have been a violent morning fire fight and **a separate set of “sink or swim”** precepts to diligently follow in order to survive. My brothers, 2 by 2, were prepared to do just that, to fight, because we knew this to be true: ***When the moment of truth has arrived the time of preparation has passed.***

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