

DECEMBER 2013

MAGAZINE OF THE MARINES

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A Publication of the
Marine Corps Association & Foundation

“Mission Impossible” in Vietnam

How Many Recon Marines Does It Take to Put an NVA Regiment to Flight?

By Michael Dan Kellum

The First Reconnaissance Battalion’s Teams Chili Pepper and War Cloud Mission Impossible encountered loss and luck in the Que Son Mountains southwest of Da Nang on 1 Sept. 1970. The result was that one seven-man team suffered the accidental deaths of two Marines and two seriously injured while the other four-man relief team put to flight an estimated regiment-sized North Vietnamese Army (NVA) outfit.

Team Chili Pepper was inserted by a Sea Knight helicopter on Hill 995 at 0852 Sunday, 30 Aug. 1970, and began patrolling the mountainous terrain for any enemy activity. The team consisted of Sergeant Dale E. Rowley, team leader; Hospital Corpsman Third Class M. J. McKinley; Lance Corporal Timothy J. “Tim” Luhrs; LCpl Jimmy Ray Holkem; LCpl David F. Airaghi; LCpl Dale Allen Pennington; and LCpl David V. “Dave” Delozier. The team was operating over steep mountains with 50- to 60-foot tree canopy and with a secondary growth of 8- to 10-foot-tall vines, small bushes, bamboo, elephant grass, boulders, thorns and thick bushes.

Two clicks (kilometers) and three days into their patrol, Luhrs spiked a 103-degree temperature, and Holkem broke his ankle, resulting in the whole team needing extraction. In the fading light toward the end of the day on 1 Sept., a 120-foot flexible aluminum ladder attached to a CH-46 Sea Knight was dropped to the team. The men were to snap link onto it from the harnesses they wore. Unfortunately, an

unstable tree in the landing zone (LZ) fell, knocking three of four men off the ladder. Holkem and Pennington were killed, and Rowley and “Doc” McKinley were injured.

Also, the team’s two radios were either inoperable or sent over the mountainside, and most of their weapons were missing. They had no way to communicate with the helicopters to bring them back to their position after they waved them off.

As they waited for the Sea Knights to return later that night, Airaghi directed them to split their watches with two men up and one sleeping. Luhrs remembered the night as being “just black.”

Marines from 1st Recon said the Sea Knight helicopter that had tried to extract Team Chili Pepper returned to Camp Reasoner’s LZ, and, in the darkness, all they saw was the eerie sight of no Marines snap linked onto the ladder and two M16 rifles dangling from it spotlighted by the helicopter’s landing light: an ominous sign that the team was in deep trouble in Indian Territory.

At approximately 2200, the Recon Bn’s reaction team was alerted that a Recon team was down and needed help. Gunnery Sergeant Terrence L. “Terry” Moore was team leader of War Cloud Mission Impossible, seasoned Marines from the battalion’s Headquarters and Service Company. Joining Moore were Staff Sergeant John F. Hare, SSgt D. M. Mudgett, Corporal R. J. Ravelo, a Navy corpsman and one other Marine.

A Sea Knight picked the team up from Camp Reasoner after being equipped with

These Marines in Vietnam are snapped into a Special Purpose Insertion and Extraction (SPIE) rig, a 125-foot reinforced nylon strap with D-rings sewn into it every 8 feet, just like that used to extract Team Chili Pepper. (Photo courtesy of LtCol Terry Moore, USMC (Ret))

a Special Purpose Insertion and Extraction (SPIE) rig, a 125-foot reinforced nylon strap with D-rings sewn into it every 8 feet for the Marines to snap onto with harnesses, to extract Team Chili Pepper.

Rappelling ropes were attached to the back ramp area, the helicopter's side door and the "hell hole" (a 34-inch square hatch in the middle of the aircraft) for the six-man team to rappel down once they found the team and if it should need help. The only problem was that Team Chili Pepper was not making radio contact, and no one knew exactly where it was located in the darkness. It could be assumed only that the team's radios were not working, or the worst case scenario—the men already had been overrun.

"We just weren't sure where they were. We were flying along at about 3,000 to 4,000 feet approaching the area where the team was last seen in the mountains when someone saw a fire down below. The extract officer had the intelligent thought that the team had lit a signal fire to direct us to them," recalled retired Master Sergeant Hare.

The Sea Knight turned its landing lights on as it spiraled down to hover over the "signal fire" which turned out to be roughly 7½ clicks short of the team's actual location. The landing lights showed an area on the side of a hill below that was suitable for the men to rappel down their ropes, and the lines were thrown to the ground. At 2225, Team War Cloud Mission Impossible moved to its rappelling ropes, awaiting team leader Moore to make the descent to the ground.

"We couldn't see the troops below in the landing lights from the helicopter. Terry stepped out on the side door's steps, and I counted him walking down those four steps outside the aircraft ... 1,000 ... 2,000 ... 3,000 ... 4,000 ... then I began rappelling down my rope at the hell hole, thinking he had already started down his rope. Shortly, I landed on the ground, and immediately I could smell gooks all around me and saw a little fire about 30 or 40 feet away," said Hare. SSgt Mushett and Cpl Ravelo had done the same 4-second count at the back ramp before rappelling down their rope one after the other.

Meanwhile, Moore was about to rappel down his rope when the extract officer reached out and grabbed him from behind to pull him back aboard. Moore's sub-machine gun hanging from its strap off his shoulder was dislodged and it dis-



GySgt Terry Moore, left, and 1stLt Hank Rathwell assist a trainee in rappelling through a CH-46 hell hole.

appeared, falling into the foliage below. Moore stepped back into the helicopter.

"He grabbed me and pointed to flashes from the far hillside, thinking the flashes might be someone opening fire," said Moore. "When I realized that Hare had already rappelled to the ground, I automatically broke away and rappelled to the ground as well, thinking I could get a spare weapon from one of the men when

rappelled down, he turned around and rappelled down to join me." Both Moore and Hare agreed that it's a Recon rule that if one man goes down a rappelling rope, everyone goes down.

Moore was armed only with his pistol and several V40 golf ball-sized mini-fragmentation grenades as he leaped onto the rappelling rope in the door and joined his fellow Marines below. The next two men to go down their rope, the Navy corpsman and the last Marine in the team after Hare at the hell hole, encountered a problem.

The team's doc got hung up on his rappelling rope and was dangling from the hell hole under the aircraft about 120 feet off the ground as the helicopter took evasive action to avoid green tracers zeroed in on the Sea Knight's landing light. The other Marine team member could not go down in trace of the doc as a result. Before he could utilize one of the other rappelling ropes in the door or back ramp, the team and the helicopter crew discovered simultaneously that they had chosen the wrong spot for an insertion. The pilot immediately turned off his landing light and gained altitude, turning as he did to escape the enemy fire.

"That poor corpsman was hung up on that rappelling rope for 6 clicks before they could land and get him off it. He never went on patrol again after that, and, frankly, nobody blamed him," said Hare.

After rappelling to the ground, Moore, Hare, Mushett and Ravelo knew they were in some serious trouble as movement was



Sgt Dale Rowley, Team Chili Pepper leader (above), was severely wounded, requiring a special extraction that quickly turned hazardous. Fellow team member LCpl Tim Luhrs (right), was lifted out of danger by a SPIE rig.



I reached the ground. Once I got on the deck, Hare told me he'd heard gunfire, but by then it had stopped."

Hare indicated he later heard that Moore had looked around the Sea Knight, and when he didn't see him, asked, "Where's Hare?" And upon being told I had already

all around them. The radioman whispered into the handset of his SRC-70 radio for the Spooky flareship overhead to stop releasing their illumination flares as it was only helping the large enemy force to locate them.

The team moved up the hill they were on to get away from their highly visible, illuminated insertion point. Darkness descended on them after the last flare burned out. The men backed into a thick clump

of bamboo on all fours to hide from the enemy vigorously beating the bushes for them.

“We had birds I’ve never heard before singing in all directions around us. Of course, those ‘birds’ were the enemy troops signaling one another. One guy came so close to discovering us, I could’ve reached out and grabbed his ankle from our hiding place,” noted Hare.

“We heard somebody tooting on a horn,

and it got deathly quiet. You know we figured those guys must’ve been trained by the Chinese as only they use horns like that. I wasn’t sure I was breathing when it got so quiet. I was thinking I only had one more month left on my tour in country, and here I was in the middle of this deep [stuff].”

The team wasn’t about to open fire on the enemy in close proximity to them as that would give away their position, and they were too few in number to take on such a large encampment of troops. It would’ve been suicide. Also, since they lacked a map of the area, they couldn’t radio in any map coordinates for artillery or airstrikes on the large troop concentration surrounding them. Any kind of pyrotechnic like a pencil flare or pop flare or even firing off tracer rounds to pinpoint their location to guide the overhead gunships in on the NVA would be calling attention to their hiding place to the enemy as well.

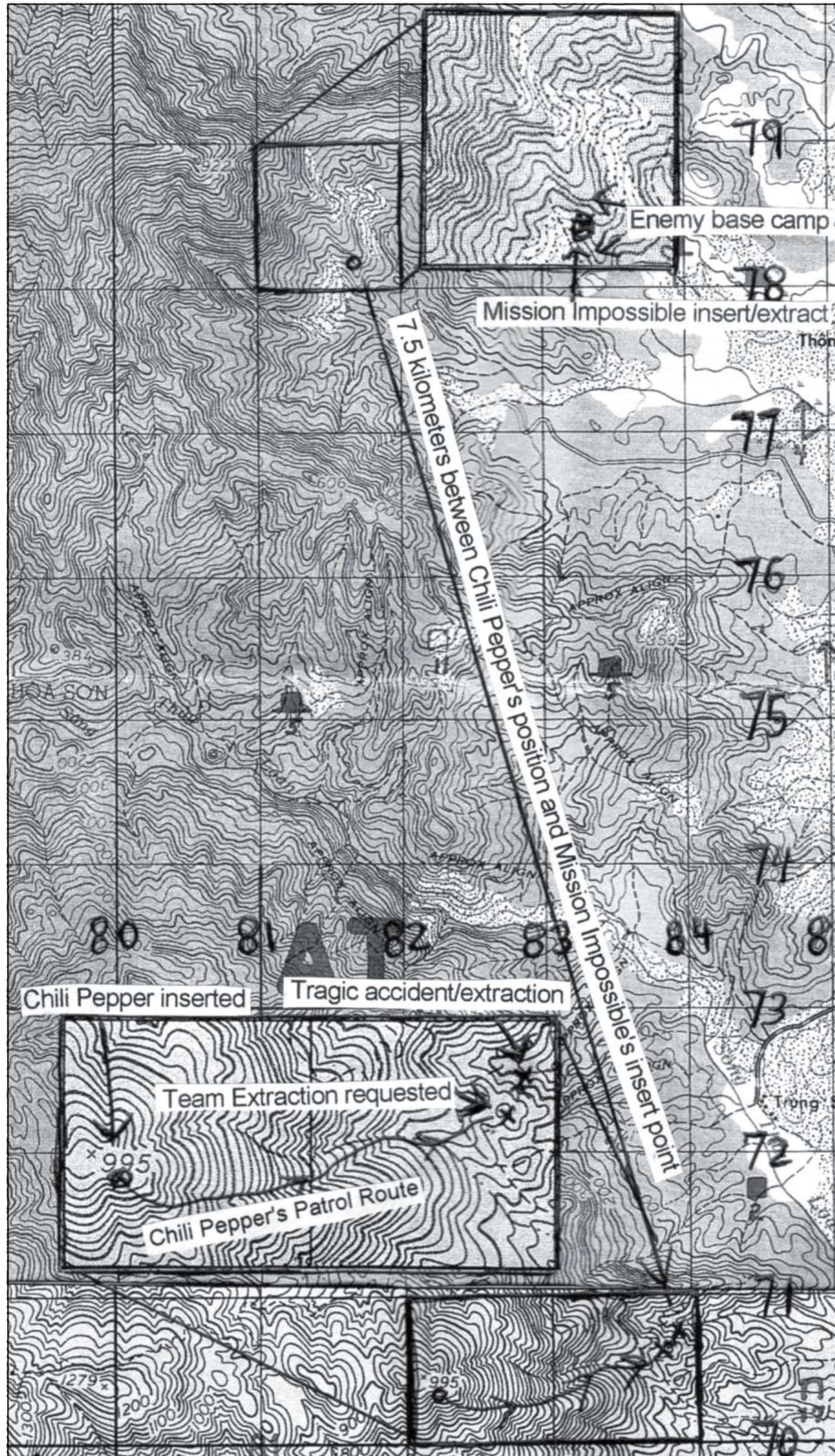
So they sat tight and prayed they wouldn’t be discovered. One of the Marines handed his M16 rifle over to Moore and armed himself with an M79 grenade launcher.

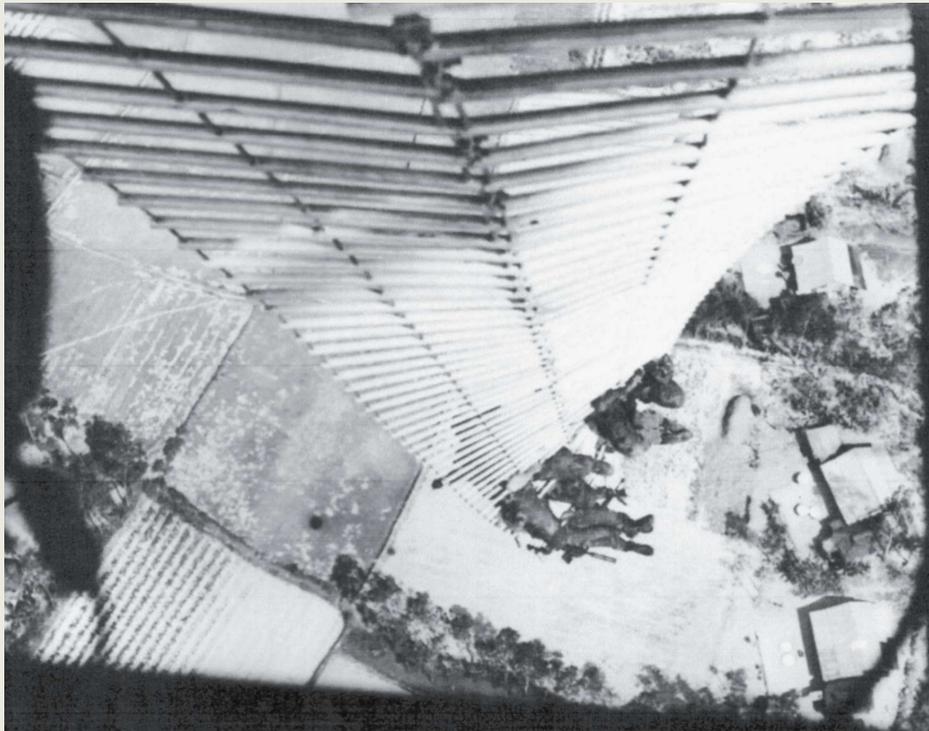
After tooting the horn once more, the enemy troops around them began moving north, away from the Marines’ position. The Recon team was able to maintain communications through their SRC-70 radio with a relay team all night to keep the 1st Recon Bn Command Operations Center back at Camp Reasoner apprised of the situation. During the night, they answered the relay team during radio checks by depressing the plunger on the handset rather than talking since that would have given away their position to enemy troops nearby.

Moore and Hare also each carried scrounged handheld search-and-rescue (SAR) PRC-90 survival radios as backups to their main source of communications. The PRC-90 radios didn’t have much range, but at least they could contact the overhead “birds” in a pinch. “We traded captured enemy SKS rifles, bogus NVA flags sewn together by our riggers, then shot them full of holes and bled on [them] to pass as the real thing in trade for survival radios, additional ammo, beer for the troops and other items we needed from Red Beach,” said Moore.

The patrol record notes: “There was some movement in the streambed 75 to 100 meters down a 75-degree slope southwest of the team and, in addition to breaking brush, they heard a metallic sound.”

At 0500, the team reported what sounded like 122 mm rockets being fired in the direction of Da Nang. As it became light, Hare spotted Moore’s Swedish K sub-machine gun lying nearby that the extract





CPL DOUG WOODS



COURTESY OF TONY PACK

First Lt Tony Pack, the CO of Charlie Co (above), climbed up and down a ladder beneath a CH-46 just like this one (left). The Recon team on the ladder sits on the aluminum rungs with their legs dangling out the side facing the camera and the direction they are going. The Recon Marine closest to the camera has both arms wrapped around the rungs.

Lieutenant Tony Pack's Heroic Ladder Feat

Team Chili Pepper also was having a dickens of a time getting the attention of the extract birds at 0830, 1 Sept. 1970, the same morning Mission Impossible was picked up. An Army Loach helicopter finally located them as they waved a brightly colored air panel. But that was only the beginning of their problems communicating with the overhead Sea Knights.

Not knowing the team's situation of two dead and two injured, the "Peachbush" Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron (HMM) 263 Sea Knight pilots, Lieutenants Bob Miller and Les Williams, had their crew chief, Corporal Dave Asleason, roll the 120-foot flexible aluminum ladder out the back ramp for them to snap link onto for extraction. Lance Corporal David Airaghi couldn't get them to understand their situation initially due to the lack of radio contact. The helicopter was quickly burning up fuel as it hovered.

Realizing they must not be getting on the ladder because they had casualties, a McGuire rig (a basket to strap in the wounded or dead in the prone position) was sent down by cable hoist. Sergeant Dale Rowley was strapped into the basket and sent back up to the Sea Knight.

First Recon's extract officer aboard the helicopter, First Lieutenant Anthony J. "Tony" Pack, 26, of Glastonbury, Conn., the commanding officer of "Charlie" Company, 1st Recon Battalion, took the initiative and did a gutsy thing. Wearing an HMM-263 "Purple Fox" squadron helmet that he was given for protection, he exited the hell hole midway of the helicopter and climbed down the ladder to help. It was a dicey move to grab the ladder's rungs and fight the 100 mph or so rotor wash and begin working his way down to the ground 120 feet away. En route, he passed Sgt Rowley's basket being hoisted upward.

As the lieutenant reached the ground, Rowley's basket hung up on the ladder. Seeing the problem, Pack climbed back up the ladder and managed to get the sergeant untangled and

into the aircraft with the crew chief's help.

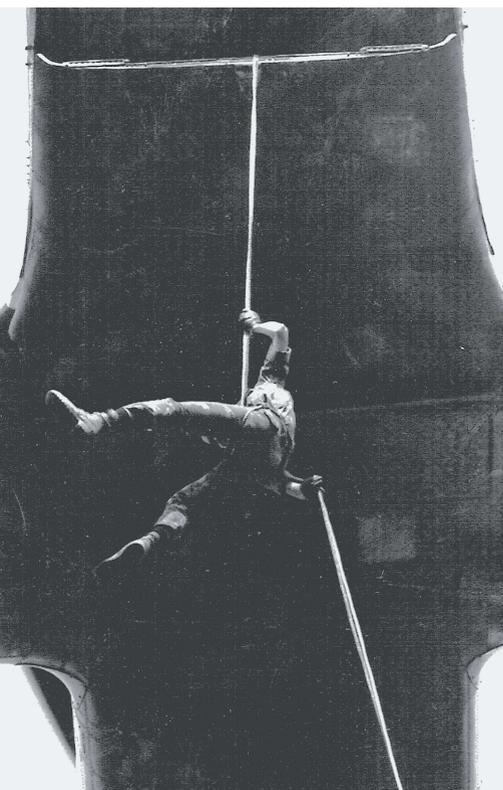
Pack, a Fox Co, 6-68 TBS [The Basic School, Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va.] graduate, climbed back up and into the aircraft to retrieve a PRC-93 survival radio and rode the cable hoist's jungle penetrator back to the ground, knowing it had failed three Recon officers (Second Lieutenant David Skibbe, Captain LaVoy Don McVey and 1stLt Henry P. "Hank" Rathmell) in separate instances earlier in the year, snapping and sending them to their deaths. He arrived without incident and could communicate with the Sea Knight's pilots.

"I had been in country for 26 months at that point. When I was climbing up and down, it was a physical challenge like a new type of O [Obstacle] course. When we finally got back to Camp Reasoner's LZ, my knees were shaking so bad I had to sit down and couldn't get up for several minutes. That never happened to me before."

Some polled Recon Marines, including Gunnery Sergeant Terry Moore (Lieutenant Colonel, USMC (Ret)), noted after the extraction that they had never heard of anyone climbing out on the ladder via the hell hole down to the ground and back up again.

The Peachbush Sea Knights were running low on fuel, so they departed to refuel and take Sgt Rowley to "Charlie" Med. By 1030, the helicopters returned to extract LCpl Dale Allen Pennington, LCpl Jimmy Ray Holkem and Hospital Corpsman Third Class M. J. McKinley by McGuire rig and Pack, Airaghi, LCpl David Delozier and LCpl Timothy Luhrs by SPIE strap, the same type of nylon strap that would be used to extract Team War Cloud Mission Impossible less than an hour later. Team Chili Pepper finally was extracted from the side of the hill, thanks to Pack's heroics and the flying skills of the Peachbush Sea Knight crew.

—Michael Dan Kellum



COURTESY OF CHARLIE KERSHAW

A Recon Marine rappels from a CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter ramp during training in Vietnam.

lieutenant had accidentally pulled off his shoulder. He reached out from their hiding place and retrieved it.

The dawn revealed steps and handrails up the side of the hill they were on as well as classrooms and hooches in the valley. On an opposite hill on their level they spotted a possible anti-aircraft position for a machine gun. Several well-camouflaged

bunkers were within their observation. The area appeared to have been abandoned by the enemy during the night.

The men didn't enter the area as they figured the enemy had "left somebody behind to watch the store," according to Hare.

Moore called for an extract, but due to triple canopy their extract package couldn't locate them in the dense jungle. "They kept flying in wider circles, asking, 'Can you hear us now [referring to the sound of their aircraft overhead]?"

"We heard this weird buzzing sound as we tried to talk our birds back to us. The buzzing didn't sound like any American helicopter we'd heard before. A U.S. Army Loach with two guys in it descended to where we were, saw us and gave us a thumbs-up they knew where we were. They gave us a compass azimuth to where there was a bomb crater we could be lifted out of by SPIE rig.

"The Army Loaches had [sensitive] directional finders our helicopters didn't have at the time and were able to lock onto our radio transmissions to locate us. They really saved our bacon," said Hare. The team was extracted at 1110, and A-4 Skyhawks came in behind them, strafing and bombing the enemy camp, resulting in secondary explosions from stockpiled munitions and explosives.

"The conclusion we came to over the years as to what we dropped into was that it was an enemy regimental command post. Some colonel or general's snuffie had probably made a small fire to fix him some tea, and that was what drew our attention.

"They probably thought we had balls bigger than bowling balls, throwing ropes down from a helicopter and turning lights on to illuminate his CP. The colonel or general must've figured we were there to kill him and got brown stuff all in his skivvy drawers. I imagine he had 20 bodyguards huddled around him as he got out of there.

"It's got to be in the back of their minds there's people out there like Marine sniper Staff Sergeant Carlos Hathcock who once killed an NVA general in the middle of his encampment, spending days to line up his shot to put a fatal round in the man's heart and escape. If you recall, Hathcock was said to have had several hundred kills—one shot, one kill—in Vietnam," said Hare. This fear of the famous Marine sniper or gung-ho Marines like him might've saved the four Recon Marines' lives as the enemy unit quickly departed the "targeted" area.

"I think we landed at their regimental CP, and other [NVA] troops were off the finger depressions off from that area," said Moore.

"We were very lucky not to have been captured, considering the number of enemy troops we rappelled into. Only our training and cool heads kept us safe," surmised Hare.

Team Chili Pepper was not forgotten. It was recovered after a fitful night on the mountaintop with a delirious Sgt Rowley causing some anxious moments about giving away their position. Next morning, they recovered their missing gear, and after two trips by the Sea Knights and the use of a McGuire rig to extract their dead and seriously wounded comrades, the survivors snap linked onto the flexible aluminum ladder, and they all were removed from their exposed position back to Da Nang.

It was a night that teams Chili Pepper and War Cloud Mission Impossible nor, most likely, one spooked NVA regiment would ever forget. And it answered a question as to how many Marines does it take to put an NVA regiment to flight. Answer: Four Recon Marines.

Author's note: This condensed excerpt comes from Chapter 8, "Book II, American Heroes: Grunts, Pilots & 'Docs.' "

Editor's note: First Lt Michael Dan Kellum, USMCR served in Vietnam as an infantry officer in Echo Co, 2/1 in 1970. He is the author of books I and II of "American Heroes: Grunts, Pilots & 'Docs.' " The books are available through Navarro-Hill Publishing Group, P.O. Box 1088, Longview, TX 75606, or www.MichaelDanKellum.com.



USMC

Gen Leonard F. Chapman Jr., 24th CMC, congratulates Team War Cloud Mission Impossible members, from left, SSgt D. M. Mushett, Cpl R. J. Ravelo, SSgt John Hare and GySgt Terry Moore as MajGen Charles F. Widdecke, CG, 1stMarDiv, looks on.

