

Mavericks Rescue Downed Navy Aviator

Background

One morning, in late June 1965, Outlaw Operations received a call from 13th Bn TOC that a Navy fighter jet had been shot down in the “Plain of Reeds”, about 45 miles north of Vinh Long, near the Cambodian border. The Plain of Reeds is an area of extremely tall marsh grass, often over 6 feet high, growing year-round in the marsh water.

Outlaw Operations dispatched a Maverick Fire Team to the area to locate and rescue the Navy aviator who had parachuted from his disabled aircraft. The two-ship Maverick fire team was composed of CWO Dick Benjamin, CWO Chuck Dominy and Sp5 William Hollenbeck in one aircraft and Lt. Dave Logan, CWO C.V. Mills and Sp5 Robert Sanders in the second aircraft. (Both aircraft also had a door gunner TDY from the 25th Infantry Division whose names cannot be identified at this time).

The Fire Team, upon arriving in the area, quickly spotted the parachute on top of the reeds, extracted the pilot – Lt Commander Bob Weedon - from the marsh and reeds, and brought him back to Vinh Long. The Bn TOC was notified, who then notified the Navy. A Navy COD aircraft (Carrier Offshore Delivery) was dispatched from the carrier to Vinh Long to retrieve the pilot and return him to duty on the Bon Homme Richard.

In 2000, retired Lt Commander Bob Weedon was located during a search by VLOA members. Now living in Las Vegas, NV, he, of course, vividly recalled his rescue.

Retired Lt Commander Bob Weekon provided us with the following account of his rescue. His account has now become another vignette story of the Outlaw/Maverick lore.

MAVERICK RESCUE

(by LtCmdr Robert E. Weedon – US Navy Ret.)

In early 1965, I was operations officer of VF-194 flying from the aircraft carrier Bon Homme Richard. During our line periods at this period in the Vietnam conflict, the carriers were rotated between the north and south Vietnams to provide strikes on strategic targets in the North and close air support and other designated targets in the south. While the F8E Crusader was designed as an air-to-air fighter, it had been modified throughout the years to also be an effective air-to-ground platform.

On June 29, 1965 I was launched as the leader of a four plane flight and ordered to check in with a Forward Air controller (FAC) for targets in the Mekong Delta region. The aircraft were equipped with 8 Zuni rockets and a full load of 20MM gun ammunition. When we arrived on station, near the Plain of Reeds, we picked up our FAC and he described our target as a Viet Cong village with specific targets that he wanted hit.

We arrived over the target area at about 20,000 ft. and located the first target in the village that he wanted hit. We were pretty blasé about the situation, since there were no large anti aircraft guns and no missiles reported to be in that area. We began individual dives in a race track pattern, as we had done while training. I cautioned the flight to not get below a couple thousand feet as the FAC was reporting small arms fire. We worked different targets in the area as designated with verbal directions and smoke rockets by the FAC.

My last run was a strafing run and I again cautioned the flight to not get too low. I was pulling out of my dive at about 1500 ft and a speed of about 500 knots when there was an explosion and my cockpit filled up with smoke and the engine quit. I was very interested in getting as far away from our target as possible. I had to eject the canopy in order to see the instruments and tried to relight the engine. I made the Mayday call and the FAC had me in sight. I stayed with the airplane as long as possible since it was leaving the scene. When I slowed down to the point where I was losing altitude, I ejected. The ejection went as it should have, but my total concentration was on what or who was on the ground at my landing spot. I did not realize that Mekong Delta had these large fields of very high grass or reeds growing out of water.

On the way down, the only thing that I saw on the ground was a couple of caribou in an adjoining field. My preflight instructor would have been proud that I had remembered all of his instructions about landing, as it was picture perfect. I landed in the reeds and water and found I was about 200 ft. from a ditch that was probably used for drainage and decided that I should get there as quick as possible in case I had to fight off the enemy. It would not have been much of a fight since my weapon was a .38 caliber revolver with tracer bullets.

In our wisdom, we had put our radios and other survival gear in our seat pack. It seemed as if it took a couple of hours to get all that gear unpacked. (We changed that procedure the day after I got back to the ship!) I ran to the ditch and contacted the FAC and waited. It wasn't long before a beautiful olive green Army helicopter was in sight.

The helicopter was from the **Outlaws and Mavericks** of Company A/ 502d Aviation Company out of Vinh Long. I understand that the **Outlaw** pilot had been in the barber shop when he got the call. He looked good to me even if his haircut was incomplete. I was taken to Vinh Long and the rescue was complete. I do have one regret about the pick-up. I left my flight helmet in the middle of this field and I never could get another helmet to fit as comfortably.

After arriving at Vinh Long, the first thing on the agenda was to check in with the Medic. He could not find anything wrong with me except a small parachute riser burn. I tried to use that as an event to get a Purple Heart medal, but my bosses wouldn't buy it. HAH!

After being released from the Doc, the hospitality of the **Outlaws** came forth. The first thing they let me do was take a shower. Maybe I smelled and it was self defense. One of our destroyer escorts had an evaporator failure and our carrier had been transferring fresh water to the destroyer for several days. The carrier was on strict water rationing and I hadn't had a real shower for days. After running the shower for what seemed like hours, I finally got out and was given fresh and clean fatigues. The guys then took me to the club and treated me to ice cold San Miguel beer. I was on my 2nd San Miguel and was beginning to think about spending the night "on the beach", drinking a little too much and maybe going into town. However, I was then informed that the carrier's COD aircraft was 30 minutes out and I should get down to the air field. What a disappointment to have to go back to the ship so soon!

The **Outlaws and Mavericks** not only saved me from a fate that I would not like to contemplate, but did it in a most professional way. After that they showed me a hospitality that I will never forget. As fresh as the memory is, it is hard to believe that it was 35 years ago. Outlaws and Mavericks, please accept my thanks for a job well done.