

## 1997 RANGER REUNION

June 5 -8

Savannah, Georgia

It has been almost three months since I had a very remarkable experience in the beautiful and historic coastal town of Savannah, Georgia. The mind works in very mysterious ways at times and this is what was happening in the mass of gray matter that sits on top of John Eder's shoulders that led to my attendance at my first ever Ranger Reunion.

More than five years ago a business associate casually suggested that I read a book about Viet Nam because he had read it and thought it was "like what I did" when I was there. As most of you probably understand, dredging up old wartime horror stories is something that I had purposefully avoided since returning from Charlie Rangers in July of 1970. The fictional paperback novel about a fictional Ranger Company written by a not-so-fictional former officer of the real Charlie Company brought back a flood of memories and a tear to my eye as I thought back on a time when I was much younger, stronger, and daring. As I finished reading "Charlie Mike" I noticed the publishing house advertisement inside the back cover announcing the titles to several other books covering the Viet Nam era. And to my surprise, one of them was actually titled, "Charlie Rangers."

That title really aroused my curiosity, and although my local bookstore did not have a copy, I was able to order one and received word that it had arrived less than two weeks later. It had not really sunk in that Charlie Rangers was "our" Charlie Rangers until I paid for the book, opened it up to the pictures section, and stared at two faces from my past, the co-authors, Ericson and Rotundo, both of whom I remembered as "pot-heads" from fellow Lieutenant Brian O'Donnel's third platoon. Reading some of their accounts of life in Charlie Company, stories of their various contacts, missions, and KIA's including an account of fourth platoon's loss of Steen Foster, James Loisel and Kit Carson Scout Hoa during Team 4-4's fateful mission in Cambodia caused that mysterious stirring in my soul.

As fourth platoon leader, I recalled that I had filled an empty spot on Sgt. Foster's team with Loisel, a young man who volunteered for his 101st mission (even though I had already placed him on stand-down following his 100th) because I needed bodies and he was indeed a volunteer! Also, Foster was a new and aggressive team leader, heading into a very unknown area with little rehearsal. Sending this put-together-at-the-last-minute team into Cambodia was probably not one of the wisest decisions I had ever made. I remember flying the first V.R. of our new area of operations early one morning the day after we had arrived at Pleiku, and noticing all the old burnt and rusted APC's, tanks, and half-tracks scattered along this great, wide, and well-used track known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. I thought that this sure could be a potentially tough situation.

These are probably typical examples of the visual memory pictures that never leave your subconsciousness, even after twenty-eight years. I remember that I was really

upset over this situation of losing fifty percent of one of my teams, and I remember serving as escort officer for Hoa and accompanying his body back to his hometown of Phan Thiet. There his father saw to it that his body was properly sealed in a rough wooden casket full of sand and covered with the yellow RVN flag. As mourners passed through Hoa's home, Hoa's father and I sat beside the casket toasting his memory with something that was really dark brown and really strong and greeting Hoa's friends and family. I was also asked to accompany the funeral procession to the burial site, but stopped short of the actual Buddhist ceremonial procedures. So I began thinking seriously about where all of those other young Rangers were, what they looked like, how they were doing, were they fathers and family men now or did they still have flashbacks and sleepless nights thinking about contacts or what raw deals they had been dealt when they got back to the world?

Several months later I felt that same something stirring my soul that drove me to dial "long-distance information" in Brownsville, Pennsylvania, searching for my long-lost Platoon Sergeant, Joe Stinger. I was ashamed that now I could not at the time remember the names of all of my men, even those whose names are etched in memory on The Wall. But the one name that I could never forget was that of the man who took me on my first live combat mission after arriving as a green and nervous Lieutenant, fresh from the world of theory and stateside training regimens. Joseph Stinger was a coal miner's son from that little place called Brownsville, Pennsylvania, and he was a good man to give me the real orientation after reaching the fourth platoon headquarters at Phan Thiet in early August of 1969. As we completed my first exfil (after a dry run) I was still encouraged by the experience; that everything we carried out was very much like what I had been taught in stateside Ranger School and at the An Khe "in-country orientation" for Charlie Rangers personnel.

That evening, as the operator gave me the telephone number for the Stinger residence and I immediately dialed it up, a little surge of anxiety passed over me as an elderly voice answered. I said that I was looking for a man named Joe Stinger who had been my platoon sergeant in Viet Nam and the gentleman answered, "W-e-l-l-I-I, I have fourteen kids, b-u-u-u-t I think he's the one in Kansas City." We carried on our conversation for at least thirty minutes; Joe's father was very interested in talking and letting me know how proud he was of his son. As soon as I hung up with Mr. Stinger I dialed the Kansas City number and a man answered. It was Joe. I said something like, "Four-eight Alpha, four-eight Alpha, this is four-eight. Your L.Z. is 300 miles to your Echo." Joe replied, "Captain Eder, I've been looking for you all over Texas. Where are you now?" I had not seen or heard from him in twenty-three years so without him knowing of the welled-up tears in my eyes, we had a very nice and lengthy reunion by telephone, catching up on our families and occupations and promising to keep in touch a little better from now on. We corresponded by FAX, letters, and exchanged photos for the next few years and expressed an interest in seeing some of our old Ranger buddies, even of trying to organize a get-together ourselves. Nothing definite ever happened until one day late in the Fall of 1996 when Joe phoned to say that he had heard of a Ranger reunion of just Charlie Rangers that was to be held in Savannah, and that he had just joined the veterans organization known as Co. E (LRP) and Co. C (RGR) Association,

Inc. Joe gave me the phone number, said that he was planning to attend, and encouraged me to do the same.

Those events and thought processes are what led me to phone Daniel Pope and hear of his enthusiastic effort at organizing our veterans association and the forthcoming reunion. I immediately made the decision to try my best to attend the Savannah meeting, but there were certainly a few mixed feelings going through my mind as the time approached. Although I later found out that Joe Stinger would not be able to attend after all, and I did not know whether or not any of my old fourth platoon members would show up, and I questioned what my reception would be by the organization's membership in general, I had made a commitment to attend. There was also that gnawing question running through my mind about whether the membership in general would be comprised of a lot of black-jacketed, patch-bedecked, drunken cry-babies commiserating about how they had been mistreated and rained upon by their government, their communities, the Army, the V.A., their ex-wives, and anybody else within sight. You get the picture. Remember, I was an officer, and my opinion was that most Charlie Rangers (and assuredly most Echo LRP's, too) thought that we officers had an easier job because we "flew more than we fought." Yes, I could imagine feeling like I was standing on the skids about to touch down on a hot LZ when I first walked into the reunion registration table at the Savannah Holiday Inn.

Well, I most certainly did see lots of black-jacketed or black T-shirted, patch-bedecked (and black capped) former Rangers, but the "drunken cry-baby" part of it just never materialized. As an example of some of my pre-conceived notions striking home, imagine what went through my mind when I migrated to the hospitality room (the temporary home to 150 cases of Miller Lights) and immediately focused on the piercing blue eyes of a black-hatted, black-jacketed, gray-fleck bearded, pony-tailed man that I knew that I knew. We stared at each other for several minutes before shaking hands and re-discovering each other as Charlie Ranger contemporaries. Although his name did not come to me immediately, those piercing blue eyes and easy-going confidence sure did ring a bell. This was the same E-5 Sergeant that helped me deliver the monthly payroll (beaucoup MPC) that time we drove over An Khe Pass in a jeep by ourselves with only an M-16 and a .45 for company. (He doesn't agree that we drove a jeep, but rather, thinks that we rode in a convoy of deuce-and-a-halves. After this many years, both of our memories may have faded, and who cares, anyway). I loved and respected this Sergeant's combat expertise and cool head and took pride in the time I helped get him and his team out of a bad situation by flying the exfil. It was really great to see Rocky Stone again and I'm still proud of him for being elected as Sergeant at Arms of E LRP C RGR and most especially, for still being all in one piece.

As a matter of fact, I really enjoyed seeing all of those faces from the past, both known and previously unknown! Worth Bolton still looks lean and mean (but more like a business executive on holiday), and Lazarov still looks mean (but the lean has become more well rounded), and Doc Gove looks nothing at all like I remember, and Don Ericson looks nothing at all like a "pot-head" (although it still seems to me that the famous author was a little harsh in his literary assessment of the Charlie Ranger officer corps - everyone to his own opinion), Sam Agner may look a little different, but still has the same easy-

going manner, and my great little "shake-and-bake" team leader, Sergeant Strawn, has only added a little extra facial hair in addition to lots of that gray coloring.

My experience reuniting with Sergeant Strawn brings to mind another point that was very important to me. It finally registered in my feeble brain that Dennis Strawn had never known me as anything other than his platoon leader and could not help but call me "Sir." We were sitting around a table with a few of the Miller Lights one afternoon when I said, "Dennis, you should try calling me John. We're both just plain old civilians now." Well Dennis immediately responded with, "I'll sure do that, Sir!" And it also finally dawned on me that most of the rest of you also did not know me other than as an officer (if you knew me at all) and that the implied respect you gave me by calling me "L-T" really did make me feel proud. Even those that had never met me showed that same implied respect as did those with whom I served during July, 1969 to July, 1970. I sincerely wish that I had not been the only "L-T" that showed up, but I sincerely enjoyed being a part of the group. Maybe next time Grimes and Rosenberry and O'Donnell and some of the rest of them can make it. Maybe next time!

I also got really excited to see our former C.O., Major Holt. And he still looks the same and can still get right in the middle of anything, to include the revolving climbing wall at Ranger Gym in the First Ranger Battalion's A.O. I had called him before we arrived and heard that he would be there. And it's funny how we remember people. Bill Holt retired as a Bird Colonel, but he was my C. O. and, just like I was still "L-T" to most, he will always be "Major Holt" to me.

I heard that another of fourth platoon's team leaders, Jim Flemming (E-5 Sergeant Flemming) retired as a Command Sergeant Major. Not a bad career for a former nineteen or twenty year old Ranger team leader. But when I see him again he will still bring back visions of that very young E-5 that very early-on had accepted the responsibility of leadership and made it work for him throughout his military career. I would also dearly love to see Tommy "Fuzz" Foster, Jimmy Flemming, Riotutar, Guerra, VanSlyke, Epperson, Tuka, Lynn Snook, Joe Stinger and all the rest of the members of the "Fabulous Fourth," the famous "Dealers of Death."

For allowing an old "L-T" to come enjoy such a fine event, and to Dan Pope and all the rest of you, including your wives, for putting on such a good show, I give my heartfelt thanks! The gathering was ended on a fine note when "Sergeant" Pope conducted our closing ceremony roll call at the end of our dinner cruise. Very well done and certainly well-inspired. To say it once again, "maybe next time," more of us will be in attendance. I sure hope so. See you in North Carolina in 1999!

John Eder