

Ladies and gentlemen of the Ghostriders, it is a rare privilege to be among you, celebrating life and experiences that formed personal bonds, while in service to your country. It was in a distant place and time, some thirty-eight years ago, depending on your tour dates. We, as veterans, I carry memories from that era. We often have something remind us, of events that happened during our tours. We are fortunate, to carry those memories in normal way, that honors the experiences with others, and does not absorb the present. Tonight is a night to celebrate camaraderie, with Nam buddies!

Veterans have a unique perspective on world events and history. You served our nation in a most difficult place and time, you and your fellow warriors. You have lived the difficulties and uncertainties of war. You have also shared the personal triumph, of accomplishing difficult missions, in support of Americans on the ground, in need. The vow to "leave no one behind," may not have been possible to keep. It remains a lofty goal, for today's soldiers as well. You men know what "do or die trying" means. Most of you have lived it. All of you know someone, who gave their lives, and are not forgotten, in your hearts.

Most of you have also shared the intense emotions experienced, after simply surviving another combat assault, or a hot extraction, saving American and allied lives. You, much more than the typical American citizen, understand how difficult it can be to accomplish military operations, safely, overseas. I believe the single, most remarkable trait of warriors, especially Army Aviation Veterans, is the willingness to do or die trying, to save another man in their unit, or Americans on the ground, in need, anywhere. Major General Randy House, was a First Infantry Division commander, at Fort Riley Kansas, when we had our VHPA reunion at Kansas city. He hosted a Phoenix Veterans luncheon at Fort Riley Kansas, in the 1990's. My son Patrick was with me. I asked him if he knew what distinguished veterans from other groups. After I told him, I quickly realized, he didn't get it. In fact, he still doesn't get it today. Neither do most American civilians. They simply haven't volunteered to train in difficult skills, fly or maintain helicopters, to operate in foreign lands, on missions that require coordination and precision, under intense enemy opposition. You certainly get it! You lived it!

This is a pretty rare, special crowd tonight. Today our nation is at war, with Muslim extremists, worldwide and at home. Roughly one percent of our population is currently serving in the military. According to the veterans administration, there are some three million three hundred thousand Vietnam era veterans, of which about 2.800 million served in country, actually in South Viet Nam. In a

recent 2008 issue of men's health magazine, the veterans administration was quoted as reporting and then there are over nine million five hundred thousand who claimed to be Vietnam era veterans. That means there are a lot of men, who want to claim a status, Viet Nam era veteran, which they are unworthy of claiming. Apparently, a lot of men in their later years, realize if only, they could a, would a, should a.

Today, less than four percent of American population, according to the veterans administration, either are serving or ever have ever served, in the united states military and armed forces.

We have traveled many different paths in our lives, after Vietnam. We do share experiences from that era. Like most veterans, I departed the army after only four years of service. In August, 1971, I returned to Fort Rucker Alabama. There I became an instructor and the department of graduate flight training, transitioning jet pilots from the air force and Army fixed wing pilots, into helicopters, flying the OH 58-A. I left the service In the April, 1973. I graduated Troy State University in June that year with a degree in business administration. Through my V. A. Benefits I completed a commercial multi engine instrument rating in Airplanes. I proceeded with the usual challenges growing a business, raising two sons, dealing with life's normal issues and opportunities. All the while carrying the experiences of a long year in Vietnam. That experience was hard to reconcile, until many years later. It was not until in 1989, that I attended my first V. H. P. a reunion in Chicago. That year was I going through a very difficult time in my personal and professional life. With a divorce after eighteen years, my business was in a declining real state economy. They were simply, very difficult years, financially and emotionally. Compounded with two teenage sons, and the challenges raising them.

Why I wrote the Price of Exit

In October, 1990, Former Phoenix warrant officer, Jack Glennon in Virginia Beach, VA, called me and asked " Did you know Captain David Nelson and Warrant Officer Ralph Moreira?" My mind instantly spun back to a mental replay of my first CCN mission. I was a copilot, with Captain David Nelson. I instantly replied to Glennon, "yes, I flew my first CCN mission with him." Glennon continued " they're being buried at Arlington National Cemetary, ten, tomorrow morning". He continued on explaining that they would meet at the Sheraton at "Arlington National Cemetery tonight." Several pilots from across the nation were flying in. I told Glenn and I would be there. I called my travel agent and got a flight around four that afternoon to Washington DC. I got there about eight thirty that night. A group was already there. The story is told in the Price of Exit.

The next day, after the ceremony, we had met briefly with the families. Understanding how they missed so much, in the unlive lives of their sons, fathers and brothers, really made a lasting impression on me. That afternoon after lunch, retired Lieutenant Colonel Michael Sloniker gave me a copy of the Lam Son 719 after action report. I first read it on the way home. I was stunned by the portrayal of actions and the losses incurred.

How I wrote it

It left me disturbed, even angry. I had already been reading many books on the Vietnam era. Keith William Nolan came the closest to describing our experiences in his book "Into Laos." But it barely scratched the surface of our experiences and observations. By 1993, I had come to the conclusion that the book I wanted to read had not been written. As a child, I grew up in Pensacola, a navy aviation town. I grew up in a neighborhood that included active military in the navy and marines as well as veterans of world war two. That was an era when the military was respected and appreciated, unlike the post Vietnam years. Writing The Price of Exit became my obsessive, compulsive, interest in life, after making a living. At that time I had twenty years experience as a technical report writer and investigative researcher in the real estate appraisal industry. I have read many military history books. Most read like a text book, simply full of military acronyms and statistics. I wanted to write a book that can be read by most people and easily understood. How did I start writing? First, I had my letters home, which my wife saved for me, as a diary. In the letters home, were glimpses into what I was dealing with, during my tour. The letters activated older, deeper memories and emotions. They allowed me to remember what was not being said, reading between the lines. I started by writing short stories that had been brought back to mind in my letters home. I then incorporated the Lam Son 719 descriptions of actions and wove the history around my stories. In 1995, retired Lt. Col. Mike Sloniker, introduced me to the Air Force CHECCO Reports, which gave running observations by FAC's and Air Force gunship pilots. It also provided useful dates, descriptions of actions and units involved. He overwhelmed me with information regarding the era, much from declassified military records, as well as sharing his extensive book collection in his personal library.

I also used the VHPA directories. I knew my class lost a lot of members killed. My former TAC officer, saw me at Rucker, after I returned. He told me "your class really took heavy hits", referring to the number killed in action. When I made the decision to report the deaths, in a calendar narrative, I was surprised by the number killed. For me, the most compelling reason to tell their stories, was to

commemorate those lost, as well as those that served with them. I also believed it useful to the families, who still grieve them to this day.

The other reason, was to give the Lam Son 719 veterans, their acknowledgement, in military lore.

One of the remarkable things was, that while reading the after-action reports, I knew many of the pilots and crewmen involved. Our experiences allow us to read between the lines of written history. You men were there. You have different memories of certain actions and experiences. You all know that Combat is like car wreck. Four people witness it and there may be four different stories, varying dramatically in memory, perspective and intensity. Where I spoke of the Ghostriders, you know where I got the story right, and where I didn't.

When people tell me "I got something wrong," I simply acknowledge "yes, you were there."

The first source of stories was from my friends who were veterans of the Phoenix. Several reviewed manuscripts as I evolving them. Many copied portions and gave to others, who contacted me with their personal stories.

I relied upon several unit newsletters printed by veterans groups, including the Rattlers, the Blueghosts, the Kingsmen and Commancheros, as well as the Ripcord Association.

One thing became very clear. In trying to understand the severity of losses in Lam Son, I decided to relate it to the Ripcord action. When I was down at the fourth infantry division in August, 1970, most of the 4th Infantry Division pilots were talking of the horrible losses taken around Ripcord in July, by the 101st.

When researching the Ripcord story, in the historical light of Lam Son 719, the casualties struck me. There were three days in particular, in March, 1971, where each single day, exceeded all the losses of nearly four months around Ripcord. That is three days, each exceeding the total losses over three and three fourths of a month at Ripcord.

That gives a pause to think, to really comprehend what it means.

One of the first questions I get asked is "how did you write this?"

It is simple, somewhat.

I had my letters home. Col. Sloniker gave me the declassified after action records for the events. The army and air force do tend to write everything down, in case you have forgotten how you received official orders in writing, not just 5 or ten copies but 50 to a 100 copies, mimeographed. I still have some of them.

LAM son

Col. Sloniker also shared with me audio tapes of actions with the Robinhoods, Blue Stars, the Air Cavalry. The Ghostriders tape of Ripcord, copied from a reel to reel recorder in the TOC. The tape was made by Rick Wickboldt, Ghost rider 30.

On the tape are Lightening 3, the S-3 officer for the 158th Aviation Battalion, as well as Lightening 6, commander of the 158th Avn. Battalion. You also hear Rider 16, Alpha 158th Avn. Btn., one of the two last birds off Ripcord. Can any of you tell me who Rider 16 was? Who was with him and who were the men in the second bird?

E

Also on the tape is Kingmen 23, B Co., 101st, Griffin 93, C co., 101st. C/4-77th Aerial field artillery, Redshkin 24, Delatea Co., 158th cobras, Comanchero 11, commander of the Commancheros, A. Co., 101 Avn. Btn., Phoenix Lead, 12, Captain Randy House, who was a two star general in the first Gulf War.

CW

The only editing I have done is to eliminate the dead spaces where there was no conversation. I have condensed it to five minutes, to give you the good parts.

(Listen to tape with slides running)

Ripcord was the largest movement of troops out of an area during the ten years of Vietnam. I believe the military term is contact. Confuses with the word retreat, doesn't it? The fall of September, due the monsoon.

T. L. L. L.

M. D.

I pose a question to you? Who flew the last aircraft picking Ghost rider Lead. A Sergeant, Phil Tolson, who received a Bronze Star for him as the last man off, wrote me and told me of it.

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Here is his letter to Colonel Harry Summers, Ret., editor of the Vietnam magazine.

You Ripcord Vets have a standing invitation to the Ripcord Reunions, held in November, each year. I bet your money is no good there, you couldn't even buy a drink there. They would love to meet you.

I believe any pilot or crew member veteran, would be welcomed with open arms at a Ripcord reunion. They are held in November of each year, around Veterans Day. You can find out about them at the Ripcord website.

What unit flew the lead ship into the Laos, the morning of February 8, 1971.

Ghost rider Lead, led the way.

Last off Ripcord, First in to Laos, quite a distinction, Gentlemen!

Ripcord was the largest movement of troops out of an area of operations, under continuous contact during the ten years of Vietnam. I believe the military term is retrograde, withdrawal under enemy contact. Confuses with the word retreat, doesn't it? The fact was, it would have been closed in September, due the monsoon.

W

I pose a question to you? Who flew the last aircraft picking up the very last troops on Ripcord? Ghost rider Lead. A Sergeant, Phil Tolson, who received a Bronze Star with a V device, acknowledging him as the last man off, wrote me and told me of it.

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