

Rescue at Le Son

By Howard A. Christy

In the commentary on the Vietnam War, perhaps the most prominent consensus is that it was largely an ugly succession of terrible mistakes. This story amply supports that consensus, but offers in addition something for which those who fought, and perhaps all Americans, can take some comfort.¹

On May 21, 1966, southwest of Da Nang, Vietnam, the Third Platoon of Company A, First Battalion, Ninth Marines, was detached to Company C, which had called for help upon becoming heavily engaged with Viet Cong along the west bank of the River Yen, about a mile and a half northwest of Hill 55.

In what might be considered a classic example of the fog of war, Third Platoon was not dropped on the west bank of the river at the landing site designated by Company C, but on the east bank and right in the middle of a well-armed Viet Cong force of company size.² The enemy blasted away at the two helicopters landing in their midst at point-blank range. The troops of the Third Platoon exited as fast as they could and the helicopters escaped, although both aircraft took many hits. One eyewitness reported that so many bullets whipped through the helicopters that it “sounded like popcorn.”³ A slaughter had commenced. In a few minutes, six Marines were dead, twenty-five were wounded, and there was a clear likelihood that the entire platoon would be annihilated. Those not yet hit attempted to return fire, but they were too few and both of their new M-60 machine guns had jammed.⁴

Fate began to turn in favor of the beleaguered Marines, however, when the VC ran out of ammunition and decided to withdraw.⁵ And there was something else. At the height of the bloodletting, ten Marines and Navy Corpsmen began to pull off a spectacular rescue.

The two Navy corpsmen attached to the Third Platoon were the first to act. Larry Bollinger administered life-saving first aid to the nearest wounded Marines and Shane Morris did the same, but they too were soon wounded.⁶ A bullet grazed Larry's forehead and he had to repeatedly wipe blood from his eyes as he worked. At about the same time he saw Shane get hit by enemy fire, his left arm going limp. Larry reported later that he despaired of Shane being of any further help and felt that the enormous task of trying to save more than twenty bleeding men in various states of extremity was now his alone.⁷ Later, Larry was wounded again, this time in the foot. Nevertheless, he remained at his post throughout the day, refusing assistance for himself. Although the wound to his forehead was too obvious to hide, he carefully kept to himself his other, more serious, wound in order to stay with the unit.⁸

Fortunately, Shane was not out of action as Larry had thought. He was not out of action because he refused to consider himself out of action. Even though seriously wounded in the left arm and leg, he continued his life-saving work, first serving one, then the next closest Marine, and then a third. Shane then moved to the next wounded Marine—and was hit again, this time in the right elbow and knee. He went down in great pain. As he lay there, the likelihood that they all were going to die began to dawn upon him.

What more could he do? He was down, barely able to move, literally bleeding to death. Had he not done enough in what he now feared was a lost cause? What he chose to do is best described in his own words: “I heard a cry from another comrade. He was laying out in the open. . . . I crawled to rescue my comrade.”⁹

As he crawled, a rocket or mortar round exploded behind him, shrapnel penetrating, among other places, his spine and his brain. Shane recalled later that

I knew I couldn’t get up. . . . I lay there not knowing the outcome, if I would see my family or wife, and my son born. When reinforcements arrived they were searching for the living. One man turned me over and said [I] was dead. With all I had I said no I am not.¹⁰

Shane was flown, unconscious, to Clark Air Force Base Hospital, in the Philippines, where he remained unconscious for ten days. Despairing for his life, doctors there flew him to the United States, hoping that he at least might live long enough to see his family. For months he remained in critical condition at the Portsmouth Naval Hospital, in Virginia. Finally, after about eight months of convalescence, doctors attempted to remove the shrapnel lodged in his spine and brain. But after opening him up the doctors determined that any attempt to remove the shrapnel in either place would be too risky. The shrapnel remains to this day.¹¹ Shane recovered sufficiently to be discharged to his home in southwest Pennsylvania, and he has lived ever since quietly, humbly, and in pain—largely unknown, unacclaimed, never complaining, never asking for any special treatment, for what he did on May 21, 1966. At the time of their almost unbelievable acts of courage, heroism, and devotion to duty on behalf of others, both Larry and Shane were only nineteen years old.

While this was going on, a two-helicopter medical evacuation team began a series of sorties into that bloody field, at first under intense enemy fire. Jim Rider and Dick Drury, the pilots of the first helicopter to land, gave it everything they had. With great skill and daring they darted in and out of that bloody field. While on the ground, Rider and Drury, keeping the engine revved for instant take-off, banged away at the enemy with their pistols while Jim Mayton, the evacuation team’s Navy medical corpsman, and Bob Abshire, the crew chief and machine gunner, ran about picking up the wounded as quickly as they could.¹² Rider described the scene:

I had waved off on that first approach when I started taking hits, and saw muzzle flashes from brush about 25 yards away from the three casualties I could see in that spot. I landed about 50 meters away from the radioman, next to a lot of casualties we could see laying in the open. I landed with my tail pointing at the area that we had taken the hit from. That avoided aimed fire at the aircraft crew from that particular spot. We continued to take hits on the ground. On one of the trips into that zone the armor plate next to my seat was hit by a small arms round. If it had hit one-eighth of an inch higher, it would have drilled me through the chest cavity. As it was, my arm was blasted with the ceramic material on the outside of the armor plate, the bullet skinned my arm, hit my flight helmet and exited the aircraft through the plexiglass above my head. Later on we found a round imbedded in the spar of the aircraft, which made it very dangerous to fly, so we switched aircraft.¹³

Jack Enockson, piloting the support gunship, although his primary duty was to provide fire support to the other medevac team, seeing the chaos below, landed his ship also. Rider observed that Enockson

made a gun run on the zone, then landed with a quick stop maneuver and controlled crash into the soft earth of the paddy. I don't ever recall seeing anyone else do anything like that. They landed right in front of the enemy positions. One of the crewmen spotted a VC and shot him with the machine gun. They landed alongside one of the wounded Marines, who jumped up and ran to the helicopter. Jack literally shot his way into the zone.¹⁴

Corpsman Jim Mayton was superb. As Rider later recalled, as the crew swooped in to land, to save precious seconds Jim would leap to the ground before the chopper touched down, under heavy enemy fire run to fallen Marines, retrieve them, signal for takeoff, then wrestle himself back aboard as the chopper was pulling away. He repeated this gutsy maneuver during the first several of the eight total sorties the medevac team carried out that afternoon.

The wounded Marine who ran to the gunship (he was the Third Platoon radioman) had been badly wounded in the shoulder by VC machine gun fire. Since he was bleeding profusely, Frank Pfeiffer, one of the ship's door gunners, desperately attempted to stop the blood with his hands. Unsuccessful, he grabbed a large field dressing, and, holding one end to the floor of the helicopter with his foot, he did a turn around the radioman's shoulder and pulled on the free end as tightly as he could. In the meantime, blood had splattered all over the radioman, Frank, and the helicopter. Fortunately, the flow was stanching and the radioman was delivered alive to the field hospital.¹⁵

After evacuating the wounded, the choppers came back to pick up the dead. Copilot Dick Drury recalled those last moments. Bodies were stacked in a pile behind him, and Jim Mayton and Bob Abshire had to sit on top of the pile, there being no other place. And, as the chopper arose, dipping its nose forward in the normal attitude for take off, the mingled blood of the dead ran forward into the cockpit and around Dick's boots.¹⁶ Pilot Jim Rider stated in a letter, "I think a lot about those young guys lying in that field. I flew a couple of hundred med evac missions in Viet Nam, out of 1,000 total missions. I got pretty calloused after all that, but that mission brought tears to my eyes."¹⁷

For the men remaining on the ground, those last terrible moments are also indelibly etched in memory. As the blades pelted loudly and the chopper lumbered slowly upward, Doc Mayton looked down from his grisly perch, and the expression on his face was one of profoundest sadness, as if he were trying to say to those below that he was so terribly sorry that he could not have saved them all.

It was a desperate, ugly, tragic episode, one like so many others experienced in that awful war. But at the same time something marvelous and noble had occurred. Ten Marines and Navy Corpsmen, at tremendous personal risk, had unhesitatingly exposed themselves in service of their fellow man. Together, their quick action, great skill, and heroism saved the lives of every one of the twenty-five wounded Marines. They came, and they came back, again and again, until their noble task was concluded.¹⁸

Their selfless heroism under such desperate circumstances was not to go unrecognized. One by one, all ten were decorated: Jim Mayton and Bob Abshire with the Navy Cross; Larry Bollinger, Shane Morris, and Jim Rider with the Silver Star; Jack Enockson and Dick Drury with the Distinguished Flying Cross; Frank Pfeiffer and C.W. Revier with the Navy Commendation Medal with Combat "V," and A.D. "Tony" Costa with the single-mission Air Medal. Three—Bollinger, Morris, and Rider—were also decorated with the Purple Heart for wounds received in the incident.¹⁹

The story continues. Jim Rider wasted no time in seeking recognition for his crew. On May 22 he came down to Hill 55 by jeep to ask, among other business, the A Company commander if he would consider recommending Jim Mayton for a decoration. And from the number of decorations ultimately awarded to helicopter crew members, he didn't stop with that single request. Bob Abshire's award, although he was recommended for the Navy Cross, was reduced later by higher authority. Appalled by the apparent slight, Rider appealed the reduction and, as a result, Bob received the Navy Cross he so richly deserved. After the war, Bob was accidentally killed as a Texas highway patrolman while in the act of rescuing someone else.

Shane Morris was also recommended for the Navy Cross, but his award too was reduced by higher authority. Unfortunately, the initial letter of recommendation had been based on incomplete information. Eyewitnesses who described Shane's heroism were unaware that he had been wounded three times separately, which fact made his heroism all the more exceptional and self-sacrificing. When the matter was clarified many years later, the Navy was contacted with a request that he be considered at least for the Navy Cross initially recommended—if not for the Medal of Honor, which high honor has been awarded to others for similar acts of selfless heroism. The Navy has not as yet reconsidered.²⁰ Shane, still suffering from his several wounds, has since been afflicted with adrenal cancer. Resolutely he carries on; he is one of the bravest Americans who ever lived.

Larry Bollinger might also have been slighted. Again owing to incomplete information, he was initially recommended for the Bronze Star, but further reflection resulted in his receiving the Silver Star he so richly deserved.

Many years after the war, Frank Pfeiffer added another small experience to the story. He even apologized that what he wanted to say might be viewed as being too trifling and personal to be of worth. After the wounded radioman had been delivered to the field hospital and the rescue at the scene of the carnage finally concluded, the gunship crew returned to base, where they, although still on standby, took a break. Later, Frank went back out to the chopper to clean up the mess. He found another, younger, Marine on board and cleaning up. Somewhat angrily, Frank ordered the young Marine out, stating that the ship was his, Frank's, responsibility. The Marine quietly told Frank that it was okay, that he and rest of his crew had done enough, that the crew of which the young Marine was a member had voluntarily picked up the standby. Frank's voice grew a bit husky in the telling. After more than thirty years he remembered this tender but seemingly trifling little kindness as vividly as the bloody and hectic rescue earlier in the day.²¹

In conclusion, surely the Vietnam War was largely an ugly succession of terrible mistakes. But almost as if in spite of this, many good men heroically and nobly served each other—and some were ultimately recognized for that service. This heroism,

nobleness, and loving-kindness, and its proper recognition, deserves consideration with similar acts in other wars as having contributed significantly to the preservation of this nation's honor.

Notes

¹ This story had its origins as brief tributes on behalf of two corpsmen at two Marine battalion reunions in 1998 and 2000. The fuller story then began to take form as more information became available from eyewitnesses who responded to the tributes. Although I was the commander of the infantry unit involved, and was present during the last minutes of the rescue effort, almost all of the details have been provided long after the fact by six of the ten splendid men who actually carried off the rescue. That is, this is not my story, but theirs. The story is told in the third person throughout. Properly, all further reference to me, either in the text or in the notes, is merely as the author.

² Why this occurred remains a mystery. George Connell, executive officer of Company C, stated later: "I cannot express my frustration when I saw the helicopters drop below the tree line and realized they were going to land too far north and on the east side of the river! I literally screamed over the net that my reinforcements were landing on the wrong side of the river!" Connell went on to say that he assumed pilot error rather than a mistake on the part of the battalion commander, giving as a reason that the battalion commander "promised . . . another platoon (this from the regimental reserve) and it arrived in the correct LZ a short time later." Whatever his reasons, the battalion commander chose not to inform the commander of Company A that his third platoon had been misplaced and was possibly in trouble, nor did he allow any discussion later with the commanders of either Company A or C. See George Connell, "Patrolling Hill 22," *Marine Corps Gazette*, July 1994, 57–58. For other published accounts of this episode, see Howard A. Christy, "Patrolling Hill 55: Hard Lessons in Retrospect," *Marine Corps Gazette*, April 1994, 77–83; and George M. Wastila, "Another Perspective—Action in Da Nang TAOR 21 May 1966," *Marine Corps Gazette*, October 1994, 42–44. Company C also suffered six KIA in the day's fighting.

³ Author interview with Jerry Simon, May 22, 1966.

⁴ Only sixteen Marines remained unhurt. Eleven men gathered in a large bomb crater and five in another. They were also out of communication. The platoon radioman, badly wounded, was lying separate from the others and alone.

⁵ The VC withdrew south along the river bank and straight into the path of Company A, which by that time had moved to the river and deployed north toward the battle. All the VC were killed, some in hand-to-hand fighting. This "victory" was purely by chance; the VC had also made a terrible mistake; in addition to expending all their ammunition, they had remained too long in one place. Company A's being in assault formation was merely a precaution, not because of any prior information that the enemy was moving toward them.

⁶ No rank is mentioned in this account. Suffice it say that they were all young men—junior enlisted men and junior officers. Whatever their differences in rank were made entirely irrelevant by the equality of their heroism and dedication to the lives of others.

⁷ Bollinger explained this to the author at a 1/9 reunion in 1998. Why did he remember such a seemingly trifling detail after thirty-two years? He remembered it because his ability to carry out *his* particular mission had been reduced thereby—by half, in fact. Had Shane actually been out of action so early, more Marines would have died. In battle, one always remembers, indelibly even, what is *personally* most graphic and important, not the full sweep of the situation—the big picture—which nobody sees or understands at the moment of crisis.

⁸ Interview with Lawrence Bollinger, July 1998.

⁹ Shane Morris to author, March 1998.

¹⁰ Ibid. Of this event, Tom Stubbs, senior corpsman attached to Company A in May 1966, has recently recalled: “I remember this incident very well, as I was with the first group to reach the third platoon and I remember that upon evacuation of the dead, I placed Shane on the chopper as ‘dead.’ Later it was revealed that during graves registration he was found to be alive and taken to emergency surgery before being evacuated to the states.” Stubbs to author, March 6, 2001. In a later conversation with Tom and Shane, this at the First Battalion Ninth Marines reunion at Las Vegas in July 2002, Shane, although repeating that he remembers having attempted to indicate that he was still alive, acknowledged that his attempt may have been so weak that it went unnoticed. Tom continues to hold that he triaged Shane as KIA and sent him out with the dead.

¹¹ Correspondence and interviews with Shane Morris, 1998, 1999, and 2000.

¹² Pilot Jim Rider stated that Bob Abshire “was a quiet, somewhat moody guy, on the second of three tours in country. He was a brave man who weighted everything, and still chose to put his life on the line.” Of Jim Mayton, Rider stated that he “was a happy-go-lucky, wise cracking, hillbilly who showed little respect for pilots, but he was touched deeply by the wounded men he rescued and worked on.” Rider recommended both these fine men for decorations. Both have since died.

¹³ James Rider to author, March 30, 2001. Regarding the role of medevac crews generally, Rider explained that “the crew chief assisted in getting casualties on board, and fired shoulder weapons when necessary. The corpsman performed first aid. Normally these crew members did not leave the aircraft; the infantrymen carried the casualties to the helo. On the A-1-9 flights, Abshire and Mayton just assumed that they had to get out and get those Marines on board. No one else was standing up in the zone, and many of the wounded were not close to anyone else who could help them.”

¹⁴ Ibid. Rider further stated that Enockson “was a ‘good stick,’ good at delivering ordinance, and had a lot of guts.” Of Tony Costa, the gunship copilot, Rider said: “He was a tough, former lumber jack who did not understand fear. He was not brave. He just wasn't afraid. He and Jack Enockson together represented a tremendous duplication of talent. I couldn't have picked a better gunship crew to escort us.” Rider has described the role of the gunship as follows: “The medevac ship (we called it a slick) was not supposed to go into the zone if the gunship was not there. When the gunship caught up, it would hang in close to the slick, ready to fire on any target engaged by the slick. The gunship was always happy to shoot at anything the Marines on the ground would give him clearance on, because that tended to distract the enemy from the slick. The gunship often acted as a decoy. When it couldn't get clearance to fire, it would make dummy runs on suspected positions. When the slick came out of the zone,

it was heavy and slow. That was a critical time, and the gunship would make dummy runs past the med evac, and shoot if it had a target. The gunship also provided airborne support if the slick went down, and would land and get the wounded out of the slick if possible.”

¹⁵ Interview with Frank Pfeiffer, August 27, 2000, and March 21, 2001. Before arrival of the medevac helicopters, the Third Platoon radioman, thinking himself the only one still alive, desperately reported his situation on the First Battalion Ninth Marines tactical radio net, which report enabled the commander of Company A to locate then move to his position. See Christy, “Patrolling Hill 55,” 79-80.

¹⁶ Interview with Richard Drury, November 7, 2000.

¹⁷ James Rider to the author, 1967.

¹⁸ The crew also picked up wounded and dead Marines of Company C, which was located just to the west and across the river.

¹⁹ Information regarding decorations has been compiled from personal files, official naval records, and correspondence with several of the recipients. The desperate nature of the events described here is further enhanced by the fact that several infantry members of Company A also received decorations: one the Navy Cross, three the Silver Star, and one the Bronze Star. About 40 men received the Purple Heart, six of them posthumously. Of the six men killed of Company C, nearby across the river, one was Peter Francis Meade, still another Navy Corpsman who unstintingly gave of himself that day—and whose decoration, like the eleven Marines killed in action, was a posthumous Purple Heart.

²⁰ The initial recommendation for a Navy Cross was submitted by the company commander on June 19, 1966. The essential part of the proposed citation stated, in part erroneously, that Morris “immediately ran to the nearest wounded Marine. Completely in the open and under intense enemy fire, he administered life saving first aid. Without hesitation, he moved on to the next, and the next, all the time exposing himself to the same intense fire that had struck down the men to which he was administering. Upon completing life saving first aid to the fourth Marine, he moved on to the fifth, and while moving, he himself was struck down, critically wounded, shot through the head.” The recommendation and attached proposed citation was forwarded, highly recommending approval, through to FMFPac, where on August 15, 1966, the Silver Star was recommended in lieu of the Navy Cross. CO, Co “A”, 1st Bn, 9th Mar ltr HAC:dlh 1650 of 19 Jun 66 w/ enclosures and 7 endorsements . The author contacted Morris in April 1998, and learned from him that he had been wounded three separate times, two of these injuries occurring before he was ultimately struck down with the head wound indicated in the June 19, 1966, recommendation. Multiple wounding was partly verified by Lawrence Bollinger during a personal interview with the author in July 1998. The author then approached CNO by letter with the information regarding Morris’s having been wounded three times, and recommended upgrading the decoration to at least the Navy Cross initially recommended on June 19, 1966. The recommendation was disapproved. Author to CNO (NO9B33) August 3, 1998 (recommendation for reconsideration); and J. D. Mahar (CNO [NO9B33]) to author, August 26, 1998 (recommendation disapproved). The author personally visited Commander J. D. Mahar at CNO (NO9B33) in May 1999, again asking for reconsideration. Commander Mahar agreed to reopen the case but stated that Morris would have to supply his medical records to further verify multiple wounding. The author requested Morris to produce his medical records. Morris was unable to do

so without considerable correspondence with the Navy, and, largely because of modesty and ill-health, he requested that the matter be dropped. He was entirely satisfied with the Silver Star, but he also felt that if Navy officials really wanted to reconsider him for a higher decoration, they would produce the medical records for themselves. In 2002, Tom Stubbs strongly urged Shane to request his medical records and recommended the proper channels through which he might go. Shane, in a recent telephone conversation with the author, reported that he had made the request and had been assured that the records would be made available.

²¹ Interview with Frank Pfeiffer, July 30, 2000. This remembrance is not unlike Bollinger's seemingly unimportant remembrance of Shane Morris being wounded on the left side early in the battle. Interestingly, that seeming trifle may now be important in determining whether Shane should be reconsidered for the Navy Cross. See notes 7 and 20.