
EIGHTEEN**Rappelling**

The next morning we ate an early breakfast in the mess hall and then worked until about ten o'clock helping the local Vietnamese, who had been hired as civilian laborers, fill sandbags. These bags were used to firm up the underground bunkers located at key locations all around the base.

At ten a sergeant appeared and gathered us into formation for our first class in jungle training. All together there were approximately fifty new men being prepared to join the companies out in the field. Under the intense heat of the mid-morning sun, he explained what we would be doing for the next couple of hours.

“Men,...first of all, let me welcome you to the headquarters of the First Air Cavalry Division in Vietnam.

You probably don't know it right now, but you've been very fortunate in having been assigned to the First Cav. This is one of only two divisions in Vietnam, and in the entire Army for that matter, that has the designation 'airmobile'. The other division is the 101st Airborne.

“I'm sure you're all familiar with what the job of the paratroopers consisted of during World War II. Their mission was to parachute from planes, behind enemy lines, and then regroup on the ground to attack the enemy. Well, that form of air assault was found to be inadequate for the kind of terrain we have here in Vietnam.

“Early on in our involvement here, several hundred paratroopers made a jump into what was reported as an enemy location. Almost all of them disappeared and were lost in a swamp that had looked like solid ground from the air. This caused the military to rethink the situation, and they came up with the form of assault unit that is now designated as airmobile. What that entails is a unit of men being airlifted, by helicopter, and then inserted into a location near an enemy position. This form of assault was found to be much more effective for several reasons.

“First, the troops could be deployed on much shorter notice. That gave the enemy less time to evacuate a targeted location.

“Secondly, they were far less vulnerable in the air than the old paratroopers had been. A man in a parachute had very little control over where he was going to land and presented an easy target for anyone on the ground with a weapon.

“And thirdly, the helicopters could furnish immediate air support, if it was needed, and supplies in the event of a long engagement.

“Behind me you will notice a sixty foot tower with a platform at the top. We use this tower to train our new arrivals how to rappel from a helicopter using ropes. Because it’s not always possible for helicopters to land in terrain where there is dense undergrowth or other obstacles, experience in rappelling is a mandatory requirement in an airmobile unit.

“Today we will teach you the correct method of fastening a rope harness around your body to which an “O” ring will be attached. At the top of the tower you’ll slip an anchor rope through the ring and rappel to the ground using only that rope.

“Now,...I know that tower looks high, and I can assure you that it looks a hell of a lot higher when you get to the top, but if you follow the directions your instructors give you to the letter, you’ll be surprised at how easily you can perform this maneuver.”

The whole time he was explaining what we were supposed to do from that tower, I couldn’t take my eyes off it. None of us had had even an inkling that we were going to perform such a feat. Like it or not, we’d have to do it, or die trying.

Each man was given a length of rope and shown how to fasten it over his shoulders, around his waist and under his groin in the shape of a harness. Directly in front, at about belt-buckle level, a metal “O” ring was tied to a loop in the harness.

Then, four men climbed the wooden ladder to the top of the tower. Once there, they each slipped a rope, that was anchored to the floor, through the “O” ring and were instructed to stand at the edge of the platform with their backs facing out.

The instructor up there explained how the anchor rope was used to control the rate of descent.

“After you jump, if you’re moving too fast, you pull the rope up close to your chest. That will slow you down.

“If you’re moving too slowly, hold it out away from your body and you’ll speed up. ...but be warned. If you panic and jerk the rope too quickly toward you, you may flip upside down,...so, whatever you do, *don’t jerk the rope*. Move it smoothly and gradually.”

With that they were told to stand right on the edge of the platform with their soles on the wood and their heels hanging out in the air. Then they had to lean out at a forty-five degree angle away from the platform using the anchor rope for support.

We men, still on the ground, could clearly hear the instructor's next directive.

“When I count to three, you will push out and away with both feet. One,...two,...three!!”

Three of the four men glided pretty smoothly down the rope and landed easily on their feet, but the fourth jerked the rope to his chest and flipped upside down. There he hung, suspended about half-way to the ground. While he struggled to right himself, there were fits of hysterical laughter from the men looking up at the spectacle.

It was impossible not to laugh along with the others, at that poor guy squirming up there.

At the same time, it also made us realize that, not only was the leap from the platform going to be a heartstopping experience, but flipping upside down and hanging there could be pretty embarrassing! And it could happen to anyone of us!

My turn came soon enough. I found myself leaning out from the edge of the platform. The thought occurred to me that one should never look down when at a great height,...but I couldn't resist.

If ever there was an understatement, it was when the sergeant had said the tower would look higher from the top than it did from the ground! After a few dizzying moments, in which I could easily see all the rooftops of the barracks and the men standing below, waiting for another hilarious spectacle, I brought my gaze nervously back up to the instructor.

“All right, gentlemen,...when I count three, you'll jump out and away. ...And if you freeze, I'll give you a little nudge with my boot to help you along.”

I knew he wasn't kidding. A couple of men before me had frozen at the moment they were supposed to jump. The instructor had put his foot to their midsection and given a shove. It goes without saying that they went off the tower a little more quickly than they'd planned to!

“One,...two,...three!!”

Surprising myself to no end, as soon as he said “three”, I took a tremendous leap backward. Somehow I felt that being shoved off by somebody’s boot would be just about as degrading as hanging upside down like a trussed up turkey.

Suddenly I felt the exhilaration of air rushing past as I dropped rapidly toward the ground. About half-way down I brought the rope toward my chest, praying, in the brief span before the ground got there, that this really would work.

Again, to my amazement, I slowed until my feet touched down as lightly as a feather. With a sense of deep satisfaction, and my stomach in my throat, I released the rope from the “O” ring.

The tension I’d felt prior to the jump was replaced by a rush of adrenaline with thinking about what I’d just done so easily. I and the others who’d already made it successfully, and who now realized that it was actually a lot of fun, gathered around the instructor to ask if we could do it again. We were highly disappointed when he told us that it was near to lunchtime and there wouldn’t be enough time for another jump.