

Jon Hoberg – One of the Good Guys

By Mike Miles (PJ 67-90)

I'm writing this article partially to help me deal with the frustration of Jon's premature passing, but also to let younger PJs and others know the caliber of one individual who earned the right to be called a "Pararescueman" or "PJ."

I met Jon Hoberg in 1973. He had just been released from active duty and joined the 302nd ARRSq at Luke AFB, AZ. He had come to Arizona to go back to college, but also, he wanted to stay in Pararescue. Although I had heard his name over the years, and knew that he had earned a Silver Star for the Son Tay raid, we had not formally met until then. He had spent a year and a half in recovery and reconstructive surgery from a helicopter accident which almost took his head off. (See below for a recount of Jon's accident.) For someone who had his lower jaw replaced with a rib, and only had half of a tongue, he looked pretty good.

He had no feeling in his lips, so you can imagine the joking he took when it came to dating women. Of course, he got no sympathy from PJs. Two weeks after he joined the 302nd, he walked into the Pararescue Section and there, hung on his locker was a toilet brush with a sign under it which said "Hoberg's Toothbrush." He was also tagged with the nickname "Howdy Doody" because it always looked like he had a permanent smile on his face from the reconstruction.

Jon attended Arizona State University (ASU) earning a degree in Electrical Engineering and a secondary in Mandarin Chinese. Oriental languages were always an interest of his. He spoke Thai and Vietnamese fluently from his three tours (two voluntary) in Vietnam.

As a civilian, I had been developing computer software for years, and one day, Jon asked me "Are computers hard to learn?" I said "Jon, for you, no." As a result of that conversation, he spent the rest of his career years as a leader in software development. The State of Arizona currently manages the state's financial investments and budgeting on software designed and developed by Jon.

For thirty-five years, Jon and I continued to work together as PJs in the military and software developers as civilians. He was there when my daughters were born, and as they grew up, they thought of him as an uncle. Since longevity doesn't run in my family and it did in his, a couple of years ago, he promised that if something happened to me, he would take care of my daughters and my ex-wife. He skipped out on me, and I will miss him dearly.

Note: For more information on the Son Tay Raid, do a Google search on the internet titled "Son Tay Raid."

Incident Report on Jon's Accident

The following is a recount of Jon Hoberg's accident as it was recalled by Jon over many evenings with me and many beers, Chuck McGrath (The other PJ on board the HH53 helicopter.) and the Flight Engineer (FE) on the Air America chopper that recovered him:

The incident occurred on July 21st, 1971. The mission was to recover a reconnaissance drone somewhere in Laos not far from North Vietnam. A single rescue HH53 helicopter (Jolly 54) was used for the mission and had the normal crew consisting of the pilot, co-pilot, FE and two PJs (McGrath and Hoberg). Jon as the number one PJ, went down the hoist to hookup the drone for recovery. While he was in the process of hooking the drone to the cable from the helicopter above him, the helicopter started picking up ground fire from Viet Cong that had moved into the area.

The helicopter was damaged so severely that it lost altitude, hit the ground, rolled several yards down the hill and landed upside down. (See photo) In the process of the rotor blades disintegrating on impact, one of the blades struck Jon on the side of his face, nearly decapitating him. The rest of the crew was OK, except for the FE who had some back injuries from the impact.



Here is Jon's recap of what happened next: *"I must have lost consciousness for a few moments, but I woke up when I couldn't breathe. I rolled over and got on my hands and knees, bleeding profusely from my face. I couldn't focus to see, but I heard McGrath yell "Hoberg! Are you alright?" For some reason I found that funny. I motioned for him to setup an IV as I proceeded to pick out teeth and bone from where my left jaw once was. We couldn't control the bleeding, and it was difficult to stay awake. I had to stay on my hands and knees to keep an airway. "*

In the meantime, the Viet Cong were getting closer. (Later at the hospital, the pilot told Jon that they were concerned that if it got real bad, where the rest of the crew would have to leave the area, they would have to shoot Jon to avoid him being captured.) Fortunately, an Air America Huey (CIA) was in the area. Although the Huey was low on fuel, the crew decided they would attempt a rescue.

“It seemed like an eternity before that helicopter got there. I kept wanting to go to sleep, but I knew I’d never wake up if I did. Besides, I kept thinking, If I ever met up with a PJ in the next life, they’d never let me live it down for going out like this. Finally, the helicopter came in and I climbed on board. Someone was holding the IV bottle, while I stayed on my hands and knees trying to keep awake. After what seemed like another eternity, we finally landed. As they got me off the chopper, I remember looking up at the doctor and thinking to myself ‘It’s all yours, Doc.’ That’s the last thing I remember for four days.”

Several years back, I had an opportunity to talk to the FE on that Air America flight. He said the only thing he remembered about Hoberg was *“Here this guy was on his hands and knees and blood all over the helicopter floor, and he wrote with his finger in his own blood “How long?”*

A special note: Many people think that the title “PJ” comes from the term “Pararescue Jumper”, but the title “PJ” originated in the early 50’s, when there was no such word as “Pararescue”. At that time, parachutists were unique in the Air Force. They didn’t know whether to call us parachute jumpers, medics, or what. We were finally tagged with the aircrew position identifier “PJ” for Parachute Jumper. This is according to Raleigh D. Curtis (RD) who lived it. (RD is considered by many to be one of the founding fathers of Pararescue.) In Jon Hoberg’s case, “PJ” means a hell of a guy and a true hero.

Quoth the Raven” – Raven being FAC in Laos. Author Jim Roper’s contact info is:

Hi, Chuck-

It’s been too long my friend. So sorry to hear about Jon Hoberg.

You have my permission to extract the story from QTR to spread the word about Jolly 54’s bad day. Incidentally, Bill Forsyth of (then) Project Full Accounting sent the logs and charts from Jack (SAR C-130) and JRCC, which combined with your inputs made the story as accurate as possible. I’m glad you are still safe. Please note my contact information below.

Kindest regards to you and the other warriors on Jolly 54,

Jim Roper

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