

A Little Piece of String - Moseley
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By Charlie Moseley

We were headed home to VTE late one evening in our old Caribou when the call came to land at 20 Alternate for an emergency air drop of ammo to some outpost about to be overrun by the bad guys.

What the hell!?

The plane and crew was not rigged up or prepared for an airdrop. No necessary assistant kicker, no nylon cut straps or parachutes. And, it was getting close to dark. How much candy did Fred Walker want for a Kip?

The "Man", Tony Poe, and his Hmong crew swarmed us on the ramp and he yelled a demand.

"Don't cut the engines!"

He was in a hurry. Heck, I don't think I was ever around Tony when he was not in a hurry. Yelling, cussing, demanding, begging, and patting on the back, getting the job done, right now! The "Man" was not right, smelled like month old laundry, and that ugly old dirty floppy hat he wore was a plain disgrace. We loved him!

The Hmong crew was quick and efficient. Even though we couldn't speak the same language, it didn't matter. Tony spoke many languages and could coordinate, praise and kick butt in all of them. It was a loud profane and hectic organization, but they could really get the job done, right now.

The roller system quickly came off the walls, was securely bolted to the floor and filled with old rotting plywood pallets from previous airdrops. Dozens and dozens of rope handled ammo crates of various types from .223 to mortar rounds were just as quickly stacked waist high on the pallets and tied down.

"Let's go, take off!" Tony yells.

And right back I yell, "Where are the parachutes?"

That stopped him, briefly. He gave me a big apologetic grin even as he was giving his crew ole "Blue Billy" in their language.

While the crew was racing back and forth loading the tightly packed bags of old condemned parachutes, Tony pulled a piece of cotton string out of a pocket and quickly wrapped it several times around my right wrist.

As he bit the ends off, he looked me in the eye and said, "You might need a little luck."

"Yeah?" I replied skeptically.

Tony and all the Laotian soldiers wore string bracelets on their wrists for good luck. It was pure voodoo to my Baptist trained mind, and about as effective as "The Holy Ground" at Horseshoe Bend for the Creeks, or bullet proof "Ghost Shirts" for the Cheyenne at Sand Creek. But something in Tony's beady dark eyes compelled me to leave the string alone.

"Can't hurt," I thought, but personally, I would rather have another clip of ammo in my foxhole than a so-called "Holy Man" or piece of string.

As we began to taxi, our pilot (Rick Byrne I think) calmly asked some most poignant questions into my headset.

"Moseley, how much weight do we have? Are those chutes any good? How many drops are we going to need?"

Improvise, make an experienced guess, blend into the situation and persevere. That "get the job done attitude and ability to do so under tough circumstances" was what made Air America tick and stand out from the rest, we liked to think!?

Rick is testing the mags and other things on the takeoff list as I calculate the weight and check the chutes. Our normal takeoff weight is 7500 hundred lbs. of cargo, but the amazing Canadian built Caribou can do things that make other aircraft look puny. The load looked and felt heavy, and who packed the chutes. Tony? While sipping Phi Bia joy juice?

The ammo crates weighed about 7500 lbs. each, 14 per pallet, 8 pallets = 8400 lbs, more or less, a tad heavy. Being a licensed smokejumper parachute rigger, I pop and examine all parts of one of the parachutes and find no problems.

"OK leader, this is the situation back here in the working end of this thing. We've got about 8400 lbs, on eight pallets and need to split it into at least 2 drops. The chutes look fine, but I'm going to need your copilot on the drops. Do you want me to kick off a pallet right now?"

He studied my info and ideas for a few moments before coming back with that wisdom and decision making ability he got paid for.

"Naw Mose, that pallet might be the one they need the most. Two drops sounds about right, but set up that first drop with a cut strap for takeoff, just in case we need to lose it. OK? And I'm gonna loan you Joe for the drop, but don't get his hands or clothes dirty, OK?"

"10-4 Boss. Give me a few secs to rig up something. We don't have any cut straps." (Slick nylon belt material)

I find a piece of grass rope in one of the panels; flip off the criss-crossed chains from the back of the first four pallets to go out, and stretch the rope as tight as possible across the cargo hold in a half moon angle to keep the two ton plus load as stable as possible on take off. "OK"

Rick is watching and begins to roll even as I pull my sharp cutting knife and give him a thumbs up hand signal. Burning daylight! Everybody is pleased with the operation and their part in it, so far.

20 Alternate is down in a bowl surrounded by mountains and requires a fairly rapid gain in altitude and/or almost a 90-degree bank to the right thru a narrow canyon carved out by a creek. It had a fine long runway, the late evening air was wet and heavy providing perfect lift, and even with the cut rope stretching and allowing the cargo to slide several feet to the rear, Rick kept adjusting and stroking that fine machine into a no sweat climb out. That was my kind of pilot. No heroics, no show boating, and gentle on the equipment and crew.

The DZ was on a high point northeast of 20A and close to the PDJ. A zigzag red earth trench system enclosed about two acres and a lot of nervous soldiers. Custer and Benteen would have given a years pay for such a fort at the Little Big Horn, or Greasy Grass as my Sioux and Cheyenne friends called it. Tuff! "We who, white man?"

I had the first load re-positioned, chutes attached, and the very uncomfortable copilot checked out on handling the front cargo chains by the time Rick inquired: "You ready?" "10-4." I said.

The flickering welding machines in the darkening jungle around the fort clearly showed that the interior of the fort was our only DZ. Rick was gonna use a tough lazy V drop pattern by diving down and pulling up as sharply as possible. "Dear Buddha, what a ride!"

When Rick stood the Bou on her nose, the lack of gravity plastered me, and the copilot, to the ceiling, and shifted the load forward. I clawed my way back down to the slack cut rope, cinched it tight with my left hand and held the big knife with my right.

"Coming up on final" came over my headset.

"Ready here" I yelled back.

The command of "on final" followed soon thereafter. The adrenalin flowed.

A few seconds later he pulled the yoke back into his belly and yelled "cut" into my ears. Too late!

The G-forces slam my face, body and knife to the floor. The rope is only partially cut and is wedged deep into the rough crates and holds taut as a piano wire for a couple of moments before the two tons of cargo prevail and hurdle down the ramp and out into the gloom.

Damn! Lost load!

And to think us kickers cussed Phil Snider for his violent pull-ups. On this day Phil couldn't carry Rick Byrne's jock strap. At least Rick didn't gleefully laugh at my discomfort, a little more class.

Some folks claimed that we supplied both sides in this war. We certainly did tonight, if a .223 round would work in the AK-47. Four pallets left.

I'm thinking, "Got to do a better job" It is really getting dark in the plane, but we are not about to light up a target for Charlie. He needs no help.

On the last drop I decided to improvise, and when Rick called out "on final" I cut the rope, dropped the knife, wedged my foot against the aircraft frame and grabbed the cut rope with both hands. "Man-handle the mother" and it worked, mostly.

On "cut" I flipped the rope away from the load and towards the open door. Mistake! A rough edge on one of the crates caught my leather-banded watch as the G-forces hit and jerked me and the cargo towards the yawning door. Bad mistake! I have never worn a leather band on my arm again, just can't stand the things.

The microsecond of blurred action took my watch, knife, headset and the cargo into the DZ, and left me with peeled back fingernails, but still in the plane.

Well, half of me was still in the plane. The top half had a perfect bird's eye view of the multi colored chutes collapsing into the fort. "Good job."

Rick now had the Bou standing on her tail as he sought altitude and distance from those flickering jungle lights. Charlie might just get lucky. Unlike the DZ action, we were now plenty high enough to get my personal chute open if needed. Sixteen or so months since my last parachute ride, and I loved it so, but not tonight. It would require a long walk home, with Charlie hunting me. Not my idea of fun. My sore fingers held a death grip on the ramp edge.

The G's and the severe angle of the climbing Bou would not let me back up one inch as Rick hammered down, looking for 12,000 feet. My mind is trying to reach him. "Please look back before you roll over."

Now, I'm not much into begging, and certainly not into praying to who, whom or what. But, there was plenty of time to remember Tony's piece of string on my wrist, and to send him a million thanks. I was also remembering that at the top of a climb from a cargo drop the pilots executed a "roll over" to level flight. Some "roll overs" more severe than others. Everybody in the back had better have a firm grip on something stable, because they were going to float around for a few seconds, and the open door is close, too close. My backward grip on the ramp would not get the job done. We had lost at least one kicker that way. He just floated out the door, with no chute on, long ways down. Gives you time to think.

"Where is the copilot? I need some help!"

Being the pro he most certainly was, Rick did a look back at my ridiculous situation and with those surgeon like hands, ever so gently eased the Bou over into level flight, allowing me to crab my way back on board. Thanks! I still owe him a beer. A cold beer!

The copilot was sitting down with his back against the forward bulkhead. He was a genuine first class mess from having thrown up and being slammed around the dirty cargo floor by the G-forces. We were both totally worn out, but he insisted on apologizing for not coming to my aid.

"I just couldn't stand to get close to that door." He gasped.

"No sweat Joe. I ain't ever met a pilot yet who could stand to get close to that door. To each his own. Let's go home. I need a beer, or two."

Irreverent? Me? Art Wilson was a good teacher and my favorite dude to wander around SEA with, and he would take a cut at the devil himself, anytime, anywhere.

Tony's little piece of string eventually rotted off my wrist. Why not? Let a sleeping dog lay.

Now, there was nothing even approaching semi-heroics on that flight. Taking care of our people and being able to overcome a little adversity was part of the job description. Anything less would indicate some fraud in the hiring process. At least the flight was not boring, and that's enough.