

In the Summer, 2001 issue of Pop A Smoke Ron Zaczek and I had a conversation regarding his struggle with PTSD which resulted from his service as a UH-1E crew chief in VMO-3. His condition and the therapy resulted in his classic book of the Vietnam Helicopter war, *Farewell Darkness*. In the book, Ron revealed that among other events, the PTSD resulted from the rescue of a 3rd Recon Team named "Breaker," attempted in a Huey slick. Early in the interview Ron stated, "We got three Marines out alive. We left the bodies of three Marines and a Corpsman behind. I've never forgiven myself for leaving them behind, even in death. Every Marine knows what I mean." He also made it apparent in the book that the three Marines that they got out would most likely not survive. I suggested to Ron that we do this follow up interview based on recent developments.

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**Q. Ron, it's now 38 years since the "Breaker" rescue. You have gone through therapy, written two books and probably come about as close to coming to terms with this long-ago event as one could. Suddenly everything has changed. The Marines you rescued lived after you dropped them at Khe Sanh. How and when did you find that out? How did that affect you?**

When I was in therapy for PTSD in the mid 80's, my counselor arranged for me to visit Marine Archives in Washington to try to fill in some of the blanks in my memories. During these visits, I discovered that the day after the mission, a Marine historian had taped interviews with Cpls. Jack Acosta and Dutch Holland, and Capt. Rodney Alley, all of VMO-3 who had been on the mission. Jack and I were in the slick that made the pickup. Dutch was a gunner and Capt. Alley was a pilot in the gunships that had been covering Breaker for many hours. None of the rest of us on the mission happened to be around when the historian visited, else we'd have been interviewed as well.

As I went through the Archives, it would have been easy for me to have learned the identities of the men we had to leave on the hill, as well as the identities and status of the ones we rescued, but I really didn't want to know their names or their fates. When you're in therapy for PTSD, you learn that some of the problems you have will go away in time, and others you can handle with coping mechanisms. Listening to Jack, Dutch and Capt. Alley helped move me along in therapy, but I couldn't handle knowing anything more about Breaker than what I myself remembered and what was in the VMO-3 tapes. Ironically, I never considered that writing a book which highlighted that mission would surface more memories, as well as increase the likelihood of running into others who had a role in the extract, principally the survivors themselves. PTSD can blind you to these things.

*Farewell, Darkness* came out in 1994, and I couldn't hide from the memories any more. A number of things happened in short order. Chaplain Ray Stubbe, who founded the Khe Sanh Vets Association, wrote and gave me more information about the Breaker mission than I really wanted to know. He sent the names of the four men whose bodies we left behind, and those we rescued. For the first time, I learned that the three we got out had survived, but I took no comfort in that. When I journeyed to the Wall to visit my friend Ron Phelps, I couldn't dodge knowing that James Neil Tycz, Malcom Miller, Heinz Ahlmeyer, and Sam Sharp were only a few panels away. In time, I got up enough nerve to go to the Wall and found their names, and without being melodramatic, reading them felt as hard and cold as the granite. Visiting the Wall and reading Ron Phelps' name has always been a comfort to me. Although I've visited Ron's grave in Michigan, I feel like I'm close to him at the Wall. But the names of the Breaker men were hard, very hard. I could only think about how we'd had to leave them behind, how we'd - I'd - failed to live up to the "Marine code." I wondered how I could ever face their families, who had been denied the right to bury their sons and brothers. Every reason I threw up for leaving the bodies behind - we were too heavy, the zone was on fire, the small arms were too hot - they all seemed excuses to me.

About the same time that Chaplain Stubbe sent the names, I received a phone call from a woman who said she had been Sam Sharp's girl friend. She had been helping Sam's mother for more than 20 years to get more information about the patrol from the Marine casualty office. She had stumbled across *Farewell, Darkness* – I don't remember how – and recognized the number of the hill - 665. She wanted to know what the final scene looked like up there. I told her about the grass fires started by the napalm, and how the living had raised a wall of dead bodies to take shelter against small arms and grenades. When I wrote about that scene, building that wall seemed the most natural thing the survivors could do. She accepted my description of the final scene, but having spoken aloud about that small wall of Marine and Corpsman bodies, I regretted that I'd included it in the book. Eventually, I'd learn that my book appears to be the only place where that scene is described, and sometimes I think I went too far in writing about it. That's the trouble with writing things down; you can't take them back.

In 1994 or so, I read an article in the Khe Sanh vets' newsletter Red Clay, written by one of the survivors – Britt Friery. Britt was writing in search of the names of "General Hochmuth's crew" that had rescued the survivors. General Bruno Hochmuth and all hands were lost in November, '67 when their VMO-3 slick came apart in flight north of Hue. Britt knew that "Hochmuth's crew" had rescued him, and assumed that the same crew that pulled him out in May had died with the general in November. VMO-3 pilots Milton Kelsey and Thomas Carter went down that day, and Ron Phelps was crewchief. The irony is that I switched to gunships after Breaker, and Ron went to slicks, each at our own request for our own reasons. So I guess Breaker saved my life. Go figure.

I had a brief correspondence with Britt, told him about my book and asked him if he wanted a copy, which he did. Under the category of irony, Britt told me he was in therapy for PTSD and that his counselor was a former pilot from VMO-3, Art Graff, who had been in the squadron during Breaker, though not on that mission. Small world. Britt stopped writing after that, and I was worried that reading the book had caused him harm. We had no contact for about eight years.

Lastly, through Chaplain Stubbe, I also discovered that Breaker's radio operator, Steve Lopez, had also been taped by a Marine historian only a few hours after we'd pulled him off the hill. Imagine that! Lopez was carved up with small arms and grenade fragments, and here is a Marine noncom (probably a lousy Gunny) shoving a microphone in his face barely off the operating table. I returned to Marine Archives and listened to the tape, now some 27 years old. I was surprised that there were no surprises in Lopez' account. I had used Acosta, Holland and Alley's tapes as reference material writing *Farewell, Darkness*, but I always wondered what things looked like from the Recons' side. I was glad that Lopez' account confirmed my memories. As I said, all this took place in 1994. In only two more years, Lopez' tape and those of the VMO-3 crews would prove invaluable in a way I didn't anticipate.

#### **Q. What was it like to see these guys again?**

On November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2002, I found Britt Friery's voice on my answering machine. His wife, Kathy, was next to him and I could hear her telling him what to say – he was so nervous. He was in Washington, D.C. at a reunion of Alpha Company, 3<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn. He invited Grace and me to their Marine Corps Birthday banquet. I listened to his voice I don't know how many times. It took me a couple of hours to regain composure, then I called him, and Grace told me what to say. We drove down and found the ballroom; most of the Recons were in tuxedos and I felt underdressed in a dark suit. I thought "Recons! Didn't think they could spell tuxedo," but I felt like the odd man out. I heard a woman mention my name, then answered "I'm Ron Zaczek." It was Kathy Friery. She came over, threw her arms around me and said "Thank you for giving me my life." Can you imagine that? You know, every jarhead reading this probably saved someone's life. I wish

everyone could hear that "thank you for giving me my life." It makes you feel like you're worth something, like your life has significance.

Britt came down, we hugged each other, and water started leaking out of our eyes. He's about my height, i.e. short, but no where near as pretty as I am. We sat at the same table and shared memories about the mission and our lives. He told me some things I didn't know, like an NVA had rolled a grenade under my slick after we landed and it failed to go off. The next thing he told me really shook me up.

Marine Archives record something that I always thought was a nice bit of fiction. It's claimed that when Lt. Dave Myers and Jack Acosta, and Maj. Charles Reynolds and I arrived at Khe Sanh, we "volunteered" to make one last attempt to rescue Breaker. Three '46s had been shot up with one pilot killed and a passel of people wounded trying to approach the zone; the NVA were using Breaker as bait to lure in the helicopters and fixed wing, all of which were getting hammered. I really don't recall Reynolds saying "OK guys, whoever wants to get these guys out, raise your right hand. Majority rules." But Britt told me something I never knew and still find difficult to believe. It's claimed that some heavy in the command bunker was in the process of ordering a napalm drop when the VMO-3 pilots walked in, basically taking the team and the NVA out and bring the standoff to an end. The hill was out of range of Khe Sanh's guns, but I've since learned that Lopez attempted to call artillery in from another base, and the gunners refused to fire on our own guys. I don't know if this actually happened, but it chills you to the bone just to consider it. So maybe Reynolds did "volunteer us" to make a last ditch attempt. I don't think I'll ever know for certain since Myers was killed a month later, and Reynolds died after the war.

After dinner, there were some brief presentations. One of the Recons, Dale Sare, who had brokered my reunion with Britt, asked Britt and me to come to the podium. Britt said some really nice things about me and what all of the crews did that day, then I was asked to say a few words. I was pretty emotional, and when I got to the stage, the only thing I could think to say was PopASmoke's motto – "the Best Medal is a Live Man's Smile." I don't think I ever thought about those words, each word individually. I think I saw it as a cute catch phrase. But standing a few feet away, there was Britt, smiling, and his wife as well. Britt and Kathy had adopted some disadvantaged children, and I allowed myself to realize that those kids, who had a life and great parents instead of being raised as orphans, all added to the "smile." And I let myself think that all of us who flew that day had a piece of that as well. I think that was the first time I allowed myself to feel anything good about what happened up there.

That's all I remember saying. The stage was high and my legs are short, so I looked down as I stepped off next to Britt. When I looked up again, every person in the room was standing, applauding two old dirtbag, scumsucking troopies. There were six Medal of Honor recipients in the room, and a former Commandant – applauding us! Can you believe it? One of the Medal of Honor recipients was Mitchell Paige, who earned his award on Guadalcanal. Paige led a machine gun section. When all the men in his platoon were killed or wounded, he fired a machine gun in one hand and threw grenades with the other, single handedly stopping a Japanese attack. He was wounded by his own grenades because he couldn't throw very far with a busted arm. Then he led a bayonet charge when reinforcements arrived. Before I became a baby jarhead, I devoured stories about Paige and Basilone and Boyington and Puller. These were childhood heroes to me. And here was Mitchell Paige, white-haired and tuxedoed, with that wondrous blue ribbon around his collar, standing up for us! Hard to believe. On the way back to our table, a woman caught my arm and said she wanted to thank everyone in helicopters for saving her husband's life. Wow.

Afterwards, when the banquet was breaking up, the guys of 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, Alpha Company assembled to take group pictures. I stood on the side waiting for them to finish, but Dale Sare came over to me and said "get in the picture – you're one of us now." After the photo with the Recon guys, I told my wife that I wish I could have my picture taken with Colonel Paige, and she

said to go ask him. Britt and I both said, "I'm afraid to." So Grace went to Dale, Dale went to Colonel Paige, and now I have a treasured photo of Britt, and me and the Colonel, who is now with Chesty on the other side.



**Left to right: Breaker survivor Britt Friery, Colonel Mitchell Paige, and the Snuffy**

Britt and Kathy, and the men and women of 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon are good friends now. Grace and I attend their reunions and joined them to honor Breaker in San Jose and Arlington. I'm on 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon's roster as a full member of the platoon. Get that, Ron Zaczek, Recon Marine. Frankly I don't think I deserve it. The Recons will always be real Marines to me, and I will always be f\*\*\*ingAirWing. I think to believe otherwise would be against the natural order of the universe.

Britt is the only one of the survivors I've met. Carlson and Lopez prefer to remain private, which is certainly their right. Still, I wish I could give them an old "Semper Fi" in person.

**Q. So that was Part 1 but now we see on the news that the remains of the Breaker Team has been returned and interred at Arlington National Ceremony. Please describe your involvement in this phase?**

In 1996, Grace and I went to Vietnam with Military Historical Tours, which specializes in trips to WWI, WWII, Korea and Vietnam battle sites. The host of our tour was Lt. Gen. Ron Christmas who was awarded the Navy Cross for his actions in Hue during TET, 1968. General Christmas had negotiated with the Vietnamese to recover our MIA's. While we were visiting Khe Sanh, I told him about Breaker and he told me about the JTF-FA, Joint Task Force – Full Accounting, now known as JPAC – Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command. Their mission is to recover the remains of Americans from all our nation's wars. General Christmas wrote a letter of introduction to the

Commanding General of the JTF. Thus began an eight-year collaboration between JTF and myself to locate Breaker's remains. Like many in our association, I have a room plastered with Marine stuff to remind me of when I was young and pretty. As soon as I learned about the JTF, I went to the Wall and took rubbings of the names: Tycz, Miller, Ahlmeyer, Sharp. I made a promise to myself that someday, I would frame those rubbings, alongside pictures of the ceremony when we finally brought them home. Yeah – I'm obsessed, but then my D.I. always said not to half-step.

As I mentioned, I had taped interviews from three crewmembers and the radio operator which described the terrain, and specifically stated that the survivors had been extracted from the top of the hill. I also had the After Action Report filed by my pilot, which listed the coordinates of the extraction on Hill 665 about ten clicks northwest of Khe Sanh. Lastly, I had copies of Chaplain Ray Stubbe's research on Khe Sanh and the hill fights. In late 1996, I made the acquaintance of Air Force Master Chief Jay Ebert who had worn an MIA bracelet with Sam Sharp's name. Ebert, doing his own research on Breaker, discovered that the original mission coordinates had been changed twice in Marine Archives: in the mid-70's to a location due north of Khe Sanh, then again in the '80s to a location north east of Khe Sanh. No one knows why the changes were made. Adding to this, a Recon author writing about the fights near Khe Sanh reported extract coordinates that were on the correct hill mass, but in a different place than the coords on the AAR. You can only imagine how difficult this confusion on the coords made it for the JTF to target an area to excavate.

In 1996, I began working with the NCOIC of the JTF, Chief Dickie Hites – a wonderful guy who was and is entirely dedicated to "keeping the promise" of bringing our guys home from all wars. The first thing I did was provide the coords and description of the extract site. The taped interviews all stated that the extraction was made from the "top of the hill," which Reynolds' coords and my own recollection confirmed. Nevertheless, when the JTF in 1997 went to Vietnam, to the best of my knowledge they visited a site on the lower slopes, near the coords provided by the Recon author. They found nothing. I believe I said something like "if they're too f...ing tired to walk up the hill, send this old fart (i.e. me) back." I had tried mightily to talk the JTF into taking me with them, but they said no politely, rather than explaining that they really couldn't have old farts having heart attacks out in the boonies. As we all know, there are very few months that are clear enough to do excavation work in Vietnam, so the JTF planned another visit in 1998. As it turned out, my wife and I were passing through Oahu on a vacation in May, 1998. The JTF invited me to speak to their unit. When I arrived, I learned that a JTF search team was literally on their way to Hill 665 at the very moment I was in Camp Smith on Oahu. They asked me to locate the spot on a topographic map, which I did, and pointed out some terrain features that were mentioned in Capt. Alley's interview. Chief Hites transmitted this info by satellite to the team. The day after I spoke at Camp Smith, Chief Hites called my hotel to report that they'd found the remains of four pair of boots, indicating four U.S. troops! I don't know which one of us was more excited.

Unfortunately, nothing further was done on Breaker from 1998 to 2003. Vietnam, as a developing nation, was building dams which would inundate valleys where MIA remains were thought to exist so the JTF shifted gears to work those locations. Chief Hites and I kept in touch, and one day in early 2003 he called to say that Breaker was now at the top of the list. He re-re-reconfirmed the data I'd originally provided and once again I sent fresh copies of the taped histories, etc. They recovered remains in 2003 and 2004. It took from 2003 into 2004 to finish the DNA testing before the men of Breaker were identified. The photos below give you an idea of how they excavate a site and return the remains to CONUS.



**Pre-excitation JTF photo shows where remains were found atop Hill 665. As near as I can recall, the large hill is to the North East, and our slick flew in from the right of the photo, departing to the left.**



**Excavation of Hill 665. Vietnamese laborers were hired to screen dirt. An artillery unit occupied the hill in 1968, digging trenches and littering the site with C Rations, uniforms and a Hamm's beer can. Bomb strikes on the hill threw dirt into the air as well, consequently the remains were buried quite deeply under several layers of overburden. Nevertheless, the JTF recovered dental and osseous material and matched it to the Breaker men.**



**May 2003: Photo taken in Da Nang of Breaker and other remains, locked in the small black containers, being repatriated. Once in Hawaii, the JTF was able to identify three of the four Breaker men. JTF returned to Hill 665 in 2004 and recovered remains that identified the fourth man.**



**May 2003: Breaker leaves Vietnam for Hawaii**

In summer, 2004, Alpha Co. 3<sup>rd</sup> Recon invited Chief Hites and the XO of JTF/JPAC to their reunion in Reno while PopASmoke was there, and announced that they'd conclusively identified the remains of all four men.

**Q. Did you get to interact with any of the Recon folks at Arlington or the families of the returned Marines? What was that like?**

Grace and I attended two Breaker ceremonies. We attended Sam Sharp's burial in San Jose CA, where we met his mother, sister and niece. Neil Tycz, Heinz Ahlmeyer and Malcom Miller were interred in Arlington several weeks later.

I was extremely nervous about meeting the Sharp family. Scratch 'nervous,' I was scared. Michael Norman's beautiful words, which we've heard a number of times in PopASmoke, guided me. *"I did not pick these men. They were delivered by fate and the U.S. Marine Corps. But I know them in a way I know no other men. I have never given anyone such trust. They were willing to guard something more precious than my life. They would have carried my reputation, the memory of me. It was part of the bargain we all made, the reason we were so willing to die for one another."* Once a Marine, whose name I unfortunately can't recall, told me that the memories we carry don't belong entirely to us, the survivors. It's as if we hold them in trust until

we can pass them to their rightful owners. So I had a responsibility to Mrs. Sharp, regardless of how scared and awkward I felt.

When I approached Mrs. Sharp and introduced myself, it was as if she could read my mind. First she said that she had never resented that any of us involved in Breaker had lived while her son died, or came home while her son did not. I told her what happened up there that day, and said how very, very sorry I was that we hadn't brought Sam back to her. She said she knew that we had done everything that was humanly possible. As we gathered the next morning for the ceremony, I was feeling pretty low again. Mrs. Sharp approached me. She said that if I shouldn't worry, that if I became upset or had a problem, to come see her and she would take care of me. I didn't feel like a 58 year old man, I felt like I was still 19 and it was like mom saying, "Don't you worry, I'll be there."

Before recounting my conversations with the Recons and family members, I want to set the stage by telling you about the ceremony, though any description really can't do service to the sense of pride and honor I felt as a witness. I especially want to mention George Neville of Alpha Co. 3<sup>rd</sup> Recon, and Bob Plame, Dale Sare and Don Schwinn of 1<sup>st</sup> Plt Alpha Co. Bob, Dale and Don organized the ceremonies for Sam Sharp in San Jose and George led the way in Arlington. All of these Marines from 3<sup>rd</sup> Recon willingly took it upon themselves to ensure that all the families' needs were met, all the veteran's needs were met, and that print and television media covered the ceremonies with sensitivity. These guys made both ceremonies happen with care and consummate dignity. All of us who attended owe them many thanks for seeing this through to the end.

The ceremony. Caskets for Tycz, Miller and Ahlmeyer were already in place on the gravesite as the families arrived, set about twenty feet apart in the full sun. In San Jose, Sam Sharp's casket lay open the evening before the funeral, so I knew that each casket contained a full dress uniform with decorations and the remains that had been positively identified. Most of the men were identified through DNA with as few as three teeth, but the JTF had recovered many fragments that didn't contain enough usable DNA for identification. These fragments were interred together in a fourth casket and since it was reasonable to assume that some of Sam Sharp's remains were in that casket as well, the Sharp family also attended in Arlington. A crowd of perhaps 200 waited in silence. A Marine band waited a short distance away, and next to them a rifle squad. Two Navy Chaplains resplendent in white full dress stood in the sun. A Marine Colonel and a Gunnery Sergeant commanded the detail, and an honor guard stood at the head of each casket. The wind and some distant traffic were the only sounds as we waited for the fourth casket to arrive.

We were in a new section of Arlington, and I tried to read the inscriptions on the memorial markers that would stand next to the men of the Breaker patrol for as much of eternity as I could fathom. There is a sad irony to the selection of this site; the Breaker patrol would rest in the company of those who died in Afghanistan and Iraq. Men of an age to raise sons, would rest next to someone's sons, who fought and died only weeks before. In some cases, a single large stone listed the names of those who died together, and as I waited, I thought about the Reno reunion and the men we inducted as the first Marine Combat Helicopter vets from the desert wars. A single large marker bore the names of seven Marines, died in their aircraft in Afghanistan

The closest relatives occupied a half-dozen chairs facing the caskets. Behind each family, anywhere from a half-dozen to as many 30 relatives and friends stood. Behind them more than a hundred people assembled. Sam Beamon, crewchief of the CH-46 that drew fire away from my slick was there. Dutch Holland who had covered the '46s, Breaker and my slick was there. Survivor Britt Friery and the men of 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, Alpha Recon were there. My PTSD counselor Tom Murtaugh, who had held me together in the long years of surviving PTSD came. Without Tom, I wouldn't have been above ground to contribute my part in bringing Breaker home. All of us links in the long chain that ended today. A fairly large group of TV and newspaper crews

covered the event but the Arlington people had them assemble off to one side and kept them from approaching the families.

Ironically, the weather was exactly the same as it had been 38 years earlier – fair with a cooling breeze and a cloudless, dazzling blue sky. A Marine band played the Marine Corps Hymn softly and slowly as pall bearers carried the fourth casket from a hearse, still covered by the American flag, and placed it in front of the Sharp family. I'd never heard our Hymn played so slowly, with such pride and sadness – sadness without melancholy or grief, and was unprepared for the depth of emotion I felt. Played so slowly and softly, the hymn carried the sense of 'home.' A great many ceremonies are conducted each day at Arlington, so Breaker's service was designed so that the families could witness one complete ceremony rather than repeat the entire ceremony in front of the family for each of the deceased. The pall bearers folded the ceremonial flag, and gave it to a Marine honor guard, in Malcom Miller's place a Navy rating. A member of the honor guard stood at the head of each casket, embracing a flag close to their chest with the star field pointed up. The Chaplains conducted a short service, followed by a 21 gun salute from the Marine rifle squad. I have to tell you that I start leaking tears as I describe what happened next, casket by casket in turn. We've all heard the phrase, "buried with full military honors" but to witness it is a deeply emotional experience.

Each honor guard genuflected slowly to one knee and bowed his head. He carefully rotated the flag downwards so that the star field touched the head of the casket, bowing his head slowly as he genuflected. The guardsman held the flag there for a long moment, then rotated it back to his chest and slowly stood, all the while merging a posture of military bearing with the homage and dignity of genuflection. I can tell you as a Catholic altar boy, I never saw so much respect and honor conveyed in the act of genuflection. In turn, each honor guard carried the flag to the NCOIC of the detail. The NCOIC carried it to the OIC. The OIC carried it to former Commandant P. X. Kelly who presided over the ceremony. General Kelly held the flag to his chest, walked slowly to the family and presented the flag. The General repeated this for each family, then the OIC, then the NCOIC individually approached the families and spoke our country's and Corps' appreciation for their sacrifice.

This concluded the formal ceremony, then everyone in attendance (except the media) were allowed to approach the caskets. I touched each casket at the head, and at that moment felt the weight of years lifting from me. Breaker took place during my 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> Air Medal and as I stood before each casket, I thought the mission was finally over, but I would discover in only a few hours I still had one last task to perform.



Former Commandant P. X. Kelly officiated, standing in a suit next to the two Chaplains in white dress. Commandant Kelly presented flags to each of the four families.



**Three who were there that day: L to R, VMO-3 Gunner Jim “Dutch” Holland, Ron, HMM-164 Crewchief Sam Beamon**

George Neville had arranged a reception on the penthouse floor of a building overlooking the Marine Memorial. As I said, the day was beautiful and there was an outside deck with a spectacular view of Washington. I spoke with the Sharp family again, but otherwise didn't approach anyone else. I was still nervous about speaking with the families. Several of the Recons, however, found me and said that some of the families wanted to talk to me. I started having brief conversations with several people, but eventually I found myself talking to a group of about 25 on the penthouse deck. Below us lay the Marine Memorial which inspired the men of Breaker – which inspired most, if not all of us to become Marines. Beyond the Potomac, under the living blue sky, the Wall held the names of Breaker and the other 58,000. It was hard to believe all this had come together, 38 years to the day, almost to the moment that we landed on that hill.

So I told the story of Breaker again. I told them about the napalm fires, the bunkers and spider holes that had us caught in crossfire, and all the fixed-wing and helicopter crews that flew that day, putting their own lives at risk. I told them about Sam Beamon on his 50 caliber drawing fire away from us, and Dutch Holland burning the barrels out of his M-60, and about Reynolds, Myers and Acosta on our three attempts to land in the zone. I wanted them to know how so many men in so many machines tried so very hard to return their son, their brother. I told them about getting Friery, Carlson and Lopez into the slick with their massive wounds and how helpless I felt. I described how Reynolds had barely been able to lift us off that damned hill, and that if there had been one more survivor, we'd have never gotten into the air unless one of us stayed behind. I

told them that I was so very, very sorry that we couldn't get their loved ones out. But I also said that in the face of so much that went wrong, and despite 38 years, that this day was the last and the best thing on earth that anyone could do in some way to bring them – bring all of us - peace.

In the middle of this, Dutch Holland came outside and politely interrupted the talk. Dutch explained that he had burned out three or four barrels that morning northwest of Khe Sanh. Dutch described how he'd covered us in his gunship and saw Acosta and I run across open ground to bring in the wounded. I thanked Dutch, waited for him to depart, then explained that Dutch, God bless him, had just given them the Hollywood movie version of the mission. I explained that we landed right next to the men – we owned our own helicopter, we could land most anywhere, so we did. Major Reynolds did put us down so that our aircraft (and the unfortunates inside it) did shield the survivors from small arms and grenades as we'd brought them aboard, but running across the open ground. Dutch! Never happened G.I.

I got a lot of hugs. A whole lot. Some people wanted pictures taken with me, which was nice. And just like Mrs. Sharp, they all said that none of us should feel guilty about living, or about having to leave the bodies in the zone. They all said their Marine, their Navy Corpsman, would have wanted us to do anything to get the survivors out and save ourselves. So it took awhile, but like my Marine friend said, I gave the memories to their rightful owners, the moms and dads and sisters and brothers. I even started to let myself feel a little proud about my part of Breaker, which I had barely felt before. That brief whiff of pride had always turned to guilt. But the biggest change, one I never expected – for the first time since 1966 I began sleeping through the night.

That feels really good.

**Q. Something in the back of my head keeps wondering what was more important in your life, the rescue, the book, or the return of the Breaker Team. If sleeping were a measure, I guess it was the return which seems peculiar to me. Three live guys seems much more important than 4 pretty minimal sets of remains to me but I ain't you and I wasn't there. You might want to think about putting that in print. I guess it is more a function of your mind but I don't need to go there unless you do.**

I can tell you precisely what's most important to me and why. Of the three, the rescue is least important. I was *supposed* to do that. We were all supposed to do that – save the grunts. Any jarhead in PopASmoke probably did exactly the same thing we did in our slick, or would have done the same thing. I have never felt that we did anything unique up there, and the only way I justify getting any kind of an award is that I did my job while at the same time controlling great fear. But controlling fear was also part of my job. The initial shock of the fire we were taking on our run into the zone caused me to go into sensory shut down. I'm not sure that's the same as "freezing", but it doesn't matter that much because by the time we were in the zone, I was back in control and acting like a crewchief.

I feel pretty good about writing *Soldier's Heart* and *Farewell, Darkness* because both books are in use in therapy and are helping Marines, Corpsmen, families, doggies, non-Corpsman squids and Greyhound bus drivers. Actually, it's a Greyhound bus crewchief that makes me feel best about the books. This fellow was an Air Force Huey crewchief with a background very similar to mine. Married, engineer, two grown kids. We had a telephone relationship for a couple of years. One night, he called me up, said he had a gun to his head and asked me to explain why he shouldn't pull the trigger. I'm not a shrink, but I kept him talking for two hours. Eventually, we discovered what had put him over the edge, and I talked him into getting rid of the gun and going back into therapy. He's still above ground.

But my part in bringing the remains of Breaker home is where I feel I went above and beyond and met the "highest traditions of the Corps," as it says on those gedunk Air Medals we all collected. In Korea, during the winter of the Chosin Reservoir, they say the Marines took out their frozen dead strapped to the barrels of their tanks. That's a piece of the legend that defines the spirit of Semper Fidelis. Many years ago I determined that the spirit of Semper Fi was going to define my life. I know it sounds corny, but there are worse models to live your life by. I've never said or written this before, but that image from Korea is a big part of why I wouldn't give up on Breaker. We couldn't tie the dead to our skids, and all we brought home were a few teeth and bones, but I never gave up. When I discovered that there was a shot at recovering Breaker, I put all my energy in it. On May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2005, 38 years to the day, I completed that mission. When I go to meet Chesty on the other side, I can look him in the eye and tell him I was Always Faithful.

**Q. You wrote that it was difficult for you to participate in this interview. Why is that?**

I have to say that this interview has proven more difficult for me than I had imagined. In fact, at one point I discovered that I really didn't want to do it at all! I finally realized that I'm OK with where I am now and I really don't want to look backwards any more. I realized that I was now having the same feeling I experienced when I returned from our 1996 trip to Vietnam.

We were in a hotel in Hong Kong with the 25 or so members of our tour group. All but one were veterans, and all but one were Marines, and we established some very strong bonds during our tour. We were waiting for a tour of Hong Kong to start, and talking about how great the trip we had, which it most definitely was. Everyone was saying that they were ready to go back again.

I was uncharacteristically quiet as they spoke, and when I don't open my big mouth to expose an opinion every nanosecond or so, I wonder why. I finally figured out that for the first time since graduating boot camp I was looking forward. I had spent nearly 30 years looking back, and now that I was looking forward things felt so good I initially didn't even recognize the feeling.

Eventually, someone asked me if I would do it again. All I could think to say was "I don't need to anymore." I've spent my life looking back. Finally, I want to look forward. I have the same feeling about Breaker. A bunch of people want me to write a new final chapter to Farewell, Darkness, which I've resisted. But as I put my thoughts in order, I finally realized that is exactly what I've been doing since Gunny Skinder asked me for an article for PopASmoke.

**Q. Were there things that did not turn out as you would have hoped?**

**Q. Ron, think about this: You served heroically in the war. This resulted in pretty substantial damage to yourself (and your family) but you managed to get through several years of therapy and actually wrote a book about the combined experience of combat and PTSD. Then you find out that the three men you rescued lived and even later, the remains left behind are recovered. Is this random chance or do you detect some sense or message in all of this? ( I personally can't imagine any writer scripting a more compelling story?)**

All I ever wanted to be in my life was a jarhead. That, and marrying Grace are the only things I ever did on purpose. Everything else has been by accident. I wish, like anyone else, that Vietnam had turned out differently, and that I could have stayed in for 20 or 30, call me gungy if you want. But I got to be one of the founding members of Scarface, a fine outfit, and become part of a great team with a great code of honor. For a while, I was lucky to have a life that most people just read about, no pun intended. Yeah, I have PTSD, but I haven't shot anyone in 38 years, not even those who desperately needed it, and I have 'way more good days than bad days.

I'm a pretty lucky guy.

Is this random chance? The outcome of the Breaker story in and of itself tells me this is no random chance.

*Here's the chain of events in rapid fire. Zaczek gets PTSD, and wife encourages him into getting help, then goes to Murtaugh who keeps Zaczek from talking a long walk off a short bridge, then contacts the Marine Corps who gives Zaczek the After Action Report with Breaker's coordinates, who writes book that Stubbe and Friery read who provide names to Zaczek who recovers from PTSD with Murtaugh and wife's help, enabling him to stay alive to go to Vietnam and meet Lt. Gen. Christmas who had retired only a short time earlier, therefore has the time to travel to Vietnam and is working with Hanoi to recover MIA's. Phew. Lt. Gen. paves way for Zaczek to work with JTF, who has been looking for Breaker in the wrong place In Country due to having the wrong coordinates times 2. The error is picked up by a retired Air Force Master Chief who was wearing Sam Sharp's MIA bracelet and does research on the coordinates. Master Chief connects with Sam Sharp's girl friend, who connects him to Zaczek, who resolves the error by providing the AAR and taped interviews of Acosta, Alley and Holland. Still, the JTF goes to the wrong place on the right hill so we do it all again. At last, the JTF goes to the right place and finds teeth with DNA.*

Take out one of the links in this chain, and the men of Breaker would still be on that damned hill. I don't believe it was random chance. I believe it was the hand of God with some help from Chesty.

The Lord is, after all, Marine.