

In Vietnam, a Soldier's Bond; When Americans needed rescue, race became irrelevant.

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In December 1993 I stood on the tarmac at an airfield outside Hanoi as part of a U.S. delegation about to receive the remains of eight American servicemen. As I waited, my mind drifted back 25 years to my time as an adviser in the Mekong Delta.

There was a special, unstated bond I felt then that existed among most Americans when they were engaged in combat. Simply put, it was: If you were wounded, under heavy enemy fire or if your life was in danger, you would not be abandoned by your fellow Americans. Americans would always come to the rescue of other Americans in trouble. These bonds might break down later back at base camp or when the danger was over, but as long as we were in combat, they held us together.

I saw my first example of this phenomenon while I was an adviser in the Mekong Delta in 1969 and 1970. We were the only Americans for miles around and were dependent on the Vietnamese for our defense. But when we got into serious trouble, all we had to do was put out a radio call that a "Uniform Sierra" (the military phonetic substitute for United States) was wounded or under heavy fire, and the response from the Army and Navy bases was instantaneous.

I remember one night when a nearby village was overrun by a Viet Cong unit. Three of my team members were trapped there in a small mud fort, surrounded and under heavy mortar fire. I put out the call to the Vinh Long Army Air Field and almost immediately two helicopter gunships were "on station" and in communication with our men, ready to put in air strikes if needed.

It didn't bother the pilot that he was exposed to enemy ground fire that could bring down his ship. It also didn't matter that he had probably never met any of the Americans down below or even knew their names. All that mattered was that they were Americans and needed help.

Shortly after the helicopters arrived, we received word that Navy boats were on their way to the village, even though they had to risk possible enemy ambushes on the narrow canals that wended their way there. The men on them had never met any of my advisers, either. Then two "Black Pony" Navy planes contacted us, volunteering to put in air strikes. At one point, so many American aircraft were around that I was beginning to be more worried about a midair collision than the enemy threat on the ground.

This instantaneous show of force worked. The Viet Cong retreated, and the only casualty was the team's mascot -- a dog killed by an incoming mortar round. As the various American elements departed the scene, there was a final parting word of thanks from those of us on the ground to the pilots and boat commanders -- people we might never see.

Strict radio procedures usually fell by the wayside at that moment and emotions took over when the people on the ground, who realized they probably wouldn't be alive except for this quick response, would say something like "Hey! You guys really saved our tails tonight." And the understated reply would come, "All in a night's work," or "Just doing our job."

These special bonds between Americans could overcome even the strongest feelings and animosities, such as racial prejudice. One of the greatest ironies of the war is that, while it caused so much division at home, perhaps more than anything else in our national experience, combat in Vietnam obscured, and occasionally even erased, racial barriers between blacks and whites.

This phenomenon might have lasted for only a few hours or a few minutes, and it usually came at the height of a battle, but the important thing was that it happened. I remember well the time a black soldier -- the radio man in his squad -- became separated from the rest of his unit, all of whom he believed had been killed. He was alone, in the middle of the jungle on a dark night, surrounded by the enemy.

After he informed us what happened, we quickly called a helicopter unit to come to the rescue. I can remember to this

day listening to the conversation between the white pilot and black soldier. The pilot began by assuring him he wouldn't leave him and would stay there until he got him out alive. Then, by a series of stealthy maneuvers, the radio man signaled his position on the ground. The pilot then flew close to the ground not only exposing himself to enemy fire but also coming dangerously close to the trees, which he could barely see in the darkness. Finally, after guiding the radio man to a clearing in the woods, the pilot landed and picked up the radio man. At that moment, all that seemed to matter to both men was that they were Americans.

There were many such acts in which an American of one race came to the rescue of another. I remember another one well, because it happened to me my first time out on patrol in the delta. Exhausted by the muddy going, I fell behind, slumped exhausted on the bank of a canal, and realized I was alone, with no one around except maybe the enemy, whom I imagined to be behind every tree. It was at that moment that the hand of Sgt. Bobby Chase appeared; he'd come back to get me.

Now, 25 years later standing at the rear of our C-141 Air Force plane in Hanoi, we Americans held a brief ceremony as we received the bodies of our fallen comrades. Placing an American flag on top of one of the coffins, I felt as never before that special bond that existed between Americans engaged in combat in Vietnam. We had all lived by the maxim that even in death we would not abandon one another. And here on a gray, overcast day in our wartime enemy's stronghold, we were keeping faith with men we had never known in life. No one asked if they were black or white, rich or poor, Christian, Muslim or Jew. The simple fact that they were Americans was all we needed to know.

The writer is U.S. ambassador to Cambodia.

[Illustration]
PHOTO, Ap

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