

THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE SKYDIVING TEAM

By MAJ(R) Roy D. Martin, Red Hat 1968-69

In 1968, the Psychological Warfare Section of the Vietnamese Joint General Staff designated skydiving as a military sport and directed the Airborne Division to organize a Military Sport Parachute Team to compete in military sports programs on behalf of the Republic of Vietnam. Unlike the US Army Golden Knights, the members of the Parachute Team did not have the primary duty to skydive, but it was an additional assignment to their normal responsibilities. All the team members were instructors in the Airborne Division Jump School. Major Tran Van Vinh, the Jump School Commandant, was responsible for training the team. Earlier, MAJ Vinh had caught the watchful eye of General Stilwell in 1962, when he was a 2LT in the Vietnamese Airborne Division.

I met Vinh at Ft. Bragg, NC when he attended the Special Warfare School. General Stilwell directed the Commander of the United States Army Parachute Team to invite LT Vinh to jump with the Parachute Team while he was at Ft. Bragg. Vinh was a highly motivated, intelligent, professional warrior. He had good command of the English language and was a good skydiver. Apparently, some of the American Advisors had worked with him in Vietnam. During his training he was a frequent guest in my home, which gave my family a chance to appreciate his charm and grace. I met him again in 1968 when I was assigned to Team 162, which advised the Vietnamese Airborne Division.

My first assignment in the VN ABN DIV was with the 3rd Airborne Brigade. Then in February 1969 it was my honor to work with COL Minh, the newly assigned Division Inspector General. General Dong recognized the need for a Division I.G. when one of the Vietnamese Artillery Batteries exploded, south west of Tay Ninh City - but that is a whole another story.

On April 1, 1969 General Dong, Commanding General ARVN Airborne Division, ordered the Division Skydiving Team to prepare for and participate in the Competition International Sports Military skydiving event in Barcelona, Spain in June. LTC Jack Nicholson, Deputy Senior Advisor, informed me that I had the additional duty to help prepare the Vietnamese Sky Diving Team for the C.I.S.M. skydiving competition in Spain. Also, that COL Bill Roop, Detachment Senior Advisor, would be freefall trained and qualified. The team was made up of experienced skydivers, but a major handicap was the short training time available. MAJ Vinh and I arranged several meetings to discuss the C.I.S.M. events and rules for competition. Another important consideration was that the aircraft, a Vietnam Air Force C-119 would require the team to take off from Saigon, but the Ap Don drop zone was 12 ground miles distant. This meant that we could only make one or two jumps a day. Therefore, we would climb to an altitude of 12,500 feet where the jumpers could make a 60 second delay freefall, perform a minimum of two series of turns and loops and practice their accuracy to land on the target. This is not the ideal way to train for a parachute meet! However, considering that our main mission was to win the war, this was the best that we could do.

I was issued an Air Force surplus 7 gore T-U main parachute with a 24 foot reserve and an altimeter with a stopwatch. I had no doubt that this equipment was in good condition. The aircraft available for the training would be a Vietnam Air Force C-

119, C-47 or CH-34, depending upon availability - combat operations always had priority. The Airborne Division would provide security at the drop zone.

Under normal conditions we would have practiced the jumps from altitudes of 2,800, 4,200, and 7,000 feet. However, considering the aircraft and time available, we decided to make all jumps from 12,000 feet. This would give each jumper an opportunity to practice two series and give it his best shot at the target. MAJ Vinh conducted ground training and prepared the team for the jumps.

COL Bill Roop, Team 162 Senior Advisor, received his skydiving ground training from the instructors at the Vietnamese Jump School. Since he had a strong desire to be a skydiver, he would jump with the team. On April 15, 1969 we briefed the Vietnamese Air Force C-119 pilots and went over the jump order. While, we were putting on our parachutes, my mind flashed back to November 1962. The 503d Airborne Infantry Regiment was flying out of Stewart Air Force Base, TN, to participate in operation Warm Wind, in Alaska. Just as one of the C-119 aircraft had gotten airborne, I heard the props start to feather as paratroopers started coming out of the clouds. The pilots and crew were able to keep the crippled bird in flight long enough for the troopers to safely parachute and then fly the aircraft away from the civilian population. Unfortunately, the plane crashed and the air crew was killed. I have often thought how much we paratroopers owe the pilots and crews of those troop carrier commands.

We boarded the C-119, took off and climbed to 2,000 feet. As we passed over Ap Don drop zone, we dropped the wind drift indicator, made a left turn to observe the impact and determine the line of flight and exit point. The pilots were instructed to make the second pass at 2,200 feet. LTC Nicholson, Deputy Detachment Commander, would serve as the "wind dummy." We continued to circle the DZ at the same time climbing to only 2,800 feet, due to the low cloud ceiling and limited visibility. COL Roop made his first simulated free fall. He had an excellent flat and stable exit; he pulled the dummy rip cord and landed near the target. We then made individual passes for the remaining 10 skydivers to make 5 second delays and practice our accuracy in landing on the target.

This was my first freefall jump since April 1968 and I was pleased to find that the skills that I had learned were present. After I landed, one of the local Vietnamese children collapsed, folded and bagged my parachute. I was always impressed by the courtesy, humility and politeness of the Vietnamese children. What a difference a few months makes – just last June we were fighting to clear this area of the North Vietnamese Army.

MAJ Vinh invited me to have dinner with his family. I was honored to meet his lovely wife and six children. The welcome was outstanding and the food was delicious. We drank hot tea and visited for a couple of hours. He showed me some pictures that he had taken in my home and pictures of the US Army Parachute Team that he had taken during his assignment at Fort Bragg. The brotherhood of paratroopers is a thing of beauty.

On April 23, 1969, we boarded the same C-119, dropped COL Roop at 2,800 feet and some other jumpers at 3,800 feet. We then climbed to 12,500 feet and made single passes to allow each team member to practice two series of turns and loops and an accuracy landing. MAJ Vinh and I had planned to make a baton pass for old time's sake, which should have been a piece of cake. He left the aircraft first and I followed; and then the problem started. He was dropping like a cannonball! I assumed a head down

position and finally caught up with him at 10,000 feet. When I flared to move in for the pass, he reached up and fell like a rock. The chase was on we repeated this procedure until we reached 3,000 feet and broke off the effort. We opened at 2,000 feet and landed near the target. When I saw the skydiving bat suit in the Airborne and Special Warfare Museum, I wondered if this failure motivated him to create the suite. Good paratroopers always learn from their experiences. The same Vietnamese boy was there for the "rescue" - I found out later that MAJ Vinh had arranged for this assistance. MAJ Vinh was one of the best, organized Warriors that I ever met. He planned everything in detail. I supposed that is why he was the Jump School Commandant.

On April 25, 1969, COL Roop made his first freefall parachute jump. His body position was perfect and the pull was smooth as silk. I had trained many skydivers prior to this time, but I never worked with one as cooperative and skillful as COL Roop. This time MAJ Vinh and I made a successful baton pass. I never knew why the cold champagne was on the drop zone that day. I suppose it was in celebration of COL Roop's first free fall jump. The Vietnamese were masters of ceremony, every successful event was worthy of a celebration. I was in complete agreement with this one. COL Roop's freefall placed him in the Vietnamese Airborne Division hall of heroes, which earned him the right to wear the Vietnamese Gold Parachute wings.

On April 26, 1969 I observed MAJ Vinh and CPT Hue pass a baton. The other members of the team continued to prepare for the C.I.S.M competition by making one or two jumps daily until May 7, 1969. We knew the team had done all it could do to prepare for the military skydiving competition. A couple of days later the Vietnamese Skydiving team was ordered to fly to Da Nang to perform a skydiving demonstration jump for Nguyen Van Thieu, the President of the Republic of Vietnam.

On the appointed day, we went to the airport to board a C-47 flown by Vietnamese pilots. In addition to the team, the cargo consisted of civilians, hogs, chickens and various other animals. We taxied to the south end of the landing strip, revved up the engines to maximum throttle and took off. This flight was beyond exciting - it was a disaster in the making. We flew over artillery batteries, ammunition dumps, cantonment areas, and free fire zones as evidenced by B-52 bomb craters. After a short while, I could see that we were flying up Highway 1 at a very low altitude and maximum throttle. I repeated the Lords Prayer and recited the 23rd Psalms many times. After what seemed like a very long time we landed, people, animals, food and all. I am thankful for a sovereign God that cares for foolhardy pilots and skydivers.

The big day came and the team was ready. The team went through the normal procedures, briefing, and inspection. They boarded the trusty C-47, climbed to 2,000 feet dropped the wind-drift indicator and then climbed to 7,000 feet. MAJ Vinh and CPT Hue made the baton pass on the first pass; two members did a max track on the second pass and a four-man formation jumped on the last pass. MAJ Vinh presented the baton to President Thieu. This was a great day and one that I will always remember. The thought occurred to me that this is the life of a skydiver. This was just one year after the Tet Offensive, which was reported by the left media to be won by the Viet Cong. Fortunately, the Vietnamese Airborne Division did not get the word; we kept thinking that we were winning the war. During the year that I was assigned to the Airborne Division I did not see one American reporter. We had been involved in some of the toughest and most successful battles and now we were celebrating with the President of

South Vietnam. Apparently, none of the success stories were newsworthy. Is there a pattern here?

The following day we assembled at our trusty C-47 for another exciting flight. Lo and behold there was a young Vietnamese Airborne trooper, my driver, complete with family, trunk and animals. He was wearing that sheepish grin that he always used to con me. When it comes to kids, dogs and privates I am no doubt the most vulnerable person in the whole wide world. This was truly a test of my relationship with MAJ Vinh. He was not a happy trooper - I could see the daggers fly from his eyes and smoke come out of his ears. If we had not been the best of friends he would have killed this little con artist.

We boarded the C-47; the pilot revved up the engines, flipped the ailerons a couple of times, taxied out to the main runway with max throttle again and headed south. How could it be that pilots can be so precise and safe when they are flying troops to a drop zone and so haphazard when flying to another destination? Would it be the bond between the troop carrier crews and the paratroopers? In any event there is no relationship between paratroopers and the chickens, pigs, and assorted other animals we were carrying. We landed at Saigon late that afternoon and the next morning I had a new driver and jeep. The team continued to prepare for the C.I.S.M Competition in Barcelona and I started to pack for the USA.

I had the honor and pleasure of visiting MAJ and Mrs. Vinh at their home on several occasions. They were true friends - he was a fellow Warrior and a brother paratrooper. We continued to maintain contact for five years. Sadly, in 1975 when the North Vietnamese Army captured Saigon, LTC Vinh was captured and interned in a so called "reeducation" camp where he was beheaded for resisting indoctrination. Thank God for the Airborne brotherhood that extends beyond this life. When I cross the Jordan River I will be greeted by that great warrior, LTC Tran Van Vinh.

Note: LTC Tran Van Vinh was beheaded in a "re-education" camp by the North Vietnamese for "resisting indoctrination! It is Vinh's signature on almost all of the advisors' Vietnamese jump certificates.