

The "Infamous" Water Buffalo Story
As told by: Roger Cook

Written by Gunny Sachs
Read by Jack Lodge February 3, 2003
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Close your eyes for a moment, and travel with me back to the springtime of 1966. Recall the images of that era: Lyndon Johnson in the White House, Ed Sullivan on Sunday nights, and a new issue of Life Magazine on the stand each week. One of the lasting mental pictures of the period is a battered Sikorsky helicopter carrying a bewildered, terrified water buffalo in a cargo net suspended beneath it as it flew over the verdant wet rice paddies and reddish brown rivers. American Marines working to win the hearts and minds of Vietnamese peasants.

This is the rest of the story.

Jim Aldworth had led the Marines of Helo Squadron 362 from California to Vietnam in mid-1965, and the ensuing months were nothing if not filled with what we have come to refer to as "learning experiences," those events and mishaps that we promise never NEVER to let happen again. One involved the unfortunate premature death of a mangy old water buffalo in the village of

Tam Ky. Whether the animal was hit by a Jeep, rammed by a six-by, or shot by an eager Marine mistaking it for the enemy, is lost to history. All we are sure of is that the poor beast was on its way to the great grazing ground in the sky.

Some enterprising sort - perhaps the Public Information Officer of MAG-36 -- got the idea that it would endear the Marines to the residents of Tam Ky if they would arrange to replace the water buffalo. A water buffalo is as essential to the life of a Vietnamese town as the general store is to the United States: it pulls a plow to grow the rice, fathers cows for milk and butter, and -- after years of doing that, provides beef and leather for food and shoes. So the Marines went into the little hamlet outside the wire at Ky Ha and purchased a bullock. Roger Cook, who had experience in both the cowboy country of Colorado and the rich ranch land of Texas, was selected to head the team to replace the deceased critter. Phil Turner, a farmer from Iowa and a couple of lance corporals took charge of leading the beast back to the flight line.

Arriving on the marston matting in Ky Ha, Ferdinand the Bull was docile. "How ya gonna get him in the chopper, lieutenant?" several troops inquired. "Not a problem, boys. I'm on top of it," Roger explained. "It's just like gettin' him into a cattle truck." He and a couple of guys from maintenance put together a ramp, and as Roger held a bucket of grain in front of it, the animal walked into the belly of the bird just as smooth and happy as could be. Old Willy the Water Buffalo looked around, bored. The crew chief -- it may have been Dick Houghton -- attached a couple of chains across the open door, and sidled past the hind quarters to fire up the APU. After a few final words with the Operations Duty Officer to assure things were set at the other end, Roger climbed up into the H-34 and Jack Lodge strapped into the left seat. By now the half-ton bovine had become so bored that he decided to take a nap. Somewhere in the archives of the United States Marine Corps, there is a faded black-and-white photograph of the Ugly Angels H-34 number YL 53, Roger Cook grinning like a pig in dirt, with a sleeping water buffalo clearly visible at the knees of the crew chief. Even the roar of the powerful Pratt and Whitney radial engine coming to life failed to disturb the bull's reveries.

Perhaps the air rushing through the crew compartment inter-rupted the animal's dreams. Perhaps the dip of hitting an air pocket jolted it awake. Perhaps its ears popped as the

helicopter gained altitude. We'll never know. But this water buffalo woke, took one look out the crew door, saw that the pasture it longed for was now twenty-five hundred feet below, and absolutely freaked out. It bellowed with a roar from the depths of hell, and recoiled backward to the port side of the helo. This, of course, caused the aircraft to lurch into a left bank, "What the hell was that?" hollered Roger, struggling to regain control of the copter. As if on cue, the water buffalo moved forward, throwing YL 53 into a shallow dive. "Houghton! Get that beast under control before we crash!" The next few seconds of chaos were mercifully ended when the crew chief, seizing the situation as only a Marine can, whipped out his .45 caliber Colt M1941A1, and -- waiting until the beast was right at the center of gravity -- dispatched the animal between the eyes; it collapsed. As they began to get their heart rate under control, and as they began the final approach to the Tam Ky, Roger and Jack realized they now faced a diplomacy problem.

Tam Ky is the capital of Quang Nam province. A wealthy town during the French Colonial period, it features a long green town plaza, lined with palm trees and punctuated by flower gardens, leading to a colonial capitol building. In front of the capital was a small brass band in white uniforms, a formation of village elders in formal attire - long coats and cummerbunds, the mayor adorned with a sash across his breast. It was evident that this was the biggest event in the political life of Tam Ky in a long time. Roger landed, quickly kicked the dead animal out of the helicopter, immediately took off, and climbed to altitude. The whole thing took maybe twelve seconds.

Three days later, as Roger was returning to the tent that served as the Ugly Angels' Ready Room, he was told to report without delay to the Group Commander's office. Don't change your clothes, don't shave, just get your duff up there most skosh. He hurried. He hammered on the pine and was told to enter. The colonel stood behind his desk. Beside the desk stood an entourage of four Vietnamese. The sergeant major looked stern; the colonel spoke. "Mayor Cao, this is First Lieutenant Cook. Lieutenant, this gentleman is Mayor Nguyen Lan Cao of Tam Ky. He wishes to speak to us, and thought it appropriate that you hear what he has to say."

In halting and broken English, but with undiminished dignity, the mayor alternated eye contact with the colonel and Cook. "Is very generous of American Marines to offer to village of Tam Ky replacement of old, decrepit carabao sadly killed by Marines by young and strong water buffalo. Is sad, however. Village hoped the replacement of old dead water buffalo would be a living water buffalo, rather than young dead animal."

Always thinking, Roger saw the light go on over his head. He broke the position of attention, rose his arms in a gesture of victory, and leaped into action. "A living buffalo? They wanted a living one? Hell, colonel, we can do that! We must have mis-understood! We can take care of this with no problem!"

Well they did. But never again did a Marine pilot carry a living farm animal that size inside a helicopter. The world's lasting image of Marines winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese -- a water buffalo suspended beneath an H-34 -- was the result of Roger Cook's harrowing experience in the air, and his quick thinking under the scrutinizing eyes of an angry colonel.