

### 39 YEARS LATER

Every time the 6<sup>th</sup> of April rolls around my thoughts turn to that incident in far away Laos those many years ago. The North Vietnamese had given Harry Duensing and myself a rather rude invitation to take a hike on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It was nip and tuck for a while and, being pursued and surrounded, I thought for sure we would wind up as guests at the Hanoi Hilton or something worse!! I will never forget the image of Jolly Green 54 hovering above us and lowering a cable giving us a new lease on mortality.

John F. Guilmartin Jr., now Doctor Guilmartin, a Professor of History at Ohio State University, was the copilot on Jolly Green 54. Many years later, with the help of Mr. Tim Nash, a telephone contact was made. Until this year contacts have always been phone conversations and Christmas cards.

During all of these years I have had a fantasy or a compelling desire of seeing "Joe" Guilmartin and others thanked publically for their life saving efforts. But how could something like this ever happen?

Surfing the Internet one day I came across the Jolly Green web site and discovered that not only was Joe a member of their association he was also a previous president.

I sent an E-Mail to Mr. Lee T. Massey, this year's reunion director, and asked if someone could mention the rescue mission in one of their public meetings. Lee then forwarded my request to Joe Panza and Barry Kamhoot, the previous and current president of the Jolly Green Association. I really didn't expect a response let alone an invitation to attend by Mr. Panza. I am grateful to Barry Kamhoot for his willingness and enthusiasm in setting up a surprise for Joe Guilmartin.

I flew to Pensacola, Florida and drove to Fort Walton Beach on Thursday the 28<sup>th</sup> of April. This surprise was not scheduled until the next evening during an open house meeting. At first I didn't know a soul and couldn't tell anybody who I was or why I was there.

Finally the time came Friday evening and I was a bit nervous not knowing how well this thing would go. On the way up to the top floor in the elevator there were two women. Would you believe one of them was Lore Guilmartin, Joe's wife? She looked at me and I looked at her and neither of us said a word. I saw her again just before the surprise. I wanted to make sure that this type of event was something that would go well with Joe so I told her who I was and what was going to happen. Her big hug assured me all would be well.



Barry Kamhoot asked everybody to gather around for some business. He then asked Joe to come to the podium and proceeded to read the E-Mail I had sent which briefly described the events of 6 April 66. Barry then asked Joe where this guy, me, was. Just as Joe was saying "well he is out in Utah" I walked up to the podium, shook his hand and gave him a well deserved hug! What a warm and kind response I received and suddenly all of the fears and worries were gone. I was given a few minutes to address the association members there gathered and thanked them for the "service" rendered by the Jolly Greens. In case some reader doesn't know, a Jolly Green Giant is an air-sea rescue helicopter. This action was to honor Joe but then came the totally unexpected honor to me. Joe returned to the podium and declared me an honorary member of the Jolly Green Association. I assure you I can be loyal to two great organizations, theirs and ours!!

During this reunion several other rescuer-rescue scenarios were honored with survivors from the SS Mayaquez and an incident in Iraq present. Jerry Singleton, a former POW, spoke to the association. He had been shot down near Hanoi, was captured, and spent seven years as a guest of the Hanoi Hilton. The keynote speaker at the banquet was Mr. Gene Kranz, NASA's control officer for the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo missions and the man in charge during the Apollo 13 rescue mission. What an honor it was to meet him and to get a picture taken at his side.

The story is not over and the search for the remains of James Gates and John Lafayette continues even to this day. I remain in contact with people at the Data Casualty Center in Hawaii. They tell me that another attempt to locate the graves will be conducted in June or July of this year. This time two North Vietnamese Colonels who supervised the burial will be going with the team. I also remain in contact with the families of both of these men. I hope for their peace of mind that the search will be successful.

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Hello George!

Would you take a look at the enclosed material and see if you think it would be of interest to the association and maybe include it in one of the newsletters? It's a follow-up to an article printed in issue # 29 of the Mohawker.

None of the photos need to be returned and may be discarded or kept for unit history purposes. You could save them and bring them to the reunion but it is not necessary.

All of these photos were taken on the night of 29 April 2005 in Fort Walton Beach, Florida.

I was talking to Chuck Schall a couple of days ago and he thought this adventure of mine in Florida was fun and exciting and worth mentioning.

This man Gene Kranz who spoke at their reunion might be persuaded to speak at one of our reunions in the future. His speech was captivating. If any of the association directors think this would be desirable I could give you names and phone numbers of who to contact. It is just a thought.

If you need for any reason to contact me please do so. Thanks.

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Larry K. Johnson and rescuer  
Joe Guilmartin, Photo taken  
39 years, 23 days and about  
3 hours after our first en-  
counter a few feet above the  
ground in southern Laos. Joe  
was the co-pilot on Jolly Green 54  
The figure to the right is their  
association's symbol, a jolly  
green giant.

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