

Opinion

My Turn: John M. Boehnert: Raw courage of Americans at war

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I watched as the two American advisers jumped off one of the many helicopters unloading Vietnamese Rangers. It was late 1969 or early 1970 in Vietnam's Central Highlands.

The American advisers, a senior NCO and an officer, were elite Army Rangers. They were top professionals. Given the circumstances, that was important. As they approached, I thought about how our fates had become so intertwined in a few short hours.

I was serving as one of two American advisers to a Vietnamese Army (ARVIN) infantry battalion. That morning, Tony and I had been ordered to accompany our ARVIN counterparts on a search-and-rescue; a helicopter had gone down with senior Vietnamese officers on board.

The area was dense jungle, a day-and-a-half slog from our location.

As advisers, we could decline an operation, since the Vietnamese made the final decision on a mission. Usually we could talk them out of something that made no sense, but with senior Vietnamese officers at risk, we knew reason would not prevail.

Tony asked what I thought. I thought it was dumber than hell. Even in the unlikely event anyone survived the crash, the area was infested with the enemy. Any survivors were probably prisoners, and there was a high likelihood of ambush.

As we talked about declining, I realized we were in a box. If we refused to go, our Vietnamese counterparts would not go, because we controlled artillery, air strikes and medevacs. Another unit and their advisers would go.

I told Tony it was a mission that should be refused, but the effect of that would be sending someone else in our place, and I did not want that responsibility. He agreed, and we started preparing our gear to move out.

The Rangers were to assume our current perimeter defense position while we went on the search-and-rescue.

Just hours before the Ranger battalion arrived, headquarters decided the Rangers should do the search-and-rescue since they were already on the move. We were told to hold our position.

I stood on the side of the wooded path that the Ranger battalion would take as it moved north.

As each adviser passed by me, I said nothing; I just nodded. Each of the two advisers nodded in return; neither said anything.

I looked into their eyes as they approached, and I saw the same thing. I saw recognition; they knew it was a high-risk mission for little potential benefit. I also saw resolve; they knew what they had to do, and they were going to get on with it.

Tony and I were the last Americans to see those two Ranger advisers alive.

We heard later that both advisers had been killed. Many of the Vietnamese Rangers had been killed or wounded, and no one from the helicopter was rescued.

What I saw in the eyes of those two American Rangers was courage. The courage to put one foot in front of the other on a wooded trail that would turn into a jungle path that would turn into a fatal encounter with the enemy — all the time knowing of the risks but moving forward nonetheless.

It is a courage I saw time and time again during my two tours in Vietnam, almost on a daily basis. It is the courage to jump off a helicopter into what might be a “hot” landing zone. It is the courage to pull point on patrol, the lead man out front, in dense jungle or open rice paddies frequented by the enemy. It is the courage to shoulder your rucksack and weapon and head out on the next operation.

It is not the type of courage for which they give medals, but perhaps they should.

If you know someone who served in combat, the overwhelming likelihood is that you know a person of courage. You may want to keep that in mind. Such recognition may be more important than a medal.

John M. Boehnert, an occasional contributor, practices real estate and environmental law in Providence.