

"Joe Dilger Story"

By Bob Carr

Written by Eugene Luning

There are some men who refuse to die and then there are some men, too, who refuse to live life only for themselves. It is my honor and pleasure, this issue, to write of a man who is both of these things. Lieutenant Joe Dilger.

I first met the lieutenant in the late Fall of 1967. I was in the Central Highlands at LZ Uplift and had just come down for a last-light insertion. It certainly wasn't my first. But it was for Joe. And he was going to be in the Command/Control slick that night. And I remember seeing he didn't have his M-16. So I asked him about it. "I've got my weapon right here," he replied. He was referring to the .45 on his hip.

We dropped into our LZ that night and everything looked proper. The chopper pulled up quickly from between the trees. And, just as soon as that, we were in contact with the enemy. A platoon's worth, I figured. And I remember hearing the sound of the C/C slick overhead and the unfamiliar sound of a handgun up there in the near-darkness. Yes, that's right. Lieutenant Joe Dilger, laying on the floorboard on his stomach, unloading his .45 into the darkened jungle. I remember radioing up in the midst of the firefight, "Well done, John Wayne." But he got us out that night and that's all that mattered. And he never forgot his M-16 again.

Four or five missions later, we got dropped into an LZ in the Sui-Ca Valley. It was another last-light and there were four Americans and two yards of us altogether. The drop was clean. We zig-zagged out ten minutes and then stopped for our listening halt. I remember the yards starting to talk rapidly. "What's the matter?," I asked them. "Beaucoup VC," they replied. And they were right. So we kept on moving for more than an hour and I remember the fresh trails we kept coming across. So we set up an NDP in the darkness and laid out the Claymores. We knew they were close but we still hadn't seen them.

And then I heard the lieutenant's voice on the radio.

"Be advised," he said. "You have thirty minutes to get back to the LZ."

"It took us an hour and a half to get to where we are," I replied.

"You don't have a choice," he said. "Do not get compromised."

It turned out there was a full enemy regiment in the area that night. Brigade Intel had failed to pass along the word to the lieutenant until we were already on the ground. But as soon as he heard, he got us extracted. He always did. Lieutenant Joe Dilger always thought of his men first.

And then there was the night south of LZ Pedro, another last-light in the DMZ. That night, the pilot of our slick was new and he was afraid of the size of the designated LZ. When he balked, the lieutenant was all over him on the radio. But the pilot still set us down in the middle of a huge field, hundreds of yards from the tree-line. We were forced to cross a trail we'd been sent to watch. About as compromised as you could be.

At the tree-line, I radioed the lieutenant. I explained our situation. He agreed it was bad, but said we had to head for another LZ. I remember crawling on our bellies into a thicket and setting up our NDP. We weren't far off-grid and I could tell from a hill above us that we weren't far from the new LZ.

Twenty minutes later, we picked up movement. By squelches, I kept the lieutenant up to speed on the situation. We were counting NVA lanterns coming over the hilltop trail. One lantern for each five men. We counted seventy-five lanterns. They were probing near, hoping to draw fire.

Then one of them tripped a Claymore wire and so we blew them all. We busted through up the hill, set up a defensive position, and, within thirty minutes, the lieutenant had us pulled. He'd been working toward our extraction since my first call at the tree-line. He was always thinking of his men's welfare.

On April 20, 1968, Lieutenant Joe Dilger was the first man on the ground to clear an LZ at Signal Hill in the A-Shau Valley. They had to repel off the slicks to get in. Behind him, the second chopper lost power and most of the men onboard were thrown clear. Except for Sergeant Larry Curtis. He was thrown on his back and the skid of the chopper landed on his chest. He was saved only by the softness of the mud and the size of his pack.

Quickly, the lieutenant set up a perimeter with the eleven available men on the ground. But they started taking fire almost immediately. Turbitt, Lambert, and Noto were all killed during that first day of the fight. And, at some point, Lieutenant Joe Dilger was struck in the upper chest by an SKS round. The entry wound was no bigger than your pinkie finger. But the exit wound was enormous.

I was the one called in to identify the body. I remember walking in and seeing the lieutenant on the gurney. I didn't want to remember him that way. So I did my job, signed off his death on the log-book, and then got out of there as fast as I could. I believe that was April the 22nd, 1968.

In 1991, I received a phone call from my old team leader, Seymour.

He asked, "Do you remember Joe Dilger?"

I replied, "Of course I do. He was a great man. I had to identify his body."

There was a pause on the line.

"Well, Bob," Seymour said, "from one NCO to another, you sure didn't do a very damn good job. 'Cause Joe just walked into our reunion. Alive and well, Bob."

I literally dropped the phone on the floor.

Two weeks later, I was fortunate enough to get Joe Dilger on the phone at his mother's house in Louisville. I will never forget that conversation.

And I will never forget last year's reunion in Louisville. I remember talking to Parkinson before I flew out and him telling me that some anonymous benefactor had set us up for a prime-rib riverboat cruise. 74 of us. And that anonymous benefactor was none other than Lieutenant Joe Dilger.

It is difficult to sum up my thoughts about this great man. But here's my try: If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be here today. Nor would Doug Parkinson. Nor would Bob Ankony. Lieutenant Joe Dilger was a total leader. He was a man who not only refused to die; he was a man who refused to live life only for himself.

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