

39 YEARS LATER

Every time the 6th 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 28th 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.