

Journal of Special Operations Medicine

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Winter Training



Dedicated to the Indomitable Spirit & Sacrifices of the SOF Medic



In December, the SOF medics met at the Special Operations Medical Association (SOMA) Conference, and again it was an opportunity to meet old friends and colleagues. We gained new insights, saw new technologies and shared experiences. It was a great success and will continue into the future.

One of the highlights of the conference was the address by 1Lt (ret) James DeVoss from Grand Rapids, Michigan entitled “Thanks For My Everything.” He is an old friend from my undergraduate college days who went off to “fly jets” when I went off to Medical School. He joined the USAF and ultimately was assigned to Vietnam as an F-105 pilot (an aircraft affectionately called The Thud). In June 1969, while flying over North Vietnam his aircraft was hit by ground fire and disabled. Lt DeVoss had to “punch out” at a speed in excess of 600 mph. His injuries at this speed were multiple and significant as you can imagine. His left arm was severely fractured and dislocated behind his torso such that he wasn’t sure he retained it through the ejection sequence. The windblast broke and severely dislocated his knees and lower legs rendering them useless. His parachute carried him into a bamboo patch and his torso and extremities were impaled by it. Once conscious, he found his right hand and arm to be functional and all the training he had was recalled, allowing him to key his survival radio and summon help.

In those days, America dedicated a task-force capability to the recovery of our pilots. The pilots flew close to the “edge of the envelope” knowing that this dedicated force was there to bring them home. On this day, the “King-Bird”, the “Sandies”, the “FACs” and the “Jolly Green Giants” showed up for him like they had for so many others. The team cleared the area, the helicopter found him and the PJs deployed down the hoist to get him. They recovered him, rendered necessary aid, put him in the recovery basket, hoisted him aboard the helicopter and took him to the care he required. Once back at the base he was handed over to the hospital folks. The rescue folks then went to ready themselves for the next “Save”.

After months of medical care, multiple operations, numerous hospitals from Vietnam, through Clark AFB to CONUS and ultimately back home, Lt DeVoss’ focus was to try walking again and to learn how to use his injured arm with a goal to return to flying and his USAF career. Within the next 5 years he was successful in getting on his feet and out of the leg braces and back to a reasonably normal life. It became apparent though, that his medical retirement would be permanent and so he went about readjusting to civilian life. He completed his Masters Degree and has enjoyed a very successful career.

In the past 30 years he also was a motivational speaker to literally thousands of folks. He told them his story of flying, his rescue, and all the folks along that chain of events who dedicated themselves to his preservation and life—from the flying instructors, the SERE instructors, the aircraft and crews of his rescue, the PJs who hoisted him out of the jungle, the medical technicians, the doctors, the nurses, the VA folks and all those along the way that brought him back and gave him back his life. On this day at SOMA he was able, for the first time, to address folks that are descendents of the rescue tradition and his thanks were sincere, from the heart and touching. He thanked us for his marriage of over 30 years, for his two children and for all his successes. His oldest child is a Ph.D. Professor at Michigan State University and his youngest is finishing his Ph.D. in Immunology at Stanford University.

His one regret was that he had tried in vain to find any of the crewmembers who engineered that save in 1969. He tried for years without success. So, he relished the idea of thanking us in the audience in their place, for we too were dedicated to the motto “That Others May Live.” Little known to him, we had checked with the “PJ Mafia” and asked if we could find anyone from that rescue. They responded with success and we smuggled into the meeting TSgt (ret) Lorenzo Willis from Satellite Beach, Florida. After Mr. DeVoss finished, we

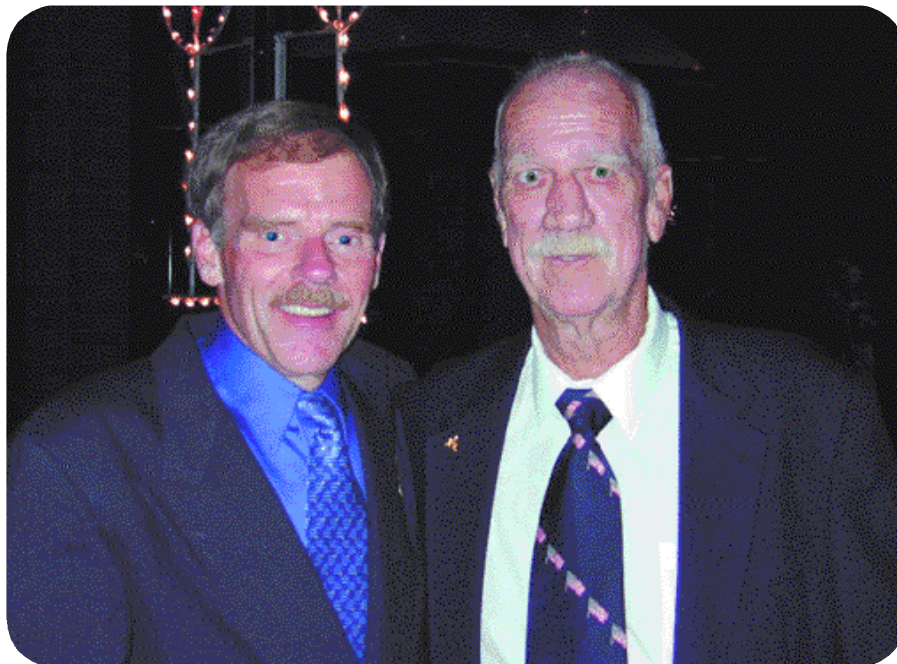
pointed out the real issues of rescues, for the true rewards of a rescue are often lost in the preparation and reconstitution for the next rescue. The ramifications from each rescue are far-reaching and significant. This family and all their accomplishments to date, and in the future with these children, is the legacy of the rescue—it is much more than a “Save”.

We then asked if TSgt Willis was in the room, and he stood to be recognized. When asked if he was the guy who came down the hoist and got this pilot out of the bamboo he replied, “Yes sir, I am”. These two men immediately recognized each other even though they hadn’t looked into each other’s face since June 1969. The reunion was magnificent! TSgt Willis retired in 1973 from the USAF

and had settled here in Florida. He remembered the rescue well as it was one of his last, and he described in detail the state of the injured pilot and his concerns for his rescue.

So, the meeting is over, the emotion of the moment is calmed, and we have all scattered back to our lives and our jobs. However, we are all better for the efforts of our colleagues and predecessors—the pilots and the rescuers. The successes of the DeVoss children that we will benefit from come from the efforts of SOF operators well before us. And just to put “frosting on the cake”, we just got a note from TSgt Willis, THE RESCUER—it says “Thanks for the best day of my life”—go figure! God Bless America!

David L. Hammer



“Isn't it wonderful that I can grow old thanks to the gentleman next to me!
And to so many others!!”

Jim DeVoss with Lorenzo Willis

Photo courtesy of MSG Samuel R. Rodriguez