

# Roots in Ripon

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*Chuck Roots*

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## My, How Time Flies

Yup! It was forty-eight years ago on October 27<sup>th</sup> that I arrived at Marine Corps Recruit Depot (MCRD), San Diego. Thus began one of the more interesting, if not challenging experiences of my life.

I was twenty-one, wondering what the next four years of my enlistment in the Marine Corps might entail. There were the rumblings that President Nixon was going to get out of Vietnam. But in the latter-half of 1969 the war was still in full swing. I wondered if I would ever see this Far-Eastern nation that was the cause of so much discord, not only in our own country, but around the world.

As it turned out, by the time I finished my training in my MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) and off to my first operational commands at Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS), El Toro in Southern California, it looked like an overseas tour was never going to happen. Or at least not to Vietnam.

Did I really want to go to Vietnam? Of course! You don't enlist in the toughest military branch of the service to stay home! Someone might say, "But it's dangerous!" Yes, it is. But I would ask in return, "Is the United States of America worth defending?" Absolutely! Unequivocally, Yes!

While stationed with an F4 squadron at El Toro in 1971, I played football with the squadron team. The last practice we had before I final game I sustained a broken rib. Since my MOS was an Aviation Electrician, I was climbing into and onto planes all the time. With a broken rib, the doctor tape up my chest making it difficult to move. He also prescribed Darvon for the discomfort of pain. This troubled me because it made me light-headed. So, I was assigned to mess duty for a month while the rib healed.

Well, mess duty usually is wet, sloppy work, often slinging a mop and carrying lots of cases of food from freezers to the kitchen and so on. This didn't seem like a good idea for trying to give a broken rib a chance to heal. I mentioned this to the senior enlisted guy who then assigned me to work in his office taking care of his daily reports and other administrative matters. I only had a couple of more days to go before I was to return to my squadron when one of the Marines from my squadron walked in and dropped a set of orders on my desk, and said, "Good Luck! You're going to WestPac." At that time, WestPac (which stands for Western Pacific) was a euphemism for "You're going to Vietnam!"

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My orders had me reporting to my new command at the end of December, with my flight departing Travis AFB on December 23. But, it still didn't look like I would get to Vietnam because the squadron I was to report to, VMCJ1, was just pulling up stakes from Da Nang, returning to their home in Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan.

I quickly settled in with my new command and was looking forward to a year in Japan. I even signed up to take a class in conversational Japanese. There was also a University of Maryland course I began in business management. But the really fun part was a military parachute club on the base which I joined with the excitement of making my first jump (yes, from a perfectly good airplane!).

As things turned out, a couple of months later, our squadron was called upon to participate in a new offensive against North Vietnam. It's known as the Easter Offensive. Off to Vietnam we went. I never did get very far with the Japanese class. However, I did finish the course in business management (barely). And my first jump was slated for the weekend my squadron left for Vietnam. As it has turned out, I never did make a jump.

As I write this, I noticed a picture of my brother John and me, taken at Marine Corps Base (MCB) Camp Pendleton in Southern California back in 1970. I was wearing my sateens (green and highly starched) and John was in his green flight suit. As a Marine helicopter pilot, then in the reserves, he was doing his summer drill with his command at Pendleton that summer. I was stationed there awaiting orders to my MOS school, so we were able to spend some time together. I was a lowly PFC (Private First Class) while John was a captain.

Little did either of us know then that we would both spend several decades serving our country through the military. After his five years of active duty, including a tour in Vietnam flying CH46 helicopters (Feb 67 – Mar 68), he stayed in the Marine Corps Reserve, retiring as a colonel with thirty-three years. On the other hand, I served four years active as an enlisted Marine and five years in the reserve. Later I would reenter the service as a Navy chaplain, retiring as a Navy captain with a combined service of thirty-four years.

I'm now 69 and John is 73, leaving me with the realization that the old saying is true: time really does fly!