

This is a true story of events, that took place on January 11, 1969, at China Beach, Danang, South Vietnam, and the subsequent awards ceremony at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii the summer of 1969.

HEY, LIEUTENANT CAN I GO SWIMMING?

by Lowell Don Colvin

It was a hot January day off the coast of Danang, South Vietnam. Seaman Stewart, Isaacs, Stanley, Quinn, and myself had been sweltering in the tropical heat of the last few days. Chipping paint off the starboard wingwall of the U.S.S. Monticello, LSD-35 was not one of our favorite pastimes.

Seaman Stewart had recently been promoted to coxswain (driver) of the Captain's gig, with Seaman Isaacs as his assistant. I had been promoted to coxswain of the Liberty launch, a small landing craft, which was referred to as a "papa boat".

My assistant was Seaman Sammy Quinn, a salty old dog, who knew ten times what I did about boats. So, Sammy became the teacher and I the student. I wasn't a very good student, because my mind was with my new bride in the states. But, undaunted by my lack of attention and my generally bad attitude, Sammy set about making me a Seaman. I became familiar with everything from bowline knots to boat handling, and from 50 caliber machine guns to twin three inch fifties; from which I can still feel the vibrations after 38 years.

With Sammy, Tom Farrow and the rest of the deck hands we were a pretty good crew after the first six months on ship.

Now, I'll admit, I am just a little mischievous; and after the amphibious landing the day before at China Beach, Danang, I was bored. We went from a flurry of activity the day before, to the officers hunting for mundane jobs for us to do. The ocean around China Beach, Danang was crystal clear, and I had been a water rat since my childhood days in Iowa

Park, Texas. So it was just natural for me to ask Lieutenant Loner when he came around if we could go swimming. Well, Navy officers are not known for their sense of humor, so of course the answer was no. Right after this we received orders to take the Captain's gig to China Beach, Danang, which was about one mile from where we were anchored. Where we were to meet two Landing Vehicle Tanks (LVT's, amphibious tanks & personnel carriers), and escort them back to the ship for repairs.

Sammy and I quickly volunteered to go with Stewart and Isaacs. So along with Lieutenant John Loner, Ensign David P. O'Connor, and two petty officers (mechanics), we had a crew that could handle almost any emergency. As they lowered us the two stories from the boat davit to the ocean, I was still thinking how rotten it was of the Lieutenant to not let us go swimming.

The seas were pretty calm, but when we got close to the beach we could see that the waves were 8 to 10 feet. We saw the two LVT's on the beach, and signaled them to follow us back to the ship. Stewart expertly turned us around, and headed back to the ship at a pace slow enough for the two LVT's to stay up with us. The first LVT made it through the surf easily. When the second LVT went through the surf, then disappeared (sank), we were a quarter mile away.

The officers signaled the first LVT to go on to the ship. Stewart then turned us around, and sped towards the beach. When we got about 150 yards from the beach, we could see the antenna from the second LVT, but the craft itself was completely submerged. Stewart tried to get us in closer, but the surf nearly capsized the Captain's Gig. He backed out of the surf zone, and as he was backing out, I started taking my clothes off. He knew that before I came on the ship I had been a lifeguard for Naval Amphibious landings at the U.S. Naval Amphibious base at Coronado, California. So it came as no surprise to him, when I told him to get me in as close as he could. The officers and petty officers were still

talking among themselves about what to do when the Lieutenant noticed I was taking off my clothes. He knew his men's strengths and weakness's very well; so, when I reminded him that I had been a Beachmaster Unit 1 lifeguard, he nodded approval.

Time being of the essence, I only took off my dungaree shirt, boondockers (boots), hat, my precious Bulova watch, and emptied my pockets into my boots. I saw that Stewart was close, and made a running dive off of the bow of the boat. As I was about to enter the water Ensign "Doc" O'Connors said, "You need a life jacket!" I laughed to myself as I raced toward the Marine. I saw the Marine through the rolling surf, and headed towards him. When I got to him, his movements were slow, and he was breathing hard. I grabbed his right arm, swung him around, and grabbed the back of his shirt. I had him in position to tow, when he hollered; "My buddy, my buddy, he can't swim!" Then over his shoulder I saw a second Marine. There was nothing to do but attempt a rescue of the second Marine. I grabbed the first Marine by both shoulders of the back of his shirt, and used him kind of like a surf board as I swam to the other Marine. When we got close, the second Marine put his arms around the first Marine's neck. I then tried to get them into towing position, by floating them. The surf was pushing against them as I towed them seaward, so this aided in keeping them afloat. At this juncture, I couldn't see the Captain's Gig, so I swam perpendicular to the beach. The first wave nearly caught us. If it had it would have surely dashed us against the submerged LVT, that was about ten feet in front of us.

I kicked and swam as hard as I could, but the two Marines were like a sea anchor. Finally I got out of the surf zone, and the going became a little easier. But, by this time my strength was waning. I glimpsed the Captain's Gig. Then started towards it with the two Marines in tow. We got about 15 feet away, but I was totally exhausted. So the men from the boat handed me a boathook, which is a stick about 6 feet long. I

grabbed, missed, grabbed again, and caught the boathook. They then pulled us toward the boat, but the Marines weight was too much for me, I had to let go. Between the men in the boat and the Marines, my 5'11", 138 pound body was being pulled apart. With about five feet left to go to the boat, I let go of the boathook and paddled a few more times. The men from the boat, then grabbed me, and swung the two Marines toward the boat.

My thoughts at this time were, "Thank God for getting us through this; and why can't these two Marines swim!" Well, as I saw them being pulled over the side, I noticed they were both fully clothed, with combat boots and all on. I was then pulled in, and grasping for air, I asked the two Marines if they were all right. I don't remember much after that, I just relaxed and when we got out of the boat onto the ship, I was pretty wobbly legged. I received a lot of congratulations, and the Lieutenant said he was going to put me in for a medal. A few months later the Lieutenant told me, that I had gotten the medal, and that it would be presented in Hawaii or San Diego. If it was presented in San Diego it would hold everyone's leave up for a day. So, I of course said Hawaii would be fine. The ceremony was held the day after we arrived in Pearl Harbor.

I had my best uniform on -- I even bought new socks. When it came time for the ceremony, I wished that Captain Homyak would just mail me the medal, because boy did I ever have the butterflies! Some how when the Captain called my name, I made it across the Helicopter deck to where he was standing. With the Ship's crew looking on, the Captain then read the

citation, and pinned the medal on me. I was grinning like a stuffed possum. I saluted, about faced, and started back to the formation. I then saw something, that to me was totally awesome -- the **U.S.S. Arizona monument**. Until that moment, I hadn't realized where I was, **Pearl Harbor**. It sent chills all over my body. It was the thrill of a lifetime, because I was in the presence of my past heroes. The gallant men and women of that fateful day, **December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii**.

For a minute the bitterness of Vietnam was lost, and I remembered the real reason we were at war.

I was then engulfed by my shipmates.

God Bless, America!

The medal was the **Navy-Marine Corp Medal**, and across the bottom of the medal it had the word **HEROISM**.

(TYPED COPY, I HAVE ORIGINAL)

This is the eyewitness account of Ensign David (DOC) P.O'Connor:

On the 11th of January 1969 the Commanding Officer of the USS MONTICELLO (LSD-35) dispatched #1 LCPL as escort and safety boat for two LVTEs leaving China Beach, Danang for the well deck of the MONTICELLO. The two LVTEs were met by the safety boat at the assigned beach and proceeded to their destination. Approximately fifteen minutes after their departure, one of the LVTEs encountered engine difficulties, its pumps failed and because of a 6 to 8 foot surf, the vehicle was overcome and sank in some fifteen feet of water. There were only a few seconds that elapsed between the engine failure and the sinking of the vehicle. Fortunately all four crewmen (Marines) were able to escape the LVTE and while two swam to safety, two more, fatigued by the incident, were after a fashion, knocked about the surf. The safety boat, hampered by the high surf, would only endanger the crewmen and the craft if it closed the sunken vehicle. Seaman COLVIN, assessing the difficulties of the situation, volunteered to swim some twenty-five yards to the men and towed them to the safety of the LCPL.

DAVID P. O'CONNOR

COMMANDER IN CHIEF
UNITED STATES PACIFIC FLEET

The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the Navy and marine Corps Medal to:

LOWELL DON COLVIN
SEAMAN
UNITED STATES NAVY

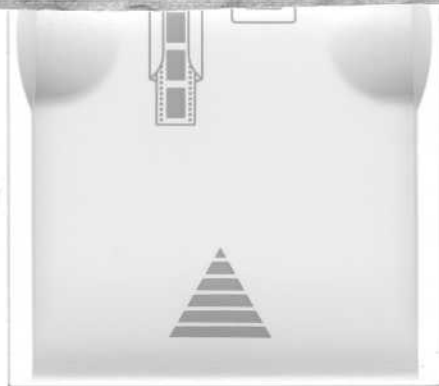
for service as set forth in the following:

CITATION

"For heroism while serving in USS MONTICELLO (LSD-35) off the coast of the Republic of Vietnam on 11 January 1969. Seaman COLVIN, as a crew member of a landing craft acting as safety and escort boat for two U.S. Marine Corps amphibian vehicles proceeding from China Beach, Danang, Republic of Vietnam, through high surf, observed one of the vehicles overcome by eight foot surf and sink in 15 feet of water. Two of the vehicle's crewmen were able to swim to the safety of a nearby landing craft. The remaining two crewmen rapidly became exhausted in the high surf and were in danger of being dashed against the sunken vehicle. Seeing the imminent danger to these men and recognizing that the safety boat could not approach closer than 60 feet to the sunken vehicle, Seaman COLVIN, without hesitation and disregarding his own safety, dove into the treacherous waters, swam to the exhausted men and towed them seaward against the surf to the safety of the waiting boat. Seaman COLVIN's courageous actions were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service"

For the President,

John J. Hyland
Admiral, U.S. Navy
Commander in Chief U.S. Pacific Fleet





Lowell Don Colvin receives Navy and Marine Corps Medal for Heroism, January 11, 1969.

I am trying to locate anyone who remembers a **drowning rescue** on January 11, 1969, at China Beach, Danang. A Marine LVT sank in surf, and I pulled two Marines seaward to the awaiting USS *Monticello* LSD-35's captain's gig. Also, in April or May 1968, while serving as a Beachmaster Unit One Lifeguard, I rescued a young lady at Hotel Del Coronado Beach. I would like to hear from those involved. Contact: Lowell Don Colvin, 531628 Wynne 3D35, Huntsville, TX 77349

