

A Marine Aviator Turned Playboy and Hero

John Shoemaker

This is a story of a Marine in Highland Beach who was a “Playboy,” but not the kind you think. John Boden has lived eight years in the Clarendon condominium community with his wife, Pat, and wrote a book titled *Klondike Playboy* about his adventures which you can obtain from the Town Library.



John’s military life started when he was not doing well in college and needed some growing up to do. So, he did what any red-blooded American boy would do, he quit and joined the U.S. Marines. He had no idea what he wanted to do. After going through Paris Island and other rigorous training that all Marines must endure, somehow, someone thought he might have what it takes to be a pilot. John took the extensive tests, even though he had no college degree, and was selected to become a Marine Cadet or “MARCAD.” They taught him how to fly an amazing assortment of planes and helicopters.

John was tall, strong, smart, and willing to go for the “challenge.” In 1965, he was commissioned as a Naval Aviator. He went on to do more training at New River, NC, and then was then sent to Vietnam.

Like all military personnel coming off the plane into a war zone, the real learning process begins in combat. John was co-pilot on Marine Huey helicopter in northern areas of South Vietnam, designated as I Corps. He established himself with good skills early on in combat missions to support Marine infantry units on the ground.



Eventually, with over a hundred combat missions behind him, he qualified to become an elite aviator known as a “Playboy.” When on the scene of a battle, a Playboy would coordinate the transports, gunships, medevacs, artillery, naval gunfire, fighter jets, and make decisions about when and how to do insertions and extractions. They acted as the eyes in the sky as the single point of command for communicating and coordinating between all air assets and ground forces while in direct contact with the enemy.

The Playboy would help direct the movements of forces on the ground while monitoring enemy movements. It was incredibly important, stressful, and demanding which tells a lot about the kind of aviator who is chosen by his peers to perform at such a high level. It required quick thinking, situational awareness, and multi-tasking multiple layers of forces, while not fearing failure and, of course, all this while still flying the bird. He became a Playboy when he was still a Second Lieutenant.

On his tenth day in Vietnam, he was the copilot for the 24-hour medivac gunship escort. At midnight they got a call for a medivac that quickly turned into trying to save the whole 30-man Marine RECON unit from being wiped out in a firefight with hundreds of NVA troops who

surrounded them. It was an all-night, intense battle. Nearly all of the RECON team was wounded. One Marine was wounded multiple times, but he still remained in charge and continued working with the Playboy to hold off the enemy. His name was Gunnery Sergeant Howard (who was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions that night.) Another gunship joined them so they could provide constant cover in this dire situation to save the trapped Marines when each needed to leave to refuel, rearm, and return.



Finally, in the light of morning, another Marine unit was inserted not too far from those under fire to turn the tide of the battle. In the morning, the third Huey with a very new squadron commander arrived and took command. That Command Huey was soon hit and then John's Huey was stitched with bullets coming up along the floor between the pilot and copilot seats.

Both Hueys turned to head back to their airfield, but the other couldn't make it and had to land in an open field with John's Huey landing next to him, John rushed over to grab the unconscious pilot, unstrapped him, and carried him back to his helicopter. At the same time, he saw an NVA running toward them. Yelling and moving as fast as his legs could go, they jumped on and took off. Looking back, he saw the enemy toss a satchel charge into the grounded Huey which then exploded into a massive ball of flame. The pilot John carried was dead.

In another Recon insertion, the team was very soon surrounded and outnumbered by the enemy. The firefight was intense as the Marines struggled to return to the helicopters that remained on the ground to take them back aboard. John and his wingman used their guns and rockets in support of the ground troops as they fought their way back to be extracted. He covered the rescue of the entire group returning to the large troop-carrying helicopters.

When out of ammunition he conducted fake strafing runs to distract the enemy and keep their heads down. He had nothing to shoot at them, so he took the risk of flying a little more than a hundred feet off the deck to scare them and attract fire. Just as the last of the team was aboard the birds lifted out. The Huey's had no more ammo and were very low on fuel. John ordered the transports to return to base, the two Hueys did not have enough fuel to return to base so landed in an outlying artillery base to spend the night. The lead transport helicopter was there in the morning with two barrels of jet fuel and a hand pump. For this action, John got the "Distinguish Flying Cross" for his valor along with his 35 Air Medals representing over 750 combat missions. He rose to the rank of Captain before leaving Vietnam.

After returning from Vietnam, he got his degree from the University of New Haven, got married, and worked in several companies, and started some of his own. John and his wife founded Personal Care Managers, Inc. (PCM), a professional geriatric care management company that began in 1988. That company helped elders and their families navigate every area of eldercare.



John is a nationally recognized expert in eldercare issues and geriatric care management. As past President of the Florida Guardianship Association, he has been an active member of the National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers and the National Guardianship Association. He has also served the Florida Bar's Elder Law Section.

In 1976 and 1977 he left his job; sold the house he built and took his family to spend a year and a half sailing the east coast and the Bahamas in their sailboat. John and his wife have five children, ten grandchildren, and nine great-grandchildren (expecting their tenth soon). They are enjoying retirement and love the ocean and beauty of Highland Beach.

When asked about how he would describe his time as a Marine Aviator, he quickly replied, "the Marines took me with no promises and were willing to bet on me! I hope I gave them their money's worth!"

I would say that was surely a safe bet.

