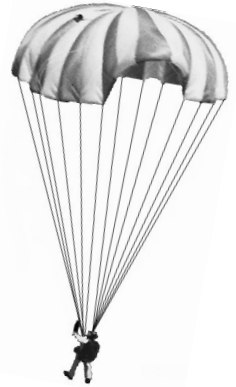


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Jump at Rio Turuach



Tomorrow would be a slow day and I would spend it getting ready for the jump the next morning. Ace would make the jump with me, as I did not like the reports of the locals not being too friendly. I would plan to spend about a day on the inspection and a day and a half with hard walking and climbing to the pickup point. But I was getting ahead of myself and I had better call Raul to make sure that he is available for Thursday and late Saturday afternoon.

I would make a few changes to the way I had done things. I tried to make use of every new thing I learned on each jump, like taking some canned dog food for Ace, and extra water. I also got Ace a new parachute canopy, as I had cut up his old one to bind his feet on the Conquistador jump and I had left what remained for the natives. I would also take some extra-heavy material to make shoes for him, just in case we ran into any foot problems.

I packed both chutes and we were ready to go. I also replaced the batteries in the portable radio, as I saw how important good communications were in directing Mario to the pickup point. I checked the weather, and from the limited information I could get, there wasn't anything unusual brewing for this time of the year. It had been raining more than the normal amount north of the drop zone but I didn't think it would bother me.

I picked up Ace at Mrs. Martinez's house and he spent the night on his chunk of rug beside my bed. He knew that something was up, but he didn't ask any questions. Just like any paratrooper before a combat jump, his senses were cranked up several notches

and his paws hit the floor about the same time as my feet did when the alarm clock jangled us awake at 4 a.m. As I pulled on my extra-heavy canvas pants and boots, Ace went into the bathroom to get a drink of water from the toilet. I carefully checked the equipment we were going to take against a check list and stacked it by the door. Too many times I had forgotten an item that could have been useful to me, and experience told me that today was going to be one of those days when I didn't need any screwups. Ace gave each item a final sniff, and we walked out the door before five o'clock.

At this early hour, Elena was waiting for us at our Jeep and she said, "Someone has to see the brave warriors off on their mission." Just a few weeks ago Dr. Mendas had removed the last bandages that covered Elena's face and finally the world could see a beautiful young lady, whose radiant smile we all knew was hidden behind that ugly hood, matched her loving and caring disposition.

I was very pleased to see her, and I thought that she was getting prettier every day. We had a meeting, and we agreed that we should just be good friends. She was beaming with happiness and the early morning light made her even more desirable. She hugged Ace and the battered old fighter smiled and gulped down the two cookies she offered him. I didn't remind her that paratroopers do not eat before a jump and Ace didn't mention it and begged for more. She handed me a small package of cookies and said, "For you and your piloto. Fly safe and be careful, mi Ingeniero. The family needs you."

She put out her hand, but I didn't want to shake her hand, I wanted to hug her and kiss her beautiful lips. She was a truly lovely young girl and the blonde hair and light blue eyes she inherited from her German father reminded me of my college girlfriend—our fraternity chapter's Sweetheart of Sigma Chi back at the University of New Mexico in '52. But my better and smarter instincts took over and I just held her hand and said, "Don't worry, the Ace and I can handle anything that comes up. We will be back in a couple of days." As she left, I could smell a lingering scent of Estee Lauder.

My sleepy-eyed pilot, Raul, was finishing his walk-around inspection of the Cessna 180 when we drove up to his hangar. He stopped to help me hang the cargo container on the bomb shackles we had installed under his aircraft. He joked that these early

morning takeoffs were interfering with his social life and he was going to have to tack on a surcharge to any flight when the wheels left the runway before six o'clock. I lifted Ace into the aircraft and hooked up his static line and we were ready to head north to the canyon country of Chihuahua. If Raul had implemented a surcharge, we would have had to pay it, as the 180 was climbing through a thousand feet of altitude into a blazing yellow sunrise at exactly ten minutes to six o'clock.

It was great to be alive on this wonderful day and even Ace concurred as he smiled and snuggled into an old blanket we were using as his bed on any long flight. We were carrying extra oxygen for all three of us, so I stuck Ace's head into a makeshift mask I had designed to fit his flat face, adjusted the elastic strap around his head and turned the valve to give him a steady supply of pure oxygen. He didn't seem to mind it at all, and lay still and in a short while was asleep. This guy was a truly remarkable dog. I was glad that I had found him in that garbage dump and had given him a chance for a second career.

This was great flying weather. Last night a light rain and a slight breeze had scrubbed the sky clean of all the dust and pollution. The wind that rushed by the open door of the aircraft was warm but it was loud, so I covered Ace's head with part of his blanket. I was wearing an old World War II leather flying helmet and ear plugs so I was also comfortable. It was very difficult to talk to Raul because of the noise, but we had gone over the bailout procedures many times so there was no need for future communications. We cruised at about 150 miles per hour and we were over the Rio Tueuachi in two hours.

Once we spotted the river, we had no trouble locating the village. We dropped down to a thousand feet and made several passes, and I could see some people on the ground. But there was no evidence of a fire. Mario had assured me that George understood he was to light a fire and make smoke in order to guide me to the correct village. Also George was to make sure that the dogs were tied up, as Ace was here to work and not to kick the crap out of the local dogs who thought they were tough guys.

To give George time to organize, I decided to show Raul the two places I had selected as the pickup points. We flew over the first mesa and made several approaches and Raul indicated that

he would have no trouble putting the "Bug" down and getting it off. He said that he could probably land the 180 if he had to.

The second, or alternate, landing site was a different matter. We made several low and slow passes and Raul said he could land but taking off might be a problem. We returned to the village but there was still no smoke or signs of unusual activity on the ground. I turned it over in my mind. Had Mario really made George understand what he was supposed to do? Had something happened to George? Had they killed him for bringing outsiders to their country?

It was decision time. I was used to making decisions and taking chances, and quickly, but the thought of not having any support on the ground from the locals gave me a bad feeling. But I had a lot of time, effort and money committed to this project, and if I backed away from a deal every time it just didn't feel right, I wasn't going to accomplish much in my life. As the Mexicans say, "No se aventura, No passa la mar." Very roughly translated, "He who does not venture does not cross the sea."

I told Raul to make a long pass at five hundred feet and I would drop the cargo container. The valley carved by the river trended northwest to the southeast, so we made our pass following the river. We dropped the container below the village and about a hundred yards west of the river. As we passed low over the river, I noticed that it was flowing much faster than I had thought and that I could see an occasional whitecap when it passed over a rock. Then I remembered that the weatherman had said that they had received a lot of rain north of the location during the past few days. I made a note to be sure to exit well west of the river. We weren't equipped to go swimming if we landed in the water.

After the cargo drop, Raul pulled up sharply and I did not have a chance to see where the cargo landed, as the tail was in the way. But I was sure that it was well away from the river. There was some smoke visible from fires in the village and that their twisting and turning told me that the winds were going to be squirrely and unpredictable near the ground. Also, the sun was beginning to heat up the terrain so I had better drop a wind drift indicator at jump altitude to get a more accurate average of the winds all the way to the ground.

We circled at three thousand feet above the ground and I dropped two indicators, just to be safe. I was not going to wear a reserve parachute and I wanted a little extra altitude in case things did not go as planned. The indicators told me that the winds were about ten miles per hour and variable. I had Raul pick a reference point about three miles away and he started his approach as I finished securing my radio case and the rest of my gear.

As usual, Ace was alert and ready for action. I moved in to the open door, tossed my leather helmet into a corner of the airplane, checked Ace's static line, picked up Ace and stood by for Raul's signal to jump. It was show time! Time to put your knees in the breeze, as the 82nd Airborne troops would say.

We passed over the river and a couple of seconds later, Raul's fist slammed down on the dash board and he yelled, "GO!" I pushed back hard and made a strong exit and we were instantly swept toward the tail of the airplane by the slipstream. The static line stretched to its limit and the cover on Ace's parachute pack was violently snatched away and Ace's was torn from my arms. I was falling on my back and I watched Ace's canopy blossom into a beautiful yellow umbrella. I had purchased some new cargo chutes the last time I was in El Paso and I had dyed them various bright colors so I could keep track of the different items on a multiple cargo drop.

I held my back-to-earth position until I was sure Ace had a good chute, then turned over and free fell another five hundred feet. The parachute canopy unpacked smoothly and the opening shock was minimal. I had packed my canopy in the sleeve. I am no longer a slow learner, at least in this area of parachuting. I looked up and checked my canopy for lines over the top or damage. Everything looked OK, so I swung my body back and forth and looked up to check on Ace's canopy. This was the first time we had jumped Ace's canopy, and I was surprised to see that the four slits I had made to make it more stable and give it a forward speed were larger than I had remembered.

I got another shock when I looked down and saw that the river was running much faster than I had expected and was quite a bit wider. My exit spot was closer than I had visualized but, no sweat, I could turn into the wind and make up for that mistake.

I was at about a thousand feet when I checked to see how Ace was doing and I got another jolt. He was almost at the same altitude as I was. This was bad news, as he could not turn into the wind and make up for my mistake.

If he continued on the same course, he was going to land in the river. All he could do was pray, and I had yet to teach him that stuff and I didn't know if Catholic prayers would work for him. If he didn't overshoot the river and landed in it, he was in deep trouble. The parachute would drag him under and he had no way of getting out of it. I had less than a minute to figure out what I was going to do. I could now see that the sandy beach ended about twenty feet from the river and had turned into thousands of rocks churned up by the fast moving river. I quickly spun around and with a stiff wind at my back ran toward the river. I had to land down river from Ace if I had any chance of snagging his parachute and dragging him to land.

With the wind pushing me and with the built-in forward speed of my canopy—I was jumping a hot seven panel TU—and me pulling down on the front risers, I was really moving out. I lifted my feet to clear the rocks which were now a blur beneath me and I smashed down—short! I hit on my back, about five yards short of the river, in the middle of the rock pile. Instantly, I felt a tremendous, searing, jabbing pain in my lower back and the lights went out for a couple of seconds, or maybe more.

When I came to, all I could see were flashes of light and stars flying around and all I could hear was the rushing of the river roaring by. I lay there for a couple of minutes and gradually my head began to clear. My mind was yelling at me, "You've got to get into that river." I tried to get to my feet, but my legs wouldn't work. I rolled over on my stomach, and tried to stand, but nothing moved but my arms. I could feel the sharp rocks with my hands, see the blood oozing through my shirt where my elbows were and feel the blood running down my face from the cuts above my eye, but I couldn't feel a damn thing from the waist down. The top half of my body hurt like hell, but I couldn't feel my legs.

I had been going downwind when I landed, and my canopy had kept on going with the wind pulling it. It was now in the water and was still about three quarters inflated with the lower quarter

water-soaked but still floating. I rolled over on my back and a gust of wind filled the canopy and yanked me around, and over the rocks so that my hands were now in the water. I clawed frantically at the mud and rocks and tried to pull myself into the river. That didn't work, but just then another gust of wind inflated the canopy and now I was in the river, floating face down.

I took a quick look upstream to check on Ace and damned if he wasn't about fifty yards from me being swept along by the swift current. I had to do something to intercept him before he raced past me but I couldn't move my legs to swim.

My mind flashed back to when I was working with Dave Burt on his parascuba project in the ocean off the coast of California and I got a lot of experience with parachute canopies in the water. I remembered that the suspension lines on the canopies would float for a couple of minutes before they became water-logged and sank.

My canopy was still inflated but I was not moving. I reached up to the left side of my parachute risers and pulled down the Capewell fitting that attached the risers to the parachute harness and released the two left risers. The risers were under a lot of strain and they leapt forward as if propelled from a slingshot toward the center of the river. It was far enough into the river to tangle with the suspension lines of Ace's parachute and now I was being towed down the river by both parachute canopies.

My canopy was partially deflated and was acting as a brake and Ace drifted into to me. I grabbed him and held on tight. He was trying to swim with all his might, but all this mess was dragging him underwater. I reached down to my right boot and unsnapped the sheath holding my KA-BAR knife. I cut the two main risers on Ace's parachute and it drifted away. But we were still entangled in the mess of nylon cords and fabric of my parachute canopy and the sleeve and pilot chute and bits and pieces of tree branches that were being washed down the river.

I released the other Capewell fitting that was holding me to my parachute canopy. Then I cut away anything that was clinging to me and we were free. I was floating and then I realized that the only reason I was on top of the water was that I was holding on to Ace's parachute harness and my waterproof radio case was acting as a flotation device. I could use my arms, but I

still couldn't use my legs. I could have been standing on the river bottom, but I couldn't tell.

Ace was in a panic mode and he was swimming as fast as he could toward the shore. We were about five feet from the shore when my knees starting dragging against the bottom and Ace's swimming couldn't pull me any more. I released my grip on his harness, and he swam away. Good for Ace, bad for me.

My face went under and I got a mouth full of muddy water. I clawed my way forward as best I could and my radio case was helping keep my head out of the water. Finally, I was out of the river and in the rocks. I pulled myself over the rocks and it was tough going.

My elbows and arms were cut and bleeding and they hurt like hell, but I still couldn't feel my legs. I knew that no matter how much they hurt, I had to keep going to where I could rest, collect my thoughts and think things through.

Wounded by the River

I lay on the sand and tried to catch my breath. Ace was about ten yards from me and his sides were heaving up and down and he gulped for air. I yelled for him to come to me as I wanted to snap on his leash before he got distracted and ran off. I had his leash wrapped around my waist and I wanted to get him under control as soon as we landed. We were here to accomplish a specific job and his job was to protect me and not run around looking for something to fight. He was reluctant to move so I shouted to him in my "get your butt over here or I am going to stick my foot up your rear" voice and he pushed himself to his feet and came to my side.

I snapped the leash to his collar and I felt a lot better. I patted him on his face and he cocked his head to the side and looked at me as if to say, "Hey boss, was this the way this thing was supposed to happen, or did somebody screw up?"

If this was his question I would have to answer him, "Buddy, we are a couple of very lucky guys. Just count your blessings and try to learn from your mistakes. The good Lord might be looking the other way on our next jump."

And he might have answered, "What's this WE crap, sarge, I'm hanging up my jump boots just as soon as we get home. My mom dog didn't raise any idiot pups."

Since leaving the airplane, I hadn't paid much attention to our surroundings other than what was important to our immediate survival so when I looked around, I was surprised to see eight or ten guys sitting on their haunches about a hundred feet from us. Ace saw them at the same time I did and he went into his fighting stance and growled and barred his teeth.

These people didn't say a word. They just stared at us. My instant reaction was to reach for the .25 in my shoulder holster. It was still under my left arm and it was wet but I knew that it would work if I pulled the trigger.

I shouted, "Buenas dias." No one moved. No one spoke. They just sat there in a tight group and stared at us. Just then, Raul's 180 roared over us at about five hundred feet, shattering the silence and yanking me back in to the real world of what we are going to do to get out of what I suspected was going to be a very difficult situation. I put a slip knot in the end of Ace's leash and secured him to my left arm. I pulled him close, hit him a couple of times to get his attention, and told him to sit down.

Keeping my eye on the group of men, I unzipped the radio carrying-case and to my surprise it was completely dry. I switched it on and immediately Raul's voice greeted us. He had been trying to reach us and I broke into his transmission by holding down the send button. His voice was coming in loud and clear.

"What's happening down there?"

I replied, "We have some problems here. But it is nothing that we can't handle if we don't screw it up." Fortunately, Raul and I, and Fr. Lopez, had gone through a "what if " drill while drinking a couple of beers about a month ago, and I was sure that Raul still had a rough idea of what we had planned. Only this time we have a really big, "what if " in that I think my legs have been paralyzed and I can't walk.

This thought had been in the back of my mind ever since I had plowed into that rock pile, but I had been ignoring it. Now I had to face it. I told Raul to wait while I tried to stand up. My legs wouldn't respond. I had no feeling from my waist down and I

couldn't get up. I knew I should be feeling some pain as my knees were bleeding and I could see the blood oozing through my pants.

I told Raul to circle above me while we worked this out. We had better go over the instructions in both English and Spanish to be sure we both knew what the other was talking about. Raul rogered that and added that we had better hurry up as he was getting low on fuel if he wanted to make it back to the airport at Parral. I told him to listen to my plan, don't interrupt me, and then repeat it back to me. He said "OK" and I outlined my plan.

"First, fly back to Zacatecas and pick up the "Bug." Call Fr. Lopez and tell him what has happened and what we intend to do. Have him alert Dr. Alvarez's clinic and tell him that I think my legs might be paralyzed, so be prepared. Since time is very important, Raul should land at the alternative landing site, if at all possible. I know that there are some trees there, but drop the Cub in, and we will take care of the trees later. Fly to El Rey and pick up Big John. Pray that he is there and not on his way into town. I am going to need lots of help walking. If John is not there, bring back Fr. Lopez. Plan to stay overnight at the landing site. "Good luck, buddy. You don't know how much I am depending on you."

Raul said that he understood and that he had a lot to do to make things square, and I could count on him. He dropped low, made a high-speed pass, pulled up and he was gone. Out of sight and out of sound.

I checked my watch and it was nine fifteen. It was beginning to get hot here on the river and I could tell that it was going to be a long and exciting day at the beach. There were going to be many unknowns and we had better be prepared for them. My first problem: the group of short—I suspected that they were short, but I wasn't sure how tall they were because I had not seen them stand up—darkskinned men who were still sitting on their haunches, just as they had been ever since I first saw them. There were ten of them, I counted twice, and no one talked and no one moved.

I shouted to them, "Hello. Does anyone speak Spanish?" There was no reply. What were their intentions? What did they want? Did they plan to kill me? I didn't have any idea, but I was thinking the worst. If they made a move toward me, my first defense would be

Ace. If that didn't work, I would fire a warning shot—I was sure the weapon would work after being in the water. If the warning shot didn't stop them, I still had five rounds in the gun and a clip with six more. I would wound a couple of them and kill the rest if I had to. I also had my KA-BAR. It had not tasted human blood while in my hands, but Brother Honus said that he had used it many times during the night fighting on Guadalcanal.

That was my battle plan. Pure and simple. I was not going to die at the hands of some illiterate savages here by some lousy river in the Mexican boondocks. My defense situation was pretty good as my back was to the river and I knew that they could not get behind me. They would have to approach from the front or from the side and I could cover that. Next problem, since I couldn't move, what am I going to do about the sun? I was wearing a heavy denim work shirt and a tee shirt. The shirt would make a good sunshade if I had something to hold it up. And, looking around, I did. There was a large tree branch that had been washed down the river and it would work just fine. I rolled over to the branch and cut off what I needed, and I built a sunshade.

What about the Ace? He didn't have much hair to protect him and I didn't want him to get sunburned. He was still wearing his parachute harness or sling, but that wouldn't protect his head. I dug a hole for him to lay down in. I wanted him to help, but I had a hard time explaining to him what I was trying to do, so I gave up and finished it myself. I cut the harness off him and made him a sunshade. It worked fine. We were in fair shape, so we settled in for the day and waited to see what was going to happen.

Now, if we only had some water. There was tons of it less than twenty feet away, but drinking it would mean instant dysentery. I had a bout with that stuff when I was in the South Pacific and I didn't want to battle it now. Also, I didn't want Ace to get sick, but I knew that it was going to be hard to keep him away from the water. So, I was alone with my thoughts. Ace was dozing, the Indians were staring, and the sun was beating down.

This was the first time in a long while I had time to do some uninterrupted thinking. Since I had a lot of time to think, my thoughts went back to my first days when Fr. Pat and I came to Mexico; he to take part in a wedding and me to inspect a potential lost gold mine. Things have sure moved fast since then and I

had met many people on the road to where I am today. Some good, some bad, but all in all, it has been a very interesting and exciting journey. To think it might end here in this unlikely place, in a deep canyon in the majestic Sierra Madres of Mexico beside a roaring dirty brown river surrounded by probably unfriendly Indians, was something that I would have never imagined.

And, if I do get out of this place, will I be paralyzed? A cripple, in the prime of my life. This I did not even want to think about.

Just then there was a commotion up the hill in the village. The men did not move or speak or turn their heads to see what was going on. This was a weird situation. Suddenly a cloud of green smoke rose into the blue sky. It was one of my smoke grenades. The natives must have broken the lock on the cargo container and were now rifling through some things from the civilized world that they had never seen before or tasted.

Tasted? Food. Things like succulent, juicy beef stew in beef gravy or peaches in thick sweet syrup. I hope these bastards are enjoying our dinner. Suddenly I am hungry. I hadn't thought of food all morning, and suddenly I am hungry. So much for my organized thoughts. Without a sign or a command, the group rose to their feet and walked away toward the village. I looked at my watch. It was exactly twelve noon. What did that mean? Who knows?

The afternoon wore on. The sun beat down and it got hotter. But there was a good sign. A slight breeze began to move the swarms of bugs around. I had covered Ace with sand and he wasn't bothered too much. But they had been feasting on me. My insect repellent was in the cargo container. I hope the Indians were now drinking it. I hoped they got real sick and all died. I had put my mind in neutral for the past few hours, but still on alert when I heard a disturbance behind me. I rolled over in time to see three natives in a make-shift boat drifting by. So much for the feeling that we were safe from attack from the rear.

I had the radio on standby and about three o'clock I began to pick up some static activity. Ten minutes later I heard the drone of an aircraft engine and the "Bug" chugged into view. Boy, was I glad to see that airplane. Raul circled overhead and I picked him up loud and clear. The radio wasn't working very well unless we were in line of sight range, so I asked him to continue

circling. Raul said, "Jefe, we are back. And Juan is with me. I am going to make a couple of passes at the landing place and try to put her down."

I came back with, "What in the hell do you mean try. Land that thing and send Big John right away. I need him. You always wanted to make a carrier landing. This is your chance. Stick it down and stand on the brakes! Keep in touch with me and good luck."

"I will do my best. Out," he said as he signed off. I could hear the engine noise for about ten more minutes—then nothing. I waited a few minutes and tried to contact Raul, but all I got was static. Did he make it? I kept trying for another fifteen minutes, but got nothing. I shut down, and hoped for the best. I left the radio on stand-by, just in case. All we could do was wait and hope and pray.

Shortly after the "Bug" flew over, the group returned. As I had supposed, they were small guys, not pygmies but they probably stood about five feet four. There were ten of them. I guessed they were the same bunch and they hunkered down a little farther away from Ace and me. Ace must have smelled them as he opened one eye, growled and went back to sleep. It was the same drill. They just sat on their haunches and stared, I kind of laid on my side and looked back, and Ace slept. The sun still blazed away, but some clouds had moved in and we had intermitted shade and, at times, it was almost pleasant.

The hours passed slowly and finally, the sun dropped below the mountains to the west, and the shadows began to move slowly up the canyon. If Big John was coming—and there were a lot of ifs connected with this hope—he had better hurry or he, himself, was going to be in big trouble. It was getting darker and darker as the twilight faded.

Suddenly Ace's ears stood up and he got to his feet and turned his body down river. About five minutes later, I heard the sounds of someone walking on the sand. It was Big John and I was a very happy man. He was carrying something in his arms that was a bright yellow. It was Ace's parachute and it was still wet. "Jefe, I am very glad to see you, he said. I found this parachute in the river and it told me I was close to you."

Ace thought he recognized him, but smelled and sniffed him before he said hello. John had a backpack full of food and water

and his .357, plus plenty of ammo. He put down his pack and asked, "Who are those hombres?"

I answered him, "I do not know but I think they are enemies."

"Oh," he said and stuck his pistol into his waist band.

I asked John, "How did Raul land the airplane? Did he hurt it?" He said that Raul did well and he got it stopped before he ran into some trees. As John left, he said that Raul was chopping down the trees.

Ace and I feasted on cold, succulent, juicy beef stew in thick gravy and cold juicy peaches in sweet syrup and cold water. It was dark now and as far as I knew, the little dark men were still out there. I filled Big John in on the situation, and there was nothing else to do but try to get some sleep. John was tired from his hike from the airfield and I suggested that he get some sleep.

I took the first watch and thinking that the change in atmospheric conditions with the onset of darkness might change the behavior of radio waves, I tried to establish contact with Raul. It didn't work, so I turned off the radio to save the batteries.

The nighttime hours passed more slowly than those during the day and my thoughts kept coming back to the possibility that I may be paralyzed and, if so, how was that going to change my life?

The cooking fires in the village began going out just as the moon rose. It was about half full, but it lit up the surroundings and I saw that the little dark men were no longer sitting there staring at us. That was a relief, but we couldn't let our guard down. About ten thirty, I felt myself nodding off and I awakened Big John. I told him to kick Ace if he sensed any trouble, and that would wake me, as Ace was still tied to my wrist. I impressed upon him to "Keep your pistola ready, with plenty of ammunition, but do not shoot to kill unless I tell you to."

It was getting cold, so I took down my shirt from the sunshade, put it on and made sure that Ace's harness was still on top of him. John had hung Ace's parachute canopy over the tree limb at our back and it was almost dry, so I put it over my legs. I would give it to Big John when we changed night guard shifts. I didn't think that I had slept much that night, but I guess that I did as I was refreshed when the first streaks of morning light flashed across the dark sky.

My head hurt, my elbows and arms hurt and my back hurt, but there was still no feeling in my legs. As I checked myself out,

I felt a little guilty as I saw that Ace's parachute canopy was still wrapped around me. John looked miserable and when he saw that I was awake, he got to his feet and moved around to keep warm. I offered the canopy to him but he said no, he was OK. Ace got to his feet, shook himself, said he wanted a drink of water, and he was ready to meet the new day.

"Here goes nothing," I thought, and I tried to stand up. As I feared, I couldn't do it. It looks like Big John was going to have to carry me. My arms hurt, but they were still strong. With John carrying me piggyback, I would have to hold onto his neck. But there had to be a better way.

John helped me get my parachute harness on and using parts of Ace's rig we made a sling that fit under my butt and around John's chest. This was going to be tough on John, but he was a big, tough guy and this was the best that we could do. We were on the trail as the sun rose out of the eastern sky.

As we departed, I noticed that the cooking fires were being lit in the village, but there was no sign of the "group." We left what remained of Ace's parachute canopy as a peace offering to our silent friends—they would find my parachute canopy and sleeve in due time and this would be an additional gift—and I was left with unanswered questions of what happened after George went back to his village.

We traveled down the west side of the river until we found a place to ford to the other side. After about a mile of easy traveling, we started our climb out of the canyon. It was tough going, but we stopped frequently to rest until we were finally at the base of the mesa where Raul had landed the "Bug."

Raul had seen us coming and was waiting for us. Good. We were going to need his help. After an all-out effort, we made it to the top of the mesa and I breathed a mighty sigh of relief when I saw the bright red super "Bug." We all rested under the wing of the Cub, and after about a half hour, we were ready to take off.

Because Raul had to come back and pick up Big John and Ace, we had a weight problem, and maybe a behavioral problem with Ace. So I decided that Ace had better fly back with me. We removed the panel from behind the passenger seat and made a place where Ace could lay down and be tied down. I remembered

Brother Honus's Marine Corps motto, "We leave no man behind on the battlefield," and Ace was surely a warrior as much as anyone in this outfit, and he was going home with us. After we tied Ace down, Big John and Raul lifted me into the rear seat and the cargo parachutes that Raul had brought with him were packed around me to immobilize my lower body.

I had absolutely no idea what damage had been done to my spine or my backbone—I really don't know the difference between the two—since I landed on my back, but I did know that what we were doing had to be done. Big John would stay here on the mesa and Raul would return to pick him up as soon as he dropped me off in Zacatecas. Big John strapped me in tight and Raul cranked up the engine and taxied back as far as he could and lined up for the take off. He extended the flaps, stood on the brakes and ran the engine up to full RPMs. The "Bug" leapt forward and we were rolling down the unimproved strip. Our wheels were still on the ground when we passed the spot where Raul had chopped down the trees—good thing that he did that—and shortly after, lifted into the air. We were airborne and the next stop would be the airport at Parral where we would refuel.

The flight to Parral and then on to Zacatecas was uneventful. We radioed ahead to have the tower call Dr. Alvarez's clinic and have their ambulance standing by and also call Fr. Lopez so he would be sure to meet us. The doctor was there when we landed and gave me a quick examination and a shot before heading into town. On the way, we stopped at Mrs. Martinez's house to drop off Ace. Elena came out to the ambulance and gave me a rose from her garden and said that she would make sure that Ace was fed. This gal sure has a way to a guy's heart.

When we got to the clinic, Dr. Alvarez's nurses cut my clothes off and cleaned me up. The technicians took a series of X-rays—many more than I thought were necessary—but I was glad that they were going overboard rather than being miserly. The X-rays were rushed to the bus station, where they were put on the first-class bus to the big hospital in Mexico City. Dr. Alvarez had a cousin who was an expert in spinal injuries and he had called ahead to have him ready to read the films. By this time, the shot was beginning to take effect and I was falling asleep. Tomorrow morning, we will know much more about my future.

No Decision

During the night, the nurses woke me up a couple of times as they rubbed lotion on my many cuts and scrapes. At five o'clock, I was wide awake in anticipation of the telephone call from the hospital in Mexico City. I hoped that the cousin was an early riser.

Fr. Lopez came over to the clinic right after the six o'clock Mass, but there wasn't much he could do except wait with me. He knew that I was not in any mood for any platitudes or discourses on God's will, so we just chatted about what was going on in the cold war and how Russia was screwing up the world.

Actually at that particular moment, I didn't give a damn about Russia; I just wanted to know if I was ever going to walk again. Dr. Alvarez came into my room at eight and looked me over. Besides the scrapes, I had a fairly large size bump on the back of my head to go with a two-inch gash over my eye and some black and blue patches surrounding indentations left by sharp rocks and massive swelling of my lower back. I asked the doctor to give me some idea of what he saw on the Xrays but he said that was not his field and we would have to wait until the specialist called.

At ten o'clock, the cousin came through and fifteen minutes later, Dr. Alvarez returned to my room. The doctor usually had a solemn expression on his face but today, I think I saw a glimpse of a smile. We were ready and waiting for what was probably the most important words I was about to hear in my short life.

He cleared his throat and said, "I am going to speak in Spanish, as I am afraid that my English is not good enough to be precise and I know that is very important that I do not make mistakes. Fr. Lopez can explain my words to you after I finish. The doctor was not a gifted public speaker, but he sure had my complete interest as I hung on his every word. Addressing me he said, "First, you will be able to walk again, but it is going to take lot of work and at times it will be slow going. Are you willing to work hard?"

"Is the Pope a Catholic?" I said in an attempt to break the tension. "That's an old American joke," I hastened to explain when I noted the curious looks from everyone, including Fr. Lopez.

What I mean is, "Hell, yes, I will do whatever it takes to be able to walk again. What do I have to do and when do we start?"

"We start right away, with you staying in bed and allowing the swelling in your back to go down. The extreme shock and trauma on your spinal cord produced when you landed on those rocks caused a short circuit between your spinal cord and your legs. While the body is figuring out how to make things normal again—I have got to admit, we doctors lack much knowledge on how the spine works—swelling is taking place to protect what the body is doing. As the swelling goes down, the pressure on the spine will be reduced and you will begin to feel sensations again. But you must remain calm and not move around. We will talk more, much more in the next few days. I will give you a shot for your pain and I will see you tomorrow morning."

So, I'm not going to be a cripple after all. In the back of my mind, I still had some misgivings. But right now, I felt great.

"How about a beer?" I asked. Fr. Lopez. He said that was not a good idea. He was probably right, so we forgot about that. The room cleared out, I became sleepy and I went to sleep. I had been awake for about fifteen minutes when a nurse came into my room and said, "There is a señorita, dos ninos and a very ugly perro to see you. Should I send them away?"

"No, no," I told her. "That is my family. Please send them in."

She gave me a strange look, and said, "The perro, too?"

"Si, the perro, too."

A few minutes later, Elena, Maria and Jesus, and Ace came in. It was great to see them. Here were four people that really cared about how I felt and how I was doing. Maria held on to Jesus with her right hand and she had a bouquet of pretty flowers in her left. She dragged Jesus up to the bed and placed the flowers at my feet. Jesus had two cookies in his right hand and placed them besides the flowers. As if on cue, they stepped back and said, in English, "Hi Jim."

I replied, "Hi kids. How ya doing?"

I was greeted with silence as I supposed that they had exhausted their English vocabulary. Elena said that she was glad to see me and hoped I got well real soon. She blushed when I told her that she got prettier each time I saw her. Ace stared at me and the cookies with a look that seemed to say, "How about sharing with me, partner? We're buddies, ain't we?" I tossed him one of the cookies and it shattered on the polished floor, but all was

not lost as he dropped his flat face and suctioned up the crumbs up like a Hoover vacuum cleaner.

We struggled through a conversation, and when they left I was glad that they had visited me. I asked Jesus where his little, dirty white bear was and all I got was a blank stare. Hopefully, he didn't need that bear for security anymore.

I slept through the night and the first thing I did when I woke up the next morning was to test my legs. I still couldn't move them but, and maybe it was my imagination, I thought that I could feel some sensation below the waist. That sensation was pain, but I was feeling pain all over my body, so how could I tell? The nurses had stopped giving me pain pills, so I guess I would start pinching my legs and see if I could feel that.

Dr. Alvarez's cousin was probably the best spine doctor in Mexico and he took a special interest in my case, but all he could tell me was just be patient and let nature take its course.

And I did. As the swelling in my back went down, the feeling in my legs returned along with a world of pain. Within a week I was able to use a walker, graduated to hanging on to a nurse and finally I was on my own.

This bump on my road of life scared the hell out of me and gave me a brief glimpse of what it would be like to be a cripple. Was this going to affect my willingness to take the big chances that had placed me above most of the other guys in what was dangerous work? I would have to give that some serious thought, but first, I had to get well and get over this damn pain. I did know that life for the next couple of months was going to be different from what I had planned.

Dr. Alvarez came in to see me that afternoon and we went over the steps that I should be taking on my road to recover. The first part of my treatment was to stay in bed for several days and get the feeling back in my legs. I should wear a back brace and in a few weeks, we would evaluate the situation. Maybe surgery, but it was too early to tell. I had had a close call and for the first time in quite a while I began to think about the chances I had been taking. Were the risks I was taking to find the lost gold of the Conquistadors worth it?

Right now, I really didn't want to think about the future. I just wanted to roll over and go back to sleep. Dr. Alvarez said that I

was having an amazingly rapid recovery and in two weeks I was feeling as good as new. Life was good and I now had time to think and do some serious reading and maybe smell the roses. I was becoming good friends with Prof. San Roman of the museum and he was teaching me about the early civilizations that once ruled southern Mexico and Central America and Fr. Lopez was telling me tales of the Catholic church in the New World since the time of the Conquistadors.

This stuff was all good to occupy my mind in the short term, but as I looked down the road, I was beginning to think that my future was probably going to be back in the States.

Looking at the options on the table, the most interesting one was the possibility of a television series. I was not a big enough egotist to think that I could compete with the Hollywood con artists and sharks like Marv, but even a chunk of that action was big bucks and a lot of adventure. Also, I would like a chance to meet the "girl" again. I had my degrees in engineering and geology, but working in those fields on a day-to-day schedule would bore the hell out of me.

How about the military? I had been promoted to captain in the Air Force Reserve but I was not a West Pointer or a graduate of the new Air Force Academy, so my chances of getting to the top in this profession were not too good. I could hope for a couple of wars, but I understand that a guy could get killed in that occupation while climbing to the top. Perhaps I should just wait a couple of weeks and see how things work out. Maybe now might be a good time to take a break and go to the beach and relax.

It will give me time to work on a plan to figure out how to return to the gold discovery on the Rio San Bernardo and break the news to the world.

The days passed slowly and the "cousin's" therapy routine seemed to be working and day by day I was getting the strength back in my legs and the pain was less and less. Then, one day, I said, "I'll do it. I'll head south to Acapulco, lie on the beach, take in the sun and some of the action that is non-existent here in the provincial city of Zacatecas."

I put a rather large and overdue check in the bank, paid all my bills except the loan on the "Bug," and was square with everybody when I boarded the plane for Mexico City.