

Jolly Green Mission – 6 November 1965

(Tail Number 63-09685; Aircraft destroyed by Hostile Fire)

By Jerry A. Singleton, LCol USAF, Ret.

At Lima 36, late on Saturday morning, 6 November, 1965, the portable single side-band radio crackled to life with the words, “Scramble Jolly Green!”.

At that time in the war those of us who were PCS to Det. 5, 38th ARS, had been in Thailand for about a month. While our orders sent us to Udorn AB in Thailand, we operated out of NKP (Nakhon Phanom Air Base, Thailand) because the Jollies and Pedros were already operating there. Major Baylor Haines was our commander. We only had two Jollies (CH-3Cs) in the theater and enough parts to keep one of them flying most of the time. Our normal routine was to send the “good” bird to Lima 36 (a covert site in Laos used by Air America that put us closer to NVN so we could respond more quickly to a need in NVN) to stand alert for two days while spending one night at the Lima site. The flight north went with either Capt. Barry Kamhoot or Capt. Bob Lilly, our two IPs, and two junior pilots who were qualified in the aircraft but didn’t know their way around the countryside. We also carried a PJ and a flight engineer. Because the maps were no good for most of the area north of the Thailand, we had to learn to navigate by terrain recognition. We took two junior pilots on such trips to accelerate that learning process. At the end of the second day the crew with the “good” bird would return from the Lima site to NKP. The maintenance crews would then work all night to transfer parts to prepare the second bird for a similar trip the following morning. While we were at site 36, our only communication with the outside world was by means of our portable, battery powered single side-band radio.

On 5 November, 1965, I flew as copilot with Bob Lilly to site 36. Art Cormier was our PJ, and Bernie Naugle was our flight engineer. We also had another junior pilot with us. We landed at site 36, refueled, and sat alert that day. Everything was quiet except for a thud that was shot down late that Friday afternoon on a strike near Hanoi. On the morning of the 6th the Sandies were up early trying to find the downed F-105 pilot. When Dick Bolstad, one of those Sandy pilots, was shot down on that search mission, Crown made the call for Jolly Green. We didn’t even need to use our tail number as part of our call sign because there could only be one Jolly flying at any given time in those days. We launched as quickly as possible leaving the extra pilot behind to find his own ride home.

After we became airborne and contacted Crown, the plan was worked out to rendezvous with another flight of Sandies sent from Udorn to relieve the flight that Bolstad had been a part of, and continue the effort to rescue him. We made

our rendezvous with the Sandy flight at the North Vietnam border and began following them as they flew repeated extended racetrack patterns so that we could keep them in sight. That arrangement was frustrating for both Jolly and Sandy because the Jolly Green was so slow. The Sandies had been briefed by their squadron mates on the route and destination, but we did not know where we were headed. It was apparent, however, that our route was taking us deep into North Vietnam and toward Hanoi.

As we progressed, the Sandies were often following roads through NVN. The unintended consequence of this navigation plan was that the Sandies would wake up the gunners as they went by a gun emplacement and the gunners would be alert and ready when Jolly Green came lumbering along a few minutes later. That scenario is apparently what did us in. As we followed the Sandies, we suddenly encountered tracers coming up in front of us. Before we could react, we took a hit in the bottom of the fuselage which exploded up through the main fuel cell in the belly and also through the 400-gallon fiberglass auxiliary tank bolted to the floor of the cabin. We were an instant torch! I think we had already topped off the main cell and jettisoned what remained in the auxiliary tank to lighten the load for the rescue. The fuel vapor in the aux tank may have made the whole fire process go faster.

Things happened very quickly after we were hit. With the huge fire, I don't think any of us questioned that we were going to bail out. I would have bailed out even if I didn't have a parachute. I was getting burned and I would live longer if I bailed out without a chute than if I stayed in the aircraft with the fire. Bob Lilly was getting the aircraft trimmed so that we could have a stable platform for bailout. He hit the "bailout" bell, and made the intercom call to "Bailout!" I started making radio calls when we saw the tracers and continued right into the "Mayday", call that we were on fire and bailing out. I probably sounded like a soprano when I made that call. In the back near the ramp, Art Cormier saw what was happening and I think he was the first to leave out the open ramp. From this time on through the rest of the bailouts, things get a little foggy. Naugle was probably the second to go and went out the side door. However, as I have heard second hand, Naugle had not disconnected his safety tether before exiting the door. Consequently, he was still connected to the aircraft and dangling a few feet below in the wind. Apparently, he climbed back into the aircraft, released the safety tether, and went out the door again. I think I was the third to leave. (It took two tries, because the first time I tried to go I forgot to jettison the window. You would think there would be some slack for a guy who is trying to get out when the

fire is raging, but I still get flak from Art and others who have heard the story.) Bob Lilly was the last out. I think Bernie Naugle was still in process of climbing back in, disconnecting, and bailing out again when Lilly bailed, but there is some confusion about that. I seem to remember Bob saying he saw three other chutes when he was coming down. But I thought Naugle ended up further away from where we were first hit than the rest of us were. So ...

The two CH-3Cs were maintained at NKP. Before we left NKP early on the 5th of November, we inventoried our weapons and survival gear. Then we all checked our emergency voice radios with the NKP tower on guard channel. My radio didn't work and I knew it when we left. We didn't have any extra radios at that time. I still took the radio with me. I guess I was hoping that it would miraculously start working if I really needed it. It didn't. We did all have the emergency beacon radios that had no voice capability.

As I said, I thought Naugle was the last to finally clear the aircraft on bailout. I think he was further away from the guns that got us than the rest of us were. He also landed on a hilltop and apparently, the bad guys did not see where he landed. Late on the night of 6 November, A US Navy helo from a carrier off the coast launched on a night rescue mission to try to help us. That helo was able to establish radio contact with Naugle on guard channel. When the rescue crew asked Naugle for a light, or flare, to fix his position, the only light he could provide to guide the helo was his Zippo lighter. The Navy crew saw the small light, made the pickup, and Bernie Naugle was taken for a boat ride courtesy of the USN. The rest of us had a different experience.

Bob Lilly, Art Cormier and I were all captured by the North Vietnamese and spent seven years and change as POWs. From comparing stories with Art, he managed to evade for eight days. He said he thought Bob evaded for five days. I also managed to evade for five days. The three of us, Bob Lilly, Art Cormier, and I were widely separated when we bailed out. I never saw any of the other guys after I jumped. We ended up in the same truck bed for one leg of our trip to Hanoi.

After I overcame the "window" obstacle, I rolled out the copilot's window, pulled the D-ring, checked the parachute canopy, and began looking for a place to land. As most of you know from your own combat experience, when the adrenaline is flowing, the training kicks in and you do a lot of things automatically. That was my experience including remembering the training sergeant telling me that after I pulled the D-ring, I should throw it away because I did not need it anymore.

It was very quiet at first till I heard small arms fire from the ground. We were flying at about 4,000 feet AGL when we were hit. I saw/heard where the shots were coming from and began working the risers to steer the chute away from there. I managed to move a substantial distance from the patties below me so that I could land in forested hills. Trees are not recommended for a parachute landing but I wanted to be away from people. From bailout till I was on the ground things worked liked advertised. I landed in tall trees. The chute would not come down. I threw a leg across a limb, released the harness and climbed about fifty feet more to the ground.

When I finally reached the ground, my heart was pounding. I had some bad third degree burns where flying gear didn't cover. I checked my survival gear and realized that I no longer had a canteen. I pulled out a small AF issued survival kit and took the first tetracycline antibiotic to try to protect against infection from the burns. (Before we left Eglin AFB, I had been the squadron supply officer. I went to the personal equipment section with the sad story that many in our unit were on our way to Vietnam. We did not have survival kits and I felt sure that when we arrived, such equipment would not be available. Since such gear was not part of our required issue at Eglin, the airman I talked with referred me to the NCOIC, who then referred me to the OIC of the section where I whined and cried until he gave me a bunch of kits to take with us. I wish I had begged some radios also.) I bandaged the burns quickly. Then I heard shots around the end of the ridge I was on and realized the bad guys had seen my chute in the trees and were headed my way. They were probably a quarter of a mile away when I first heard the shots and the chase was on. They had seen my chute, but they had not seen me yet and didn't know where I was.

I started climbing up and along the karst ridge toward higher hills and trees. It became steeper the higher I climbed becoming more like the side of a cliff. By that time, I had heard dogs barking and saw later that they had two German shepherd looking dogs with them. The dogs increased my motivation to climb hoping the dogs could not follow. I found a small ledge and the bad guys were getting closer. I thought I was in high enough and steep enough terrain that the dogs could not follow. I decided I needed to try to hide from the bad guys closest to me hoping they would pass on by. They were faster than I was and closing fast. The ledge was "out-of-the-way" so I lay down and began covering myself with the dry leaves that were all over the ground. (It was November) Bad guys passed within a couple of yards several times but didn't step on me and never saw me.

They also tried rolling large rocks or tree branches down from above, apparently hoping to flush me out. I survived the search that day.

While I was doing my evasion thing, the Sandies had turned back to help us. They had four beepers on the ground within a few miles of each other and each asking for their attention at various times. George McKnight was one of those Sandy pilots working to keep the NVN off our backs. In the process, George was shot down. By this time, we had the Thud pilot shot down Friday on the ground, Dick Bolstad (Sandy) from the search this Saturday morning was on the ground, the four Jolly crew members on the ground, and now George McKnight was there too. That is seven American aircrew members in less than 24 hours. A great day for the NVN gunners. A bad day for us.

Lots of NVN activity that afternoon all around me. Before dark they began setting up camp about 40 yards on the other side of the ravine below me. After dark, I managed to move another 20 or 30 yards to a better location, hard to climb to with a shallow recess that allowed me to be out of sight unless someone was right in my face with a flashlight. There was some NVN activity for a while after dark but then they seemed to get quiet and just listen. They seemed pretty confident that I had not gotten far. They kept several sentries around on the ridge above and around the ravine below.

There was no wind to provide noise cover so that I could move. I relaxed to try to rest. Late that night after I had nodded off, I heard a jet helicopter in the area. My first thought was that it did not take me long to lose my mind because we had been flying the only helicopter in the theater that had the range to reach us, (so I thought) and it was a pile of burned junk a few miles away. As it turned out a US Navy carrier was close enough to the coast that a Navy helo crew launched on a night rescue mission seeing that they had such a target rich environment. Bernie Naugle was rescued that night by the Navy.

When I heard the helo I turned on my emergency beeper radio. (Remember, my voice radio didn't work.) The helo was right over my head a couple of times but I couldn't talk to them. As the Navy got close, the enemy troops opened up on them with intense fire. I'm not sure how effective their fire was, but it made a lot of noise. As soon as the bad guys started shooting, I shut down my beeper. Then after the NVN stopped shooting and the helo moved off a ways, I tried turning my beeper radio on and off trying to use Morse code to send my initials as an identifier. Not sure if anyone figured that out. Also, while the bad guys were shooting I tried putting my emergency strobe light inside on of my glove with the open side up so that it could only be seen from above. I figured all

the flashes from the shooting would keep the bad guys from detecting the flashes from my strobe. It did. But because I was under tall trees, if there were no flashes from the ground fire, my strobe would light up the leaves on the trees and work like a beacon to show where I was. I wasn't going anywhere that night.

The second day there was a lot of aerial activity in the area. I tried using my beeper radio to hail fast movers a couple of times, but without voice comm no one could spend any time over my head especially with a lot of small arms and small anti-aircraft stuff around.

While I was unaware on the ground, there was also a monumental three-day rescue effort going on led by Barry Kamhoot and his crew in the remaining Jolly Green trying to rescue the Jolly Green crew on the ground as well as many others who needed rescuing. That is a separate report that Barry will have to present.

I tried to move a couple of more times at night, but the bad guys still had their camp across the ravine, searchers were still looking all around, and there was no wind to cover my movements. I didn't get anywhere. I looked for dew on the leaves but there was none. I tried chewing on some green fern-like leaves to see if I could get some water, but nothing. I had some survival rations in my vest, but I knew that I could live much longer without food than I could without water. So, I couldn't eat. I decided to just wait them out, hoping they would give up and leave, but I they didn't.

After five days without water, I decided that I was either going to get a drink or get caught trying. And I came up with a brilliant plan. At least it seemed so to me at the time. Over the time I had been hiding, the bad guys had worn a path along the ravine below me that was between me and their camp. I decided to climb down from my hide to the path below during their siesta time. During the afternoon, as in most tropical climates, the NVN army took a nap. When I got to the path, I turned away from their camp and began walking the path. It wasn't long before I found myself tripping over rocks or roots and falling down on the path. Then I found myself tripping over nothing. Then I found myself waking up on the ground not knowing how I got there. Finally, I came to the end of the path and every direction was uphill through the heavy forest. After climbing for a while, I realized I couldn't go any further. The dehydration had taken a much heavier toll on me than I had realized. I sat down to think and came up with another brilliant modification to my plan. I knew that there were three other men from our crew on the ground somewhere in the area. I would fire a couple of rounds from my .38 revolver and one of the men from our crew who had found water would come

to my aid before the NVN could get there and together we would make our way back to one of the Lima sites, or somehow be rescued. It seemed like a good idea at the time. Obviously, I did not realize how far gone I was.

You can see where this is going to end up. After I fired a couple of rounds, the whole countryside was suddenly awake. The NVN came from every direction and found me lying on the ground. They didn't even bother to tie me up. They slung me under a heavy bamboo pole and carried me out to a larger camp than the one I had seen. It was after dark when we arrived there. They had made a small shelter, gave me a little bit of water and a small amount of bread. I think I was out for most of the night.

The next day began the process of getting me to Hanoi which took another six days. We were shot down on the 6th of November. Counting my time evading, and the travel time it took 11 days from shoot down to Hanoi. I arrived at the Hoa Lo prison (the Hanoi Hilton) in downtown Hanoi on 17 November 1965.

On February 12th, 1973, Bob Lilly, Art Cormier, and I, were released to US authorities at Gia Lam airport outside of Hanoi and flown on USAF C-141s to Clark AB in the Philippines. Dick Bolstad, our rescue target, and George McKnight, the other Sandy pilot shot down covering us, were also released the same day. The F-105 pilot that was shot down on 5 November, 1965, that Dick Bolstad was sent to find never showed and was apparently killed when he was shot down.

During our incarceration, the American POWs in North Vietnam were very active, not only in resisting the enemy, but also with other administrative and personnel matters. While most of the POWs in North Vietnam were officers, there was also a small group of enlisted troops who earned their keep fighting the same battles we all fought. Those men were given/offered battlefield commissions. When they weren't enjoying the interrogations and torture, or doing the necessary communications, they also completed a training regimen to prepare them for commissioning. (That training was conducted under the most adverse circumstances. Communication was through the wall using the tap code. And any training communication was always a low priority after relaying other military information first. But our guys did what they had to do. And they made it work. Sort of the equivalent of conducting such training while in the middle of a firefight.) Those given the commissions still had to formally accept that commission after they returned to the US and there was some additional training to complete then, but the senior officers did not stop taking care of their troops just because we were in the middle of an extended battle.

Our rescue mission was finally completed in February 1973. The former POWs were flown in small groups and at different times, from Clark AB in the Philippines to Travis AFB in the US. When Art Cormier landed at Travis, Dick Bolstad (the Sandy pilot who was our rescue target when we launched on 6 November, 1965, was on the same flight with Art.) Seeing that Col Baylor Haynes was there to greet him, Art grabbed Bolstad by the arm, marched with him up to Col Haynes, saluted smartly, and reported, "Sir, I am sorry that it took so long, but here he is, the downed pilot we were sent to rescue.!"

Warren R. "Bob" Lilly, (Col, USAF, Ret.) died at home in Montgomery, AL, from a fall in early October, 2007. He was buried with full military honors.