

RESCUE

By Ben Van Etten

There are certain dates in a lifetime of events that stay etched in your memory. I can vividly remember, for example, my wedding day, where I was the day that JFK was assassinated, and other events important to my family. Another time was the 18th of March 1972.

I was the pilot on an H-34D helicopter for Air America, Inc. It started as a routine flight from Udorn, Thailand to Pakse, Laos. My passengers were mainly flight crews “dead heading” up country for a crew rotation. I was scheduled to remain six days in Pakse.

“King” was the call sign of the Air Force airborne controller for search and rescue (SAR) missions in Laos. I was about ten minutes from landing for refueling in Savanaket, Laos when “King” broadcasted a message for “any Air America helicopter in the Savanaket area that might be available to help rescue a downed pilot.”

Normally the military took care of their own SAR’s, but Air America made many rescues simply because we were in the area. Sometimes the Air Force was its own worst enemy because by the time birds were scrambled, briefed, cover provided, MIG cap provided, and authentication of the downed pilot (as if the enemy would stage a fake crash) were made, he’d probably be captured. On two other occasions, I’d picked up a downed crew, moved them to a safe area, and finally the military would make their pick up.

I responded that I could be available, after refueling.

I was given a radio frequency to contact “Sandy one” once I was back in the air. He would be the on scene commander directing the rescue operation.

The downed aircraft was an OV-10 forward air controller (FAC) out of Vietnam. It had been shot down by AA over route nine (part of the Ho Chi Min Trail) about 40 miles east of Savanaket. The crew was hiding on the east side of the “road,” which was alive with massive AA activity, and a quick pickup could avert certain capture by the NVA.

I contacted “Sandy one” shortly after takeoff and was advised to “head east to route nine and take up an orbit, but don’t cross route nine.”

“Hotel 70”, my call sign, “Rogers”. Sandy one and Sandy two were a flight of A1E Sky Raiders and normally escort the CH-53 (Jolly Green Giant) rescue helicopters.

As I flew closer to the area I could hear Sandy one talking to the downed pilot over the UHF guard frequency. He was OK, but the NVA soldiers were starting to look for him.

I might add at this point that March is the height of the “smoky” season when the farmers in that part of the world slash and burn, clearing areas of the jungle for planting the next season’s crops. Visibility on that day, because of the smoke, was down to about one mile with no ceiling.

I flew up to route nine and began an orbit when I called Sandy with my position. I also requested the coordinates of the downed airman, which he refused to pass. “Besides,” he said, “the Jollies were on the way and would be making the pick up.”

That was just fine with my crew and me. We didn't relish the idea of flying through 37mm AA, not to mention the 23mm and 12.7's that were reported in the area.

Finally, I heard the Jollies call Sandy with an ETA of fifteen minutes.

Sandy replied with "continue inbound while I descend toward the target to get visual on the downed pilot".

A few seconds later, Sandy's wingman reported ground fire directed toward Sandy one. Sandy replied with "Roger, I heard the shots, but didn't take any hits".

Even though I was only a mile or so away from the pick up point, I had yet to see the Sandies because of the smoke.

The next radio transmission was from one of the Jollies saying with a nervous sounding voice that he needed to RTB (return to base) because of a fluctuating gage (probably his blood pressure). Number two came back with "I'm right behind you". He sounded relieved.

I called Sandy again and requested coordinates.

He was going to make another pass over the area and would get back to me.

Again Sandy two broadcasted "You're receiving fire."

Sandy one answered, "I've been hit and I'm on fire!"

I interjected at that point to turn to 270 before bailing out.

"Negative, I'm heading south and ejecting right now!"

Obviously, I wanted him to head west toward us and bail out on the west side of route nine. We hadn't had visual on him yet. As he was making his last transmission, I turned the UHF homing switch that showed his position from us as 080.

I was orbiting at 3000 feet and nosed over to descend to tree top level, before crossing route nine.

The two other crewmembers (Captain B.J. Ruck, my co-pilot, and Flight Mechanic Jim Nakamoto) both agreed to go on with the rescue. There was no doubt that this one could definitely turn into a "shit sandwich." We all needed to be on the same sheet of music.

Another Air America H-34 piloted by Dave Ankerberg and Bill Johnson arrived as my backup and would remain in orbit west of the "trail" while I went for the pickup.

We were low level with the wheels inches from the tree tops, heading 080, pulling lots of power, maintaining max air speed (above VNE, no doubt). When we crossed route nine, which seemed like a four-lane highway, we were exposed much longer than we anticipated. It took about ten to fifteen seconds to cross! The "pucker factor" was also "red lined," but we never heard a shot! Back over the trees we breathed a bit easier.

Looking ahead through the smoke and haze we could see the fire and black smoke bellowing from Sandy's wreckage. I turned a few degrees left figuring that the plane probably flew on for a few seconds after the pilot ejected.

About that time Sandy one called on his survival radio that he could hear us and we were headed straight for him. I spotted his orange parachute and noted with some dismay that he was hanging about fifty feet up in a tree!

I settled to a low hover over him for a hoist pick up with the jungle penetrator. Jim operated the hoist as I hovered the aircraft. B.J. had his Uzi, loaded, on his lap, watching out the left side. (As if the Uzi would do us much good against a squad of pissed off NVA soldiers with AK47's!)

Sandy two was in a tight orbit over us. We felt good about that, those A1E's packed a lot of firepower!

The pilot was looking up at us with a big grin as Jim worked the hoist to lower the penetrator. I was thinking it was a bit early for celebration, we had a long way to go.

This particular hoist only had one speed, slow. It seemed to take forever for it to get to him.

Meanwhile, we were expecting the bad guys to come running out of the jungle with guns a blazing. Under the triple canopy the ground appeared open.

Jim came over the intercom and advised us that our grinning pilot couldn't reach the penetrator! Jim was trying to swing it to him, but because of the dense tree foliage, it wasn't happening.

About that time we heard the first round explode above us! I'm not sure if "Charley" was shooting at our cover A1E or was trying to lob an air burst at us. Anyway, times were a bit tense.

We retrieved the hoist while the pilot was able to rappel to the ground, unhook from his survival pack, and move to a more open area.

We moved over him again, lowered the penetrator, he hooked up and we began the extraction. A second explosion was heard overhead. It sounded close!

To add to our concerns, the 30-minute low fuel light had been illuminated for approximately 20 minutes. We finally got him into the aircraft and figured that we'd been hovering there for 34 minutes! Luck was with us, the bad guys were still a no show.

I gave "King" a call to let him know we had "Sandy one" on board and were heading out.

King advised us not to re-cross in that area, but to head south and cross the road near the town of Saravan where it was safer. Unfortunately we were too low on fuel to go far. If we were going to run out of gas, the west side of the road was our best option. I advised "King" that we'd have to cross at the same area where we came in.

I'd radioed to have a drum of fuel brought out. After crossing route nine (Again without incident) we rendezvoused with the other chopper, landed in a field, and hand pumped 55 gallons of gas into what must have been only fumes left in the tank.

While we were refueling, we were all feeling pretty good about saving the downed pilot, but mainly we were glad to still be alive. Being the nice guy I am, I decided to have a little fun with the pilot. There was a rumor going around (with the Air Force) that Air America crews received a \$10,000 bonus when we recovered a downed airman. Not true.

I got with the pilot and told him that we wouldn't be taking him directly back to his base (NKP Thailand) and would be going on to Paske. Of course at that point anything I said would have been fine with him. I further explained that he was worth ten grand to my crew and me and I hadn't been paid for our last rescue. So we wanted to make sure we turned him over to the right person to get credit for the bonus. Naturally it all sounded very reasonable to him.

Within an hour we landed at the Pakse Airport, turned the happy pilot over to his Air Force representative, and reported in to our "customer," Jim Butler. Jim (call sign "Grey Fox") told us to assemble in the briefing room. We had a mission (exfill) in the Bolivians plateau. Another hot one to finish out the day, 18 March 1972.

THE BOLIVANS PLATEAU

Three helicopter crews were assembled in Jim Butler's briefing room. A battalion of Thai soldiers have been under daily attack by NVA artillery and have about thirty wounded soldiers to be picked up. They were located on the Bolivan plateau and were on the move to an area that would be safe enough for a helicopter pick-up. The LZ would be on a high open area about thirty miles east of Pakse.

I was going to be the flight leader in "Hotel 70", with the other two H-34's to follow close behind. The third aircraft would remain high and become the SAR aircraft in case one of us was shot down. Piece of cake!

Then into the room came the "customer", a CIA case officer named Jim Lewis (call sign "Sword"). We all looked at each other with the same thought, Jim Lewis didn't have the greatest reputation for honesty. He'd tell a chopper crew whatever you wanted to hear so you'd attempt the mission. He was determined to win the Medal of Honor, even if the chopper was shot down in the process.

The plan was Jim would ride in my bird, be dropped off at the pick-up zone, sort out the wounded while we orbited over head, and call me in when they were ready. We'd land one at a time. If the first aircraft didn't receive any fire the second would land and pick-up more wounded. We'd continue making trips until all of the wounded were picked up, or we started to receive fire.

On the Bolivans the enemy (NVA) had artillery and some light armor. The Lao and Thai soldier's were not as heavily armed. All they had was limited air support when the weather permitted and, of course, Air America.

The Pakse airport is located on the Mekong River and during that period was a relatively safe area. About fifteen miles east, where the high plateau of the Bolivans begin, was pretty much controlled by the enemy. The Royalists (Lao Army) had occupied most of the plateau (at least the populated areas) until late 1971. Gradually, the NVA had pushed the Royalists out and by March of 1972 controlled most of the Bolivans.

One of the real travesties associated with the Communist take over of that part of Laos (or any where the Commies moved in and occupied) was that developing the immense natural resources of the area would stop. The Bolivan plateau was a mountainous area about forty miles square ranging from two to five thousand feet in elevation. It contained some of the most fertile land in Laos. Anything could grow there and that could amount to about four crops a year.

US AID had spent time with the farmers and introduced many hybrid crops which all did amazingly well. Even strawberries flourished in that area; a crop previously unknown to South East Asia.

Because of the higher elevation the rivers on the Plateau were clear and cold. There was a waterfall on the eastern edge we called Niagara Falls. It was a beautiful setting and could have been developed into a world class resort. Wild game abounded in the area including tigers, wild gaur, and elephants.

Obviously, nothing good will happen there until Communism goes away. Keeping the locals under-developed and progress at a minimum is how they retain control.

After about fifteen minutes of flight time we were nearing the landing zone. We remained high and looked for the proper signal panel to appear on the pad. A white "O"

was put out and I could see about thirty soldiers standing around the LZ. The fact that they were not hidden from view meant that there probably hadn't been any recent enemy contact.

I dropped off "Sword" while the other two H-34's remained high over-head. The landing caused a great deal of brown dust which would definitely alert any enemy in the area that a chopper had landed.

In about five minutes "Sword" called that they were ready for the first aircraft- me. The litters with the wounded were lined up next to the pad where I landed; again, creating a large cloud of dust.

I kept the RPM up and the aircraft light on the struts, expecting incoming fire at any time. The wounded were being loaded when I heard the first explosion about three hundred meters behind us!

I would wait about ten seconds before taking off, giving "Sword" a chance to get in the aircraft. I figured that if a second round was fired, it still wouldn't hit us (hopefully).

There were several litters and walking wounded at the doorway when the second round hit. Right in the middle of the troops next to the aircraft! Five feet left and we would have been history.

I was looking down from the right seat at the loading procedures when the round exploded. The concussion and noise from the impact were instantaneous, but the resulting mass of bodies being thrown in all directions seemed to happen in slow motion. Just like a "Spaghetti Western".

I hoped that "Sword" had jumped aboard because we were out of there. We had a heavy load, and because of the high elevation, it seemed to take forever for the H-34 to gain airspeed. As we were climbing out, another round went off under us. They were trying to shoot us out of the air!

Jim was with us in the aircraft, but he'd received a shrapnel wound. There was also a wounded soldier hanging on to the wheel strut! The back of his shirt was covered with blood and as we gained airspeed and altitude, I expected to watch his body drop hundreds of feet into the jungle. Too bad.

Suddenly, the muscular arm of my flight mechanic, Jim Nakamoto, reached out the aircraft cargo door, grabbed the soldier's shirt, and yanked him inside! Another life saved, as we heard later, because the soldier survived from his wounds.

By the time we arrived back at Pakse the sun was setting. We inspected the aircraft for damage, but there were only a couple of small holes. No problem.

The mission would be continued in the morning. This would give the Thais time to move to another location. Meanwhile, after a very eventful day to say the least, we were ready to suck down a few cool ones. As I had mentioned before, 18 March 1972 is a day I'll always remember.