

**I** find the late evening skies over New Mexico a masterpiece of beauty. The majestic clouds resulting from moisture entering from the Gulf of Mexico complement the many shades of blue as the fading light gives way to the onset of darkness. Watching nature at its best often transcends my day-to-day thoughts to strong appreciation for being allowed to be a part of the world about me. As I reflect upon this particular August evening in 1997, I am reminded of another 25 years ago in which, were it not for the dedication of others, the decades of pleasures I have experienced since would never be.

Early in 1972, I was a Navy A-7A *Corsair II* pilot flying missions into North Vietnam from USS *Saratoga* (CV-60). As a member of the VA-105 *Gunslingers*, we were part of a major military effort to force North Vietnam to the Paris peace talks and bring the drawn-out 10-year war to an end. I was still young enough at age 27 to believe that dying was reserved for the ailing and elderly, and with youth came the blessings of immortality. For the first four months of our WestPac cruise, I had little reason to feel otherwise. Although it had been dangerous for anyone to cross the beaches of North Vietnam, I had convinced myself the situations leading to the losses of others would never happen to me. However, on the evening of 6 August 1972, I was to learn otherwise.

### The Adventure Begins

The setting sun was ending another hot, summer day off Yankee Station when we headed west from the fleet toward the North Vietnamese coastline. We had been off to a slow start. My flight leader lost his radio and had to return to the ship, and I was instructed to join up with LCDR Art Bell, whose wingman also had to return to the ship due to mechanical problems.

We crossed the beach at 2100 and turned to a northwesterly heading toward Highway 72 where a major build-up of supply trucks had been reported. Darkness had set in by the time we spotted truck movements north of the city of Vinh. Our airborne brief informed us that other planes had earlier experienced heavier-than-usual enemy fire in the area. During our ingress from the coast, however, anti-aircraft fire was only light and spotty. I focused my attention on a faint line of headlights several miles off my nose and rolled into a 45-degree dive delivery. The intensity of AAA seemed no different than usual, and my bomb delivery was normal. But then things began to change. As I rolled over to evaluate my hits on the target, I received an ECM indication of a busy *Fansong* radar that was tracking me, followed immediately by a missile launch. All I could see in the darkness of the telephone pole-sized missile traveling four times the speed of sound was a fireball with a dark center arching high through the dark North Vietnamese sky toward my aircraft. Like most pilots flying over North Vietnam in 1972, I had seen numerous SA-2s fired at us, but this was the first time I had seen any this close at night. I again rolled inverted and pulled my *Corsair* into a 4- to 5-g split S and successfully outmaneuvered it. As I watched it pass by me, 37mm AAA erupted around my plane. Unknown to me at the time, a second SA-2 exploded behind me, shoving my plane forward and tearing off parts of its left wing. My plane went into a hard left roll and the nose pointed downward in a steep dive. With the

*Wearing a huge grin, LT Jim Lloyd, right, is helped from Big Mother 60, the HC-7 SH-3A that rescued him under intense enemy fire in North Vietnam. LCDR Bernie Smith, a VA-105 squadronmate and now a rear admiral, offers assistance.*



altimeter rapidly passing through 2,000 feet, I ejected using the alternate ejection handle. As complicated as the ejection sequence was, I could only recall a sudden rush of air, the instrument lights falling away and the plane blowing up on impact directly below me.

The parachute ride was equally simple . . . two swings in the chute and a gut-wrenching impact with the ground. I don't recall getting out of the parachute harness or seat pan, but I clearly remember running to get away from the light and heat of my aircraft in flames nearby. In a

## To Those Who Returned for Me

*by James R. Lloyd, former VA-105 Gunslinger*

matter of a few minutes, I had transitioned from my safe and familiar cockpit to a hostile environment 21 miles from the coast and 150 miles north of the Demilitarized Zone in an area saturated with hundreds of armed enemy troops and civilians. I was to learn years later that few if any Americans who went down in that vicinity were ever seen again. In fact, earlier that day we were unsuccessful in rescuing a downed pilot flying off one of the other carriers. His loss had been on my mind up until the final moments before my flight.

### Depending on the Abilities of Others

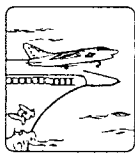
I pulled out my PRC-63 survival radio and was successful in contacting my wingman Art, who had seen the fireball and heard my emergency beeper. It is funny what goes through a person's mind in life-threatening situations. With so much to worry about, my main concern was the level of fear in my voice. Maybe it was because I knew not only did I have to depend on the abilities of many others to survive, but my own actions as well. I was trying to comprehend all that was happening around me and control my anxieties that were taking their toll on my self-confidence.

After running several hundred yards, I crouched behind a small clump of razor grass at the edge of a rice paddy overlooking a small village. My ankles hurt and I sustained cuts on my hands and face. I was to learn later that I also sustained a double compression fracture of the neck during the ejection sequence.

Mosquitoes were everywhere, and the stench of human excrement from centuries of accumulation in the rice paddies took some getting used to. I drank from one of the water bottles I carried, took a deep breath and called Art again. This time, I felt more confident as I briefly told him what had happened.



USN via the author



I had landed at the edge of Dao My, a small village a few miles east of the Song Ca River, southeast of Vinh Son in the heart of North Vietnam. Unlike the jungled landscape of much of South Vietnam, this area consisted of open fields and rice paddies broken by random scattering of small villages. Art's friendly voice on that little radio was a comfort as I viewed the strange and unfamiliar land that surrounded me. The smells, sounds and what little I could see gave me a feeling of extreme isolation.

My conversation with Art was interrupted as North Vietnamese began streaming from the village. There was shouting, dogs barking and even pigs grunting. I applied mud to my face and hands to blend my skin tones with the darkness and protect me from the mosquitoes. Within 10 minutes villagers were scattered all around the crash site searching for me.

The extreme darkness played a critical role in the events that followed in the next several hours. The dark night was to be my ally in giving me a sense of protection and an advantage over the enemy that I desperately needed. Although they couldn't see me, the searching Vietnamese would approach so close to me that I couldn't even whisper on the radio unless Art's plane was directly overhead to drown out my voice. At one point, the Vietnamese came within six feet and didn't see me.

Art informed me that LCDR Bernie Smith from my squadron had joined him. Knowing that he was overhead further boosted my confidence as Bernie was experienced in combat flying—SAR efforts were

USN via the author

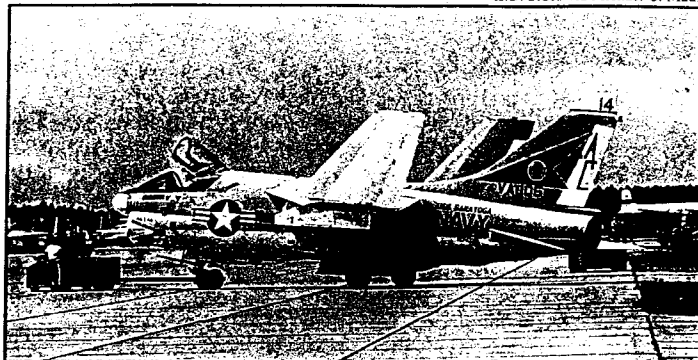


*Above: Under tow for maintenance at NAS Cecil Field, a VA-105 Gunslingers A-7A wears the colors of Air Wing Three on board USS Saratoga (CVA-60). Left: Jim Lloyd (center) stands with the HC-7 rescue crew that plucked him from enemy guns in the early morning hours of 7 August 1972. From left, LTs Harry Zinzer (pilot), Bill Young (copilot); AE3 Douglas Ankeny and AMHAN Matthew Szymanski (combat rescue crewmen).*

Corsairs to drop Mk 82 500-lb. bombs on the other side of the rice paddy in an attempt to draw the enemy away from me. It didn't work. The concussions from exploding bombs were devastating, but even worse, the light they created turned the area and my cover into daylight. I knew then if I was to get out of North Vietnam. I had to leave my cover to find a safer place to bring in the ResCAP. And I had to do all this while it was still dark.

As I was deciding what to do, I watched a group of 11 North Vietnamese less than 50 yards away in light-colored clothing and talking

L.B. Sides via Michael C. Mauls



nothing new to him. Together, Art and Bernie would fly overhead with their lights on so I could vector them over my position. This was effective in giving ships and the E-2 a location of my position, but it also gave the enemy two easy targets to shoot at, and the skies erupted with explosions as they flew overhead. It was then I realized that most, if not all, of the many North Vietnamese around me were firing pistols and smaller caliber, rapid-fire guns at the two planes as they repeatedly flew overhead. Near by, 37mm and 57mm anti-aircraft guns went off with a devastating roar.

### Too Hot for the First Rescue Attempt

I wondered how a rescue attempt could be made under the developing situation when Bernie informed me that an HC-7 SH-3A *Sea King* helicopter was feet dry and inbound. A quick assessment of the situation convinced me that no one coming in slow and low was going to survive the firepower around me. It was difficult for me, but I made the decision to turn back the helicopter and have it hold until I could find a safer pickup area. Bernie never questioned my judgment.

At first I thought I could get the enemy to move away from me by making them think I was at a different location. I asked one of the

loudly. They stayed together in small groups, and no one ever wandered off by himself. Throughout the hour I watched, none of them ever approached me closer than 30 yards.

When I sensed I could leave without being detected, I slowly got up and looked around. Although I knew I had to move, leaving my cover for more open areas made me very nervous. Step by step I slowly slipped away into the darkness. When the Oriental voices faded

into silence, I began running.

I had not traveled 100 yards when I realized I had lost both my PRC-63 and PRC-90 survival radios! I had stripped off some of my survival gear earlier to reduce the noise it made, and I had tucked both radios, a flare and the remaining water bottle under the pant leg of my anti-blackout suit. This was a mistake that nearly cost me my life. Without voice contact with ResCAP, rescue would be impossible. Reluctantly, I turned around and began crawling back, using the voices of my enemy to guide me to the grass that was my hiding place. Luckily, I found my hiding place, groped around in the mud and found the PRC-90. Holding the precious radio in my hand, I carefully retreated for a second time.

As I continued north, the direction with the least amount of gunfire and shouting voices, I checked in periodically with the A-7s overhead for updates on rescue efforts and to assure them I was still free. Once in a while I would hear searchers beating on metal objects and yelling in an attempt to flush me out, which might have been effective had I not been warned of this tactic in survival school. I would occasionally hear someone yell "Jim" in a Vietnamese accent. Either the enemy had identified who I was by monitoring my conversations with the planes flying