

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

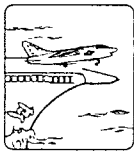
I pulled out my PRC-63 survival radio and was successful in contacting my wingman Art, who had seen the fireball and heard my emergency beeper. It is funny what goes through a person's mind in life-threatening situations. With so much to worry about, my main concern was the level of fear in my voice. 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).

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

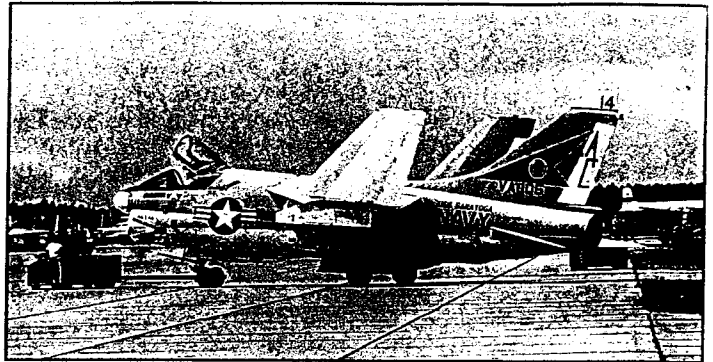
I wondered how a rescue attempt could be made under the developing situation when Bernie informed me that an HC-7 SH-3A *Sea King* helicopter was feet dry and inbound. A quick assessment of the situation convinced me that no one coming in slow and low was going to survive the firepower around me. It 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

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



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

With a little help from my friends . . . LT Jim Lloyd, in flight suit center, talks over the excitement of his rescue with squadronmates LCDRs Art Bell (left) and B.J. Smith.



overhead, or there was a Vietnamese word that was similar to my name. It was very unnerving regardless.

Eventually I came across an elevated dike between two large flooded fields that made traveling significantly easier. Wading through the rice paddies had been exhausting and noisy. The paddies were covered with a few inches to almost two feet of water, and the bottom was slimy, making walking almost impossible. Although I now was on drier land, I elected to continue crawling because it allowed me to better detect people against the dark horizon and take evasive action sooner. I began feeling more encouraged as I quietly moved farther to the north.

Nearly Captured

My optimism didn't last long. After a quarter mile I heard voices approaching from behind. I looked back to see two armed soldiers using the same narrow pathway I was on. I had little choice but to move slightly to the side of the narrow dike, and they passed inches from me as I lay motionless at the edge of the dike. However, they hadn't passed more than a few feet when they stopped and spoke to one another. They slowly walked back, and I soon felt them standing over me. Up to this point, I knew I was in a difficult situation, but as long as I had my freedom, I felt I had a chance. I now realized I was at the complete mercy of the enemy, and I was devastated! I lay there with my radio held in my right hand, desperately thinking what to do next.

I felt a jab in my back from a rifle barrel as the two again spoke. The jab was surprisingly gentle, and was quickly followed by a second. I played dead, as I didn't have any other choices. The two began arguing with each other and next I heard footsteps running off. I imagined that one was leaving to seek help from a group of other soldiers no farther than 40 yards away while the other remained standing over me. I gathered up all the courage I could and rolled over to surprise the one who remained. To my amazement, I found myself alone.

With my freedom restored, I jumped to my feet and ran as fast as I could in the direction I had been heading. As I ran, the snap link on my torso harness made a slight metallic sound that was enough to draw attention to me. A dozen or more guns from within 100 yards opened up. I held my head low and continued to run. The darkness continued to shroud my movements—the bullets aimlessly whizzed by me and thumped into the mud. In an attempt to evade my pursuers, I turned 30 degrees from my original heading and ran into an adjacent field. Eventually their shooting and yelling faded. I checked in with the A-7s overhead and realized it was well past midnight. Dawn was not far off.

Trusting in My Training

As I continued my search for a safer pickup area, I continually encountered groups of North Vietnamese spread out in waves looking for me. At one point, a dozen or so people waded past my position as I crossed a rice paddy. I held my breath and submerged, only to feel the vibrations of their movements as they passed. When I felt it was safe, I continued onward. Several such successes in encounters with the enemy suggested that I was doing the right thing, and I began to believe I may have a chance to make it out of North Vietnam alive. What I had learned in training became routine to the point I would follow what the Navy

taught me without hesitation. I found what I had learned in SERE (survival escape, resistance and evasion) and JEST (jungle environmental survival training) to be of particular value. I had to make many decisions that night, and any mistake could be costly. Through it all, I felt I was being led by the experiences of the scores of aviators before me who had gone down and lived to share their experiences so others might survive.

As the early morning hours marched on, I heard only random shooting and voices in the distance. I felt many of the enemy had lost their initial drive to find me, and they would wait for daylight to continue the search.

After crawling, walking and running about two miles from where I had landed, I found a shallow depression in the ground in which to rest and call the aircraft. I was told that after three cycles of inflight refueling and returning to my position, Bernie and Art had been relieved by other aircraft of *Air Wing Three* led by CDR Charles Earnest and LCDR Grady Jackson flying *Ace 504* from our wing's *Intruder* squadron.

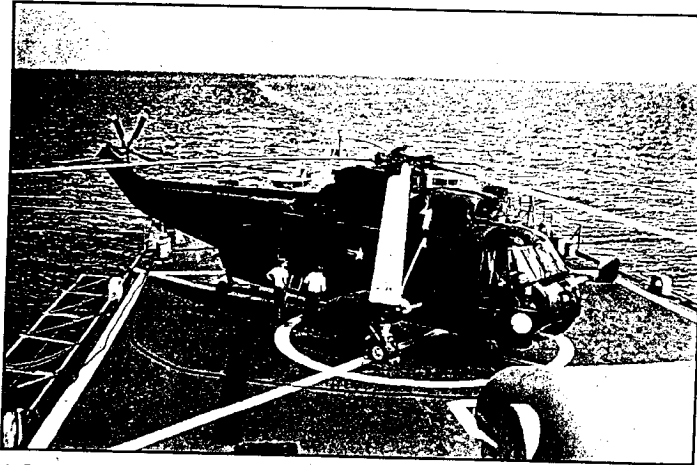
Flight operations for *Saratoga* were scheduled to end at 2200, but planes flew from her deck all night long in support of the rescue efforts, as did those from *Midway* (CVA-41). I radioed to *Ace 504* that I was in a relatively quiet area, and to go ahead and bring in the ResCAP helicopter. CDR Earnest responded that *Big Mother 60*, an SH-3A helo from HC-7 off *England* (DLG-22), had just refueled and was on its way. He went on to tell me there was little I could do for the next 30 minutes except to "just take it easy."

With that, I slumped down in the mud to wait. The adrenaline that helped me throughout the night began to leave me, and I realized just how tired and sore I was. One of three things were about to happen in the next 30 minutes that would determine my destiny—rescue, death or capture. Reality began to sink in, and I found it increasingly difficult to keep what little optimism I had from being overwhelmed by a cloud of dark despair.

Second Rescue Attempt

Meanwhile, a lone *Sea King* helicopter quietly slipped its way into North Vietnam under the cover of darkness and a low cloud cover. *Big Mother 60*, flown by LTs Harry Zinser and Bill Young, with AE3 Douglas Ankney Jr. and AMHAN Matthew Szymanski as crewmen, had its own difficulties. Earlier, the helo had been vectored to *Hepburn* (FF-1055) to inflight refuel, but the quick disconnect fittings kept breaking away while it attempted to take on fuel. Successful at last, *Big Mother 60* departed *Hepburn* and crossed into North Vietnam near Hon Mai Island at 500 feet. Although low cloud cover and extreme darkness masked the helo's presence, it also made it difficult for the two pilots to see the rough terrain and still stay low enough to remain out of the SAM envelope. Despite this, they continued inbound to my position.





A SAR SH-3A Sea King helo from HS-2, similar to HC-7's Big Mother 60, on Alert 5 on the fantail of USS Mahan (DLG-11), on North SAR Station in the northern Gulf of Tonkin, April 1967.

Twenty minutes after my last transmission with ResCAP, I could hear aircraft moving into the area overhead. With the returning aircraft came voices nearby—the enemy was also returning to my area. I wasn't sure what was going to happen next. My survival training in helicopter rescue was in the jungle with the benefit of daylight. The pickup area was still dark, with wide open paddies saturated with the enemy all around. I wasn't at all sure how I was to see the helicopter or how the crew would be able to locate me. As *Ace 504* made one last low pass over my position with his lights on to ensure positive identification, the pilot and B/N wished me luck. They then proceeded south to divert attention away from me.

An Opposed Rescue

I now began to hear the faint sound of the combat SAR helicopter's rotors in the distance. It wasn't long before I could see it as it came in low, fully illuminated and taking an intense barrage of ground fire. As the helo flew over a farm house, it took five direct hits that raked the helicopter's undercarriage just below Petty Officer Ankney's station.

My radio continued to weaken, but I was able to make contact with the helicopter pilots and began vectoring them in. At times I had a little difficulty communicating my position to them, but our combined efforts managed to bring the helicopter close to where I was hiding.

The *Sea King* was traveling fast and low to avoid ground fire when I stepped out of my cover and into the glow of the helo's blinding lights. I felt very vulnerable knowing I was exposing my position to the searching North Vietnamese, particularly when I began to jump up and down and wave my arms. I knew that it had become a race in the predawn darkness as to who would reach me first.

The helicopter didn't see me on its first pass as it flew by and away from me. I desperately called on the radio for them to turn around and dived for the ground, as I had been spotted by the advancing enemy and was receiving increased small-arms fire. LT Zinser responded by making a 180-degree turn and asking me to show a light. I was about to fire a flare when several pencil flares were fired from positions close to me. The enemy had been monitoring our radio transmissions. I yelled into my radio, "Disregard, disregard, I'm turning on my strobe light, don't shoot, don't shoot, don't shoot!" I had been reluctant to use my strobe light before, as it was attached to my shoulder harness and besides illuminating me for the enemy, it could be mistaken as ground fire by the American gunners. When I finally turned it on, several other strobe lights illuminated close by. By now I could hear the enemy advancing almost to my position.

The helicopter crew finally spotted me and put their craft into a hover a short distance away. Small-arms fire came from all directions, but the two helo gunners kept the advancing troops away from me and the helicopter. Amid the roar of the rotor blades and firing M60s, I attached my snap link to the cable and waited. Nothing happened! When I looked up. I realized the helicopter had landed to get below the deflection angle of a 37mm gun that was very close. I jumped up but couldn't get into the cabin because I was still attached to the cable. Also, the opening was chest-high because the pilots had to hold power to keep the aircraft from sinking into the soft mud. As I was trying to get on board, a SAR pilot flying overhead radioed to the helicopter pilots to get out, and to get out immediately! From above, circling jets could see we were taking AAA at point-blank range from our six-o'clock position. But the two helicopter pilots elected to remain with me. In middle of all the deafening noise and flashing of gunfire, I could see a tall gunner in the open doorway. Doug Ankney reached out with his hand from behind his M60 and yelled, "Come on, come on!" He grabbed the back of my flight suit and threw me into the cabin. From the opposite door, Matt Szymanski covered us from the advancing enemy, who were now within 50 feet. Once aboard, the *Sea King* shook as it went into full power and lifted off to begin its easterly journey out of North Vietnam.

An Eternity in 21 Miles

It was only 21 miles to the coast, but it seemed like eternity for all of us. I had seen several rounds strike the helicopter, but I didn't know the extent of the damage and was afraid we might go down before we reached the safety of the water. At first I remained on the deck, but worried about taking a round through the floor. I then stood, but was afraid of falling from the open doors as the helo jinked to avoid ground fire. One of the crewman then directed me to an empty seat and helped me strap in.

We were within two miles from the coast and beginning to feel safe when two missiles streaked by the helicopter, missing us by less than 20 yards. I was still tense and feeling extremely apprehensive when Szymanski handed me some water and pointed out the door. Looking down, I faintly saw the North Vietnamese coastline. In the final moments of darkness, *Big Mother 60* with its five weary occupants crossed the sandy beaches of North Vietnam and headed toward the safety of the *7th Fleet*.

Our first stop on our return trip was *Cleveland* (LPD-7). It was there I learned that the northerly direction I had been following would have led me directly into a series of villages at about dawn. In the open country and with the enemy search efforts, I wouldn't have had a chance. Had it not been for so many who risked their lives, I wouldn't be alive today.

Several months following my return to flying status, Charles Earnest was killed and Grady Jackson was injured during a night catapult launch. Art retired from the Navy after the war to begin a career in commercial aviation. Harry Zinser, Bill Young, Grady Jackson and Bernie Smith had successful and fulfilling Navy careers, with the latter two achieving flag rank. Douglas Ankney, Matthew Szymanski and countless others who were there for me that night have gone about their lives, their whereabouts being lost over time.

As I gaze into northern New Mexico skies, I often think of that night long ago and privately express my gratitude for all those who came back for me. Chief of Naval Operations ADM Elmo Zumwalt expressed it well 25 years ago: "The superb display of Naval teamwork resulting in the skillful night SAR mission northwest of Vinh was noted with great pleasure. Well done to all concerned."

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