

<http://skyraider.org/skyassn/warstor.htm#anchor495644> is the Plei Me section of the homepage site Byron Hukee at spadguy@mindless.com has organized.

It parallels the 155th unit history of all the activity on 21-22 Oct around Plei Me and the gunship (Falcon's) efforts to rescue an A-1E pilot with a VNAF CH-34. Below is an excerpt:

Mel Elliot the A-1E pilot wrote: "I'm hit...

After about an hour in the area I advised the flare ship that we would

be able to stay in the area longer if we expended the external ordnance

we were carrying, napalm, CBU and rockets. The compound marked an area with a mortar round and we expended our external ordnance. Upon

completing this, the flight again set up an orbit awaiting the arrival

of the Caribou to resupply the compound. At approximately 2:15 am, I requested the status of the Caribou and was told that it had been

canceled for that night. I informed the flare ship and compound that we

would have to leave the area shortly but that we could strafe any

likely areas with our 20mm cannon before leaving. The compound again

marked an area with a mortar round and I rolled in on a strafing pass.

As I pulled off the target I noticed that things were quite

bright. I
looked at the left wing and it was ablaze. At this time I called
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wingman and notified him that I was on fire. The wingman
requested that
I turn on my lights so he could see me. My thoughts, at that
point were
that, if he couldn't see me with the fire that was burning he
for sure
wouldn't see the lights of the aircraft.
At that point, I planned to maneuver over the compound and bail
out (no
Yankee extraction system at this time). Before getting into
position
over the compound the flares went out and it was impossible to
see the ground. I continued in the orbit, at approximately 800
feet
altitude awaiting the illumination of flares so I could see the
ground.
Before this happened the controls of the aircraft failed and I
notified
all concerned that I was bailing out at that point.

Over the side..."

So Al, and Earl, I would like to get the names of some of your
1965 guys
that would have flown around Plei Me and get more data going
here. I
think we can easily determine the Caribou unit was from Pleiku,
and I
think we might have the 117th and 119th in the fray.

Bottomline: In the "Battles" part of the helivets homepage, I
have been
the only contributor and that needs to end. We have a hell of a
story
here at Plei Me that needs to be exploited, researched, and put
on the
homempage, with pictures.

point, I said if we were playing baseball they would be lucky to get an assist, it was definitely not a put out.

Nevertheless, I was lifted in the air. Unlike the previous survivors who gladly went along with this tradition, I resisted. We struggled for some time. I was finally thrown over the bar, but two of the Jolly Greens held tightly in my arms crashed over the bar with me. In the process I struck my forehead on the corner of the wooden bar ending up with a deep gash that started to bleed. It was unlike any rescue celebration ever conducted at NKP at that time. Maybe ever.

The injury to my forehead left a scar that remains to this day. Years later my two young sons asked me about the scar. I said I got it in the war! I never explained to them what actually happened to me. It was the kind of war you couldn't explain to anyone.

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Mel Elliott

Plei-Me

On October 19, 1965 a flight of 4 A-1Es from the 1st Air Commando Squadron, then stationed at Bien Hoa AB, RVN were scheduled for a combat mission in South

The Jolly Green helicopter landed back at Lima Site 21. I assumed the crew would shut down their engines and stand rescue alert there. The crew informed me that it was too dangerous to leave the chopper on the ground and they needed to be airborne in case another rescue were required. They took off heading southeast like my wingman had done several hours before. This was going to be a long day after all!

In what seemed forever, I waited for the C-123 to arrive. The sun had moved west across the sky and I was still far from my home base. I got out my .38 caliber revolver and rechecked the six shells in the chamber. Sitting under the wing of my aircraft I wondered if the CIA type might have been a Skyraider pilot who had also made an emergency landing there some time ago and never got back home!

The C-123 finally arrived with five mechanics and all kinds of tools. The repair was actually quite simple. Evidently, a couple of magneto leads had come loose in the ignition system. Shortly, I started the engine and it sounded as sweet as I had ever heard from one of the huge Pratt & Whitneys. Just as the sun set, I was airborne. It was going to be easy to find my way home, just head the same direction as my wingman and the Jolly Green had taken many, many hours before.

Gear in the well...

That evening back at NKP, I was informed that my Jolly Green rescue crew expected me at the Officers Club for the standard rescue party. It was the custom for every aircrew rescued by the Jolly Green and Sandy force to buy a round of drinks for all involved in their rescue. The survivor was also lifted in the air by the rescue crew and thrown over the bar. A three foot Jolly Green Giant cloth doll stood on the counter behind the bar. It held in its hands an eight inch square white plastic board in which a number written in black grease pencil indicated the total number of aircrew rescued by the Jolly Greens. The survivor would erase the old number, and print the new to the applause and celebration of all in attendance.

How George really got his Purple Heart...

My Jolly Green rescue crew had been at the bar for a long time. They sounded as incoherent as the CIA type I had spent time with at Lima Site 21. I bought a round of drinks for them and told them, as Paul Harvey would say, "the rest of the story." We finished several rounds and they were ready to throw me over the bar. But I wasn't planning to go over the bar. It was my opinion that the Jolly Greens should not get credit for a rescue since I was returned to the exact same place in which I was rescued. They explained that they had picked me up in enemy country and transported me back over the Mekong River to friendly country. That was all that was required for an official rescue. It wasn't their fault that the command post ordered them to return me to Laos. To make my

stationed at Bien Hoa AB, RVN were scheduled for a combat mission in South Vietnam. Just before takeoff the flight leader, Captain Melvin Elliott, was told they were being diverted to Plei-Me Special Forces camp, approximately 30 NM south of Pleiku. The flight departed and flew to Plei-Me uneventfully. Upon arriving just before dawn there was a flight of F-100s in the area working with a C-123 with a FAC on board. When the F100s had expended their ordnance the A-1E's were directed into the area. The flight leader was told that the compound was in trouble from an attack by what was later determined to be regular North Vietnam troops. (The first confirmed in South Vietnam.)

The A-1 flight was operating on an FM radio frequency and had the flare ship as well as the American Commander of the compound on the same frequency. During the attack the compound Commander directed the A-1's to drop the napalm that he knew they had on-board right on the perimeter of the camp. At times the pilots of the flight noticed that the igniters from the napalm cans were going over the wall into the trenches inside the compound. After all ordnance had been expended the flight returned to Bien Hoa without incident. Upon landing three of the four planes had several bullet holes (small caliber) in them.

Back to Plei-Me...

Two days later, 21 October 1965 (Sunday), I was in the officer's club having a drink with a friend from Hurlburt who was flying the AC-47, (PUFF), aircraft. This pilot asked me what medals I had been awarded during our tour there and I replied, "The only ones left are ones that hurt or scare you." Then the phone in the club rang and it was the command post asking for A-1E pilots to go on alert. The pilots on alert had just taken off on their third mission of the day which was the point at which they would have to be replaced. I answered the phone and told the duty officer I would round up four new pilots and would report to the command post ASAP. The four new pilots, including myself, arrived at the command post, were briefed and assigned aircraft, picked up our flight gear and proceeded to the aircraft to "cock" them for alert. We had just loaded our gear in the planes when the command post called and ordered two planes to launch. My wingman and I were to be the second two to launch so we proceeded to the alert trailer to get any rest possible. About 2 hours later the phone rang ordering the second two planes to proceed to Plei-Me and rendezvous with a flare ship and an Army Caribou at 12:30 am. The flight to Plei-Me was uneventful and rendezvous was effected with the flare ship. The weather in the area at the time was about 1000 foot ceiling with good visibility under the clouds. The flight set up an orbit around Plei-Me awaiting the Caribou. The flare ship was keeping the area lit from above the clouds.

I'm hit...

After about an hour in the area I advised the flare ship that we would be able to stay in

the area longer if we expended the external ordnance we were carrying, napalm, CBU and rockets. The compound marked an area with a mortar round and we expended our external ordnance. Upon completing this, the flight again set up an orbit awaiting the arrival of the Caribou to resupply the compound. At approximately 2:15 am, I requested the status of the Caribou and was told that it had been canceled for that night. I informed the flare ship and compound that we would have to leave the area shortly but that we could strafe any likely areas with our 20mm cannon before leaving. The compound again marked an area with a mortar round and I rolled in on a strafing pass. As I pulled off the target I noticed that things were quite bright. I looked at the left wing and it was ablaze. At this time I called my wingman and notified him that I was on fire. The wingman requested that I turn on my lights so he could see me. My thoughts, at that point were that, if he couldn't see me with the fire that was burning he for sure wouldn't see the lights of the aircraft. At that point, I planned to maneuver over the compound and bail out (*no Yankee extraction system at this time*). Before getting into position over the compound the flares went out and it was impossible to see the ground. I continued in the orbit, at approximately 800 feet altitude awaiting the illumination of flares so I could see the ground. Before this happened the controls of the aircraft failed and I notified all concerned that I was bailing out at that point.

Over the side...

As I was attempting to bail out of the aircraft I became stuck against the rear part of the left canopy. My helmet was blown off immediately when I stuck my head out of the cockpit. A few days before this mission I had cut the chin strap off the helmet as the snap on it had become corroded and would not unfasten after a mission. At this point the aircraft was out of control and was rolling due to the fire burning through the left wing. After freeing myself from the aircraft, I reached for the D-Ring which was not in the retainer pocket on the parachute harness. However, I found the cable and followed it to the ring and pulled it. The chute opened and shortly after flares lit and I could see that I was going to land in the trees in the area. After landing in the trees, approximately 50 feet above the ground I bounced up and down to insure that the chute was not going to come loose and then swung over to the trunk of the tree and grasped a vine nearby. I had lost my hunting knife during the bailout so I was forced to abandon the survival kit that was a part of the parachute.

After climbing down the vine to the ground, I sat down and thought about the situation for a short time and assessed what equipment I had. I had a 38 cal revolver with 5 rounds of ammo, a pen-gun-flare, a strobe light, a two way radio, which at times was a luxury to A-1 pilots, my Mae West and a brand new "chit book" from the Bien Hoa Officers Club.

After regrouping on the ground I got out my two way radio and contacted my wingman

who was orbiting the area. I told my wingman, Robert Haines, that I had him in sight and advised him when he was directly overhead and then instructed him to fly from my position to the compound and that I intended to attempt to make it to the compound. About 30 minutes later Haines had to leave the area and proceed to Pleiku as he was running short on fuel.

A failed rescue attempt...

I proceeded toward the compound and when I felt I was getting close to the perimeter a severe fire-fight broke out. At this point I found a likely place to hide out and stayed there the rest of the night. Shortly after dawn I spotted an O-1 aircraft orbiting the area and turned on my radio and called him several times before getting an answer. I had forgotten my call sign and used my name, when calling the bird-dog. By identifying different landmarks the bird-dog (which turned out to be an Army A/C) pinpointed my position. I stayed fast all day and just after dusk the bird-dog (same pilot) told me that a Huey was coming to get me out. Shortly afterward, radio contact was made and I was told to get into the best position I could to get picked up. The Huey arrived on the scene and I moved from my hiding place onto a small trail through the brush. When the Huey came around with lights out I turned on my strobe. The Huey made two orbits and on the third circle came in and turned on his floodlight. At that point a 50 cal machine gun opened fire about 50 yards from my position. The Huey turned his lights off and left the area. I put the strobe in my pocket and got off the trail into the brush and laid as low as possible. About 10 minutes later two people (North Vietnamese soldiers), came down the trail with a flashlight. At this point I was about 20 feet off the trail and flat on the ground. The two fellows were chatting as if they were out for a Sunday stroll and shining their flashlight from one side of the trail to the other. On one of the sweeps of the light it came to within about 2 feet of me and then the next sweep was beyond me. After the two fellows were satisfied that I was not in the area, I found a new hiding place and settled down for the rest of the night. At this time it was about 8 pm. There was no sleep for me as aircraft were in the area the entire time I was on the ground. Between them and the mortars it was quite noisy. One thing I learned during my tour at "Plei-Me" was that a bomb must get quite close to an individual flat on the ground to cause him any great grief.



As dawn, (my second on the ground), approached, I heard the familiar sound of a C-47 in the area. I got out of my hiding place and saw an AC-47 orbiting with the business side toward me. The aircraft made a couple of orbits as I was going around the trunk of a large tree similar to a squirrel who is being hunted. Shortly afterward, the AC-47 opened fire with his guns, fired a short

burst and departed. I later learned that they had experienced an engine problem and returned to base.

After two nights in the jungle...

Around 8 am I contacted a Bird dog in the area and through identifying landmarks, he again pin-pointed my position. The FAC (USAF) said he was going to throw smoke grenades to get a better position on me. Then, I didn't really think that was a good idea but the FAC threw all the smoke he had but never got any close enough for me to see. He advised he was going for more smoke and left the area. At this time another Bird dog arrived and advised me that a chopper was coming to pick me up and to get into a suitable area. I moved into an opening clear of brush but full of grass 5-6 feet high, and rather swampy underneath. Upon reaching the middle of this clearing I contacted the FAC and was advised that the chopper had been diverted on a "HIGHER PRIORITY" mission. This was really the only time while I was on the ground that I was completely demoralized. I proceeded back to the place I had hidden out all night and then decided that I was going to move away from the compound to make it easier to get picked up. During the move, about 1/2-3/4 mile I came across a small stream and washed my face up somewhat and washed my mouth out. This made me feel somewhat better.

I came upon a rise in the terrain and after the climb I came upon a fair sized clearing. I spotted a clump of bamboo and started for it to hide out, when an object darted out of it. After my heart started again I saw that it was a wild pig. I proceeded into the bamboo thicket and contacted a bird dog orbiting overhead. I again pin pointed my position with the bird dog, who said he was going to go for some food and water, as they did not know how long it would be before I would be picked up. After he left I realized that the only thing I had that I could open a can with was my pistol and five rounds of ammo.

Picked up at last...

After 30 minutes I again contacted the Bird dog and he said to come on the air again in 15 minutes. At the time I turned my radio on again I heard several pilots talking on "GUARD," several of whom I recognized as A-1 pilots. The FAC said that an H-43 AF rescue chopper was about 5 minutes out and that the A-1s would be dropping napalm along a tree line about 100 yards from my position. He advised me to move into the middle of the clearing as soon as the A-1s passed over. Doing this, I spotted the H-43 coming in about 20 feet off the ground directly toward me. The pilot got into position and was forced to hover because of the brush in the grass. This created a huge wave of grass that I was forced to crawl through. Upon getting to the chopper I was dragging many vines that grew in the grass. The PJ on the chopper was hanging out the door and I stepped on to, (I thought the skid but instead got on the wheel). As soon as I reached up the PJ told the pilot he had me and away we went. The wheel rotated and I was hanging by my arm and the PJ's arm. I looked up at him and said I was not going back down there alone as he pulled me into the chopper. This was about noon and a total of approximately 36 hours on the ground.

After arriving at Pleiku there was some scrounging around trying to find a way for me to get back to Bien Hoa. Ultimately an A-1 driven by Gail Kirkpatrick was diverted into Pleiku to pick me up.

After arriving at Bien Hoa an intelligence Sgt from Saigon was there to debrief me and the most redundant question was, "Capt Elliott were you scared at any time?" After debriefing and being checked over by the Doc I asked if my wife in Phoenix had been notified of this episode and could not get a definite answer. I then asked the Wing CO if I could call back on the Hot Line to talk to her. At this time it was 5 am in Phoenix. I got through to the operator at Luke AFB and gave her my number. She advised me she could not ring off base numbers. I kept her on the line and told her why I was calling and she put the call through. My wife had not heard of any of the events about my bailout and ultimate rescue, so I briefly told her, and when she hung up, she got the local newspaper which had my picture on the front page, along with the story.

There is no way of saying thanks to all the people involved in a successful rescue mission and there is no way to tell someone who has not been through such an ordeal what it is really like.

"Thanks to all involved"

Mel Elliott