AIR AMERICA
INC.

TO : Captain H. R. Casterline
Captain F. N. Smith
Captain A. E. Cates
Captain T. Woosley
First Officer M. Disoum
First Officer K. Vongprasert
Flight Mechanic S. D. Waite via MTS, CFM
Flight Mechanic M. A. Leveriza via MTS, CFM
Flight Mechanic F. O. Ortillo via MTS, CFM

DATE: 23 May 1970

REF. NO. MF/RW-70-105

FROM : MF/RW-UTH

SUBJECT: Commendation

Gentlemen:

Your combined efforts resulting in the successful rescue of two downed airmen on 19 May 1970 embodies nearly all facets of your qualifications as Air America Rotary Wing Crew Members. This particular effort of 19 May was complicated tremendously by unfavorable weather and activities of hostile elements, however these obstacles were overcome and two lives were saved as a direct result of your competence.

I take this occasion to commend and thank each of you.

Well Done !

Earl W. Knight

cc: DFD via RM/UTH (6 copies)
VPTS via DRM, MTS, CFM/UTH (3 copies)
"P" files
File

FORM 4000B

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY
COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO 80840-5701

23 March 1988

Dear Captain Cates

Thank you very much for responding so quickly to my letter. Your letter is just the type of information I am looking for. I have already researched the official record of the AA SAR's you mentioned and provide the following for your info:

7 Apr 70 - Lt M.P Hamilton was off the Constellation, Call sign War Ace 302. Shot by prob 23MM while coming off second bombing run. Air America is listed as the recovery acft.

19 May 70 - Capt F.P. Norton and Major C.A. Crawford, RF4C out of Udorn. Callsign Bullwhip 01. Unknown gunfire while on recce of roadstrip. Pick-up by Air America acft.

I was unable to find a 2 May 72 SAR involving an AC-130. Could it possibly have been on 30 Mar? The record lists a Spectre 2 out of Ubon shotdown this date in Laos. The coordinates work out to the area of Saravane. It is possible the record keepers screwed up the date. The rest of the information matches up pretty well.

I very much appreciated your mention of the DFC while in the USMC and the point you make is well taken. I'm convinced money didn't enter into the SAR efforts. You said SAR was mentioned in your operations manual; do you know anyone who might have a copy? I would like to have a copy of passage on SAR. If not, I'll use your comments as the source.

Sir, you were very complete in your response and provided some excellent information. Many thanks. Hopefully, I'll do justice to you and the others who risked their lives to recover military crews. Your critical role will always be a part of my classroom discussions with cadets and in my future writings. When you have time, I look forward to hearing from you again.

Best Wishes

Tim Castle

TIMOTHY N. CASTLE, Captain, USAF
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Articles

The Easter Egg Hunt - Cates
12/8/1999 4:00 PM

The Easter Egg Hunt
From the Air America Perspective
By Allen Cates

By the spring of 1972, the war in Vietnam had changed its complexion since 1965. America's role of providing fighting men had all but ended and the lead belonged to the Army of South Vietnam. The war in Laos had escalated. American ground troops were forbidden in country but the air war had increased significantly. The road network along the Vietnam and Laotian border was commonly called Ho Chi Minh's Trail. It had previously been occupied with North Vietnamese soldiers and supplies streaming southward into the Vietnam Delta. Now, it was used to supply enemy troops in southern Laos. Air America used a simple term and called it the road. Only a few people have seen it. Those who worked the area long enough to know about its hazards really did not want to see it.

The description, Ho Chi Minh's Trail, did not accurately describe the road. The trail was a network of large roadways that could carry heavy trucks loaded with troops and supplies. It was heavily defended and unarmed aircraft were defenseless. You did not go to the road unless you had to, and even then, you knew your life was in jeopardy. All types of American aircraft were used in the attempt to break the supply chain and the North Vietnamese reacted accordingly. A large quantity of the expended ordnance that went down also

went up. The North Vietnamese Army took personal offense at being bombed and strafed. They responded with 23 and 37-millimeter guns that could knock down any type of aircraft. Increased firepower by the United States Air Force was badly needed.

One aircraft designed to meet this demand was the AC-130 Gun Ship. By the spring of 1971, eight aircraft were delivered to SEA with several modifications. The latest version carried two 20-mm Vulcan cannons, two 7.62 mini guns, and two 40-mm Bofors, all fixed mounted to the airframe. The rear 40-mm Bofor was replaced by a fixed mounted 105-mm howitzer by early 1972. It looked like a fire breathing monster when you watched it operate at night. No one would believe that anyone or anything would dare its wrath. Still, the aircraft was vulnerable and its mission was difficult.

These aircraft were designated with a call sign of Spectre, which accurately described its mission and capability. Spectre 22 launched out of Ubon, Thailand on March 30, 1972 and headed east toward the road. It carried a crew of 15. Each crewmember had a letter designation with "A" being the pilot and "B" the co-pilot and so on until "O," who was stationed near the tail. The attitude of the entire crew was serious and guarded. Everyone knew there were no survivors on the Spectre that went down the night before. There was probably vengeance on their mind but these were professionals. Their mission was to interdict traffic on the road, stop it in its tracks and return home safely. On this night it was going to be a longer than normal mission.

They were hit sometime around midnight. The co-pilot looked out his right side window and could see nothing but a sheet of flame engulfing the wing. It was obviously a mortal wound and he thought to himself, "My God, they've got another one." The aircraft commander ordered everyone to bail out. That was their only option. The co-pilot, running on 90% adrenaline and 10% seven-up, beat a path through a darkened aircraft and leaped out the back into a black night. He floated down in the dark and hit the ground on the very road he had been strafing. As luck would have it, there was no visible traffic and he found cover in some bushes while turning on his survival radio. Although he did not know it at the time, when ordered to bail out, he had passed several others when he made his exit. Crewmember "M" floated down in close proximity, but on an elevated ridge a few hundred yards to the West.

An airborne command post scrambled from Korat RTAFB after the distress call and started coordinating appropriate aircraft. His call sign was King 27. Spectre one and Spectre 21 AC-130 Gun Ships, were in the area trying to raise any survivors on rescue radio frequencies. It had not been

determined how many had survived. Spectre 21 provided as much information to King 27 as was available until relieved by Spectre 20. By this time, it had been determined there were survivors but the actual number was unknown. Spectre 20 had made radio contact with some survivors and learned that the aircraft had traveled some distance between being hit and bailing out. King 27 started to plan the on-scene operation with the assumption that most had gotten out of the aircraft and were potential survivors. His objective was to start a communication network and night visually search for as many as 15 men in preparation for a night recovery or a first light attempt.

Thence began the largest and most complex combat rescue operations ever attempted in the Vietnam War. King 27 requested multiple FAC. (Forward Air Control) aircraft with a call sign of "Nail" to over fly the target area and attempt communication on each of the four rescue frequencies. Allocating one frequency to each of four Nail FACS as they arrived on scene, he began a nightlong process of gathering information and eventually made radio contact with all 15 crewmembers. Since the on-scene time was limited for each FAC. by his fuel endurance, a cycling of aircraft was necessary. Replacement aircraft had to enter the subject area to continue the operation after being briefed. Concurrently, King had obtained fighter-bomber resources to orbit awaiting a possible need to deliver ordinance on enemy forces, which might compromise the safety of the survivors.

As the night progressed and more survivor locations were detected, SAR forces were launched from Nakhon Phanom and DaNang in case rescue attempts could be made before first light. These included Jolly Green helicopters using LNRS (Limited Night Recovery System) techniques (night vision goggles) and A-1 Sky Raiders for close air support. Because of the scope of this rescue operation, all airborne resources (SAR, fighter-bombers, FACS of all sorts) were made available for this mission. Additionally, Air America helicopter resources were requested to aid in the effort.

Bruce Jachens had been operating a UH34D all day out of Savannakhet a few miles to the North. He had settled in for the night at the L-39 Air America hostel when the call came for him to launch south. Bruce was a veteran pilot with Air America and had been called upon several times to rescue downed military pilots. Normally though, it was done during daylight hours. A night rescue in hostile territory is dangerous and you stand the chance of having to be rescued yourself. Almost all of southern Laos was hostile territory and going to the road at night; well . . . you may stand a chance of being rescued if you survived but there were no guarantees. Bruce talked it over with his Filipino flight mechanic and both said "What the hell" and headed south in H-

Just north of Pakse, he joined up with a helicopter from Pakse. H-45 was crewed by Cates, Frady and Nakamoto. They had been working out of Pakse for the last several days. There was no moon and it was blacker than the inside of a cave. Flying night formation without any reference to the ground is not a piece of cake. As luck would have it, both aircraft were ordered to maintain radio silence and stand by. In this case, standing by meant flying in a circle in a virtual Inkpot.
King 27 learned that two survivors had exited the aircraft shortly after it was hit and they were located approximately 40 miles east of the main congregation of survivors. These two were in deep trouble. King 27 did not know it but the rest were in an area of relative safety. He assigned support to this secondary SAR area to determine as much information as possible. Now they had, in effect, a SAR within a SAR. Since the threat to the two survivors on the road was unknown, King decided that as long as their situation was stable, he would concentrate the search and rescue efforts in the area with 13 known survivors. He would delay the East Side pickups until the primary area recovery operations were underway. By doing this, King hoped to avoid complications, which would happen if the East Side recovery went bad.

Now that all the crewmembers had been identified, it was decided to wait until first light to pick them up. The two Air America aircraft were told to stand down and they headed to Pakse to secure for the night. It was well after midnight by the time the two Air America crews got to bed. They had no way of knowing about all the preparation and assumed the Air Force was doing its thing without them. Bruce arose early, breakfasted and had the Air America cook prepare a bag lunch for later. He did not know at the time that he would be sharing his lunch.

The nightlong effort consisted of every SAR aircraft in Southeast Asia, over 100 in all. This enabled the Jollies and Sandies to begin their coordinated recovery of the 13 men located on the West Side. It soon became apparent that the men were more closely grouped than originally thought. The carefully laid plans to divide the survivors to different Jolly/Sandy teams quickly unraveled. As soon as one Jolly started in for a hover over a known location for one survivor, another survivor would make his presence known in the vicinity by radio transmission. This would happen again and again until all 13 men were safely picked up by at least four different Jollies. It truly was an Easter egg hunt and with Easter Sunday just around the corner on April 2nd, it was a blessing as well.

Before Bruce could head back to L-39 the Pakse customer

advised him that he and the crew of H-45 were needed to rescue the two survivors on the road. Once the main group of 13 was in the process of recovery King had released the East Side recovery and asked for assistance from Air America. A Nail FAC., Raven and two Sandies were also dispatched. The situation was tense and urgent. During the night, a lone pedestrian had been spotted close to "B" and King had ordered an air strike in that area. It was well assured the enemy knew there were survivors on the ground and had a good idea of their location. It was also probable they knew someone would come to pick them up . . . unless they got to them first.

Bruce was flying as a single pilot since he had been working L-39 and that station did not require two pilots. H-45 continued with the same crew from the night before. Half way to the pickup zone Bruce experienced a battery fire. His flight mechanic put it out burning his hand in the process. Normally, that would be cause for aborting, but Bruce and his flight mechanic agreed to finish the job and kept going.

Arriving in the zone, contact was made with both crewmembers. No one hesitated. They needed to get in and out as soon as possible. Bruce held his altitude and acted as SAR for H-45 who picked up "B" uneventfully. As soon as H-45 was safely up and away, Bruce descended to pick up "M" while H-45 acted as his SAR.

The UH-34D was primitive by most helicopter standards even at this date. The engine was a radial design with nine huge cylinders. At sea level it developed 1525 horsepower at 2800 RPM and 56.5 inches of manifold pressure. It was a basic stick and rudder aircraft with a hot rod engine. However, as a helicopter, it had a collective and a hand twist throttle, which made it mechanically more difficult to fly than an airplane. The controls are servo assisted, but any movement on any control, be it rudder, cyclic control stick, collective or throttle required a corresponding adjustment on the other controls. Veteran H-34 pilots learned to utilize the energy in the rotor system to their advantage in mountainous terrain. Failure to do so left many of these birds broke and burned in the rocks. RPM is the staff of life in a helicopter and in the H-34, you guarded it religiously.

Bruce's pickup was more difficult than H-45. The survivor was located near a ledge and Bruce had to hover over him in close proximity with the ridge. On a flat surface, a helicopter will benefit from a cushion of air formed from the down draft of the rotor system. The weight capacity while hovering in ground effect is far higher than hovering out of ground effect. The elevation was not terribly high, but any elevation decreases the horsepower of the Wright Cyclone.

Bruce could see he would not have benefit of ground effect due to the uneven terrain. He also had another problem. The survivor's chute was right next to him and the rotor wash would cause it to billow up into the blades. He had to make a pass and motion to him to get clear of the chute. He made his approach into the wind and reduced his airspeed while simultaneously increasing manifold pressure as he descended. This act required increasing the throttle to 2800 RPM and offsetting the torque increase with rudder. He could sense the helicopter could safely hover and arrived over the survivor with full power and zero airspeed.

Now Bruce had to hold his position while checking to see that his RPM was held constant and there was power to spare to prevent settling in to the ridge or on the survivor. At this point Bruce was oblivious to any other activity and could not be concerned even if fired upon. The safety of the survivor depended upon him holding an exact position. On cue, the flight mechanic lowered the hoist and collar. All the survivor had to do was place the collar around him and wait to be hoisted up. He was understandably apprehensive.

Most of his adult life had been spent in the Air Force. He had been schooled about rescue techniques and knew almost instinctively how to react. All of his schooling was with people in Air Force uniforms and with aircraft with Air Force insignia. He was looking up at a pilot that could pass for a Russian and an oriental flight mechanic in civilian uniform. On top of that, the helicopter was obviously antiquated and was void of visible markings. Who were these people? Where's my people?

Bruce had his hands full of controls and knew he was a sitting duck for anyone with a slingshot, much less, a 23 or 37-millimeter gun. It was time to get the hell out of there and the survivor had to make a decision. There was no way to talk and explain due to the hover height and the noise. Finally, reason set in and the survivor placed the hoist around him and allowed himself to be hauled upward and aboard.

Now safely airborne Bruce joined up with H-45 and they both headed west for safety. Bruce asked the flight mechanic, "How's our passenger doing?" "He looks a little white around the gills" he replied. Bruce reached over and grabbed one of the sandwiches the cook had made for him that morning and handed it down him. "Give him one of these." Leaning over to the frightened survivor, he handed him the sandwich and said with a smile welcome to Air America.

This completed the successful recovery of all 15 crewmembers. The act will go down in history as the largest

successful aircrew recovery of the entire war.

Acknowledgements:

Donna M. (Tisron) Inman was the wife of one of the survivors. He is now deceased. At first, she thought Air America had rescued her husband. We later found out that he had been with the larger group. Her letters to me prompted this story.

David J. Preston was King 27. His letter to Donna provided information about the coordination effort

Bruce Jachens is now living in Florida. He was recently married and his wife Carolyn attended the last reunion. Welcome aboard Carolyn.

Chuck Frady is now deceased. Chuck was an excellent pilot and if he was ever unnerved, I never saw it. His assistance that night was well appreciated.

Jimmy Nakamoto was a Japanese-American. His whereabouts are unknown. I flew with him several times and always enjoyed his company and appreciated his expertise.

Judy Porter took the time to take my ramblings and edit it into a good story. She has my sincere thanks.

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Articles

Night Train to Bangkok - Cates

02/26/2002 1:30 PM

By: Allen Cates

The war in Laos was all but over in the spring of 1974 and I had been in Udorn a full five years. The furniture was packed and gone. Lucette and the kids had left a week before and were vacationing in Spain. I had accepted employment in Taiwan and would leave tonight on the train to Bangkok.

I could have gone back to Saigon, but opted to leave Air America. I could sense the whole thing was over, but couldn't escape the feeling that it wasn't time to leave. Last minute details kept reminding me of past events and memories flooded my mind.

I was hot, sweaty, dirty and tired and only half finished with digging a large hole in the back yard. Old Dollar was our family pet and watchdog. We couldn't take him to Taipei and tried desperately to find him a home, but big Great Danes that didn't like anyone outside of the immediate family were hard to place. A local car dealership wanted him as a guard dog, but Dollar did not like any of them and I knew his life would be miserable. The alternative was to put him to sleep and the family left the task with me. As it turned out, the local vet could not get near him to administer the lethal dose. Dollar would have none of that. So, I had to do it myself while telling him gently that everything was going to be OK. He had complete trust in me and died in my arms.

Now, I was in the process of burying him in the back yard...a perfectly good dog that wanted nothing more than to be left alone with his family. I felt like shit. He also required a big hole and I rested often leaning on the shovel while staring down at his lifeless body wondering why I felt like the bad guy when it was his disposition that caused all this.

Then a memory event was triggered and I laughed involuntarily. It wasn't funny at the time. Charlie Basham lived in the same compound. I often made homemade ice cream from strawberries I got from missionaries on the Boleven Plateau and was in the process of finishing up when Charlie

walked into the house. Dollar raised his head and I looked at him, but Charlie didn't pay him any attention and most dogs will not be bothered unless they sense danger. Charlie had just got a big spoon full in his mouth when a smaller dog we had barked for some reason.

In a blink of an eye Dollar was up and had his fangs sunk in Charlie's face. Great Danes are not smart. I hope that doesn't offend anyone, but it's the truth. They react on instinct. Dollar sensed danger and reacted. Charlie never moved a muscle. He just looked that dog right in the eye and continued chewing. There are not too many people who can stare eye to eye with a large dog with his fangs puncturing his face and remain unnerved. I was stunned...along with the dog. The only one who was calm was Charlie. Dollar backed off whimpering and Charlie finished off the ice cream.

"Charlie" I choked out. "I'll get my gun and shoot the damn dog right now."

"Wait ten days." Charlie said.

"What?" I didn't know what he meant at first, and then realized...rabies! Charlie wanted to make sure the dog didn't have rabies.

Charlie walked out telling me it was pretty good ice cream. After ten days Charlie told me not to shoot the dog. The fang marks had almost healed and Charlie recognized that Lucette and the kids depended on Dollar for safety when I was up country.

That memory kind of helped me with the task and I kept on digging, but before long I was out of breath and started thinking about the strawberries and the Boleven Plateau.

Not long after arriving in Udorn I had been designated an instructor pilot in the H-34 for those who were just arriving new, or from Saigon. I was teamed up on this hitch in Pakse with Link Luckett. Link had been in Saigon flying the Bell and was actually senior to me, but he was checking out in the H-34 and we were doing some line training.

Link was more than just senior to me at Air America. Link probably forgot more about helicopter flying that I ever learned. One of his accomplishments was the rescue of some mountain climbers near the 18,000-foot level of Mt. McKinley with a normally aspirated helicopter. No small feat! Link was awarded the Carnegie Silver Medal for his heroic effort. (You can read his story at http://www.plums.com/db/chf/press.asp?id=45130>) He was also awarded the Frederick L. Feinberg Award in 1961.This award is presented to the helicopter pilot(s) who accomplished the most outstanding achievement during the preceding calendar year. The award consists of a stipend ($200), the engraving of the recipient's name on a plaque, and an individual plaque. This award honors the memory of an outstanding helicopter test pilot and an exemplary person.

Well, here I was showing him how to fly a H-34, which was redundant. However, like most good pilots, Link was also a good student. We were working out of PS-22 supplying food, water and hard rice to the several outposts on the Plateau when we heard on guard that an A-7 Corsair had been shot down just off the Plateau. The single pilot was in the process of escaping and evading some highly pissed off people that he had been bombing the shit out of before they knocked him down. Two A-1 Sky Raiders were discussing the situation and I came up on guard and asked if we could assist.

They told me they were waiting for a Jolly Green coming from Vietnam, but asked if we could

stick around in case they needed something done right away.

I asked for the location and knew immediately his survival depended on him being moved immediately. He was in a bad place and he was not well liked.

"Hey!" I said. "Either get him out now or there won't be anything to get."

They agreed and we briefed in the air a few miles from the spot he was thought to be hiding. We had contact with the pilot on the ground and he reported a lot of activity all around him. I intended to make a high speed descend to tree level, instruct him to pop his smoke, and make a fast stop right over his head. We couldn't land...there were two many trees. So, we had to hoist him up and I told him how we were going to do it. I then asked the two Sky Raiders if they would strafe on either side of me as I picked him up and as we departed.

They agreed and down we went with the Sky Raiders right along beside me. I was using a high-speed autorotation decent and half way down I called for the smoke. It was red and billowing in the trees and I knew that if I could see it, so could the bad guys.

We were in the tree line now and moving as fast as a H-34 can go at about 120 knots. Ground fire sounds like popcorn cooking in the next room in a helicopter with a 1525 HP Wright Cyclone at max power roaring in your ear, and it was heavy.

The Sky Raiders were unleashing everything they had and were jabbering loudly to each other. I should have placed them on another frequency, but I wanted to keep contact with both them and the downed pilot.

"Hold it down guys!" I can't hear the survivor." I yelled.

"OK Mister." "Do your thing." They yelled back.

I was over the smoke now and did a high speed stop right on the mark, but I couldn't see the pilot. I turned in a hover looking for him and Link was calmly telling me to keep it in to the wind. The Flight mechanic was busy dropping the hoist and then I spotted him and stopped dead still in a hover so he could get into the hoist.

I could hear the popcorn and I had the wheels in the trees trying to get as low as I could and hoping like hell I didn't catch a tail rotor. Link was scanning the area looking for bad guys and we both knew our time was limited.

"Tell me when he's aboard." We got to get out of here." I yelled to the flight Mechanic.

"He's on board." "Haul Ass!"

I moved out of the hover while keeping the wheels in the trees with 50 inches of manifold pressure and the turns pulled down to 2650 for best lift over drag...a trick that either Ed Rudolphs or John Fonburg taught me. The bad guys knew we had captured their mark and were pouring on the firepower. The two A-1's were dropping everything they had along side and the black smoke from spent ordnance was heavy.

Wham!!

"We're hit!" I yelled out. We couldn't stay down at tree level. Our only choice was to climb out of trouble. I had been hit before, but this sounded like big stuff. It really rocked the helicopter. The H-34 descends fast, but climbs painfully slow. It's especially slow when someone is shooting at you.

"Climb you son of a bitch." I yelled out. I was looking for a cloud to hide in and the A-1's were making pass after pass to hold their heads down.

And then we were clear. I checked below and everybody was OK. We headed back to PS-22 in silence…escorted by the Sky Raiders. Without them we couldn't have made it.

Dutch, the CIA case officer for PS-22 met us at the helicopter when we landed. We asked the pilot where he was from and he spouted off his name, rank and serial number and we all laughed. I guess the civilian clothes were confusing to him.

The heat brought me back to reality and I was only half through with the hole.

"Dammit Dollar!" "Why couldn't you have been a cat?"

It was late and I needed to finish. I kept looking out into the compound hoping to see a "B" bus with a note telling me it wasn't really over and to saddle up and head north.

I finished the grave and stood silently for a while. I washed up, locked the house for the last time and went to the Charoen Hotel for dinner. A taxi took me to the station.

I kept telling myself that I shouldn't be depressed and that the type of life style all of us lived was not conducive to longevity. I had been flying in a combat zone almost continually since 1964. Wasn't it time to let it go?

"Get over it man!" "Its done and finished." "OK, I accept it. " I told myself.

Just as I boarded the train, I thought I heard a VW engine. Was that a "B" bus? No?

It was the saddest trip I ever made on that train

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RESCUE - By. Ben A. Van Etten
4/15/2000 1:00 PM

RESCUE
By Ben A. 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 . 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" was broadcasting 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. Some times 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 anti-aircraft over route twenty three (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 anti-aircraft 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 twenty three and take up an orbit, but don't cross the road.

"Hotel 70", my call sign, "Rogers." Sandy one and Sandy two were a flight of A1E Sky Raiders and normally escort the CH53 (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 twenty-three 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 pickup."

That was just fine with me and my crew. 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 a visual on the downed pilot." A few seconds later Sandy's wing man 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 pickup 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 gauge (probably his blood pressure). Number two came back with "I'm right behind you." He sounded relieved.

I called Sandy again and requested the coordinates.

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

Again Sandy two broadcasting "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 twenty three. We hadn't had a 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 the road.

The other two crew members (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 "rotten sandwich." We all needed to be on the same sheet of music.

Another Air America H34 crewed by Bill Johnson and Dave Ankerberg arrived as my backup and would remain in orbit west of the "trail" while I went in 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'd 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 that 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 pickup with the jungle penetrater. Jim operated the hoist as I hovered the aircraft. B.J. had his Uzzi, loaded, on his lap, watching out the left side. (As if the Uzzi 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 fire power!

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 ways 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 penetrater! 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 penetrater, 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 twenty three (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 Pakse. Of course at that point anything I said would have been fine with him. I further explained that he was worth ten grand to me and my crew and we 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. He bought it all, hook, line and sinker.

With in 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 Bolivans plateau. Another hot one to finish out the day, 18 March 1972.

Three helicopter crews were assembled in Jim Butler's briefing room. A battalion of Lao 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").

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.

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 seconded 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 Lao army 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.

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Air America Rescue - McGrath

8/9/1999 1:00 PM

By Chuck McGrath

An Air America H-34 crew rescued me on 21 July 1971. Location: Some distance north of the PDJ. We were tasked as a single Jolly Green (HH-53) crew to recover a drone, and ended up going down during the effort just as we were picking the #1 PJ by hoist. We rolled over a couple times and ended up against some trees. The loss was later determined to be from ground fire in the area. The crews involved in the rescue saw the Jolly upside down up against some trees on the down slope side of a small clearing. The drone was in middle of the clearing. The tip tanks were jettisoned in the area of the drone. The drone parachute was in the in trees at the upper end of clearing. Three crewmembers (pilot, copilot, and FE) were at the lower end of the slope. Two others (PJs) were located about the middle of the clearing. A Huey came in first. Picked up the FE, suffering from severe back pains, (later learned he had ruptured disc in spine), by having him grab the skids so they could hover taxi with him further up the slope to where I was with the other PJ, who had extensive facial injuries. A rotor blade hit my partner as the helicopter went down. We got the FE in the Huey, I passed Jon's IV bottle up to someone in the Huey, and then we got Jon in. I got in to help treat them. I guess there wasn't enough lift to get us out of there, because one of the Air America crew tapped me on the shoulder and motioned for me to get out. Just what I needed! Out I go. Huey spins around, comes close to giving me a crewcut with the tail rotor, and exits successfully. About

10 minutes later an H-34 comes in and picks up the pilot and copilot with hoist and horse collar. The hoist breaks with me about 10 feet up and I'm back on the ground again with the hoist operator reeling in the cable by hand as they exit the area. I heard some periodic ground fire while taking stock of the situation. I guess it was about 10 or 15 minutes later - who kept track? Another H-34 came in and picked me up by horse collar. We were all taken to Lima 54 where the pilot, copilot, and I got a hop on an Air America C-130 to Udorn. The three of us were bruised up, nothing serious, but they stuck us in the hospital there for the night. I still don't know how the injured FE and my partner got back to Udorn, but they were there in the hospital when we woke up the next morning. The flight the next day to determine whether helicopter was recoverable was greeted by so much ground fire that the Sandies were directed to destroy the Jolly. Please pass this through your association. I want to give a more meaningful thanks to those men and welcome any e-mail. A handshake was all we had time for that day.

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Contact Information
or send your comments or suggestions to
info@air-america.org - Air America Association - P.O. Box 1522 ~ Castroville, TX 78009

The following narrative, by Vice Admiral Ilg, summarizes his experience in evading capture when shot down over Laos. It is a testimonial to Air America's effectiveness in search and rescue activities.

Raymond Paul Ilg
Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy (Retired)

3 November 1995

On June 3, 1965, during the initial phases of the Vietnam War, I was shot down in Northern Laos while on a mission trying to interdict the supply lines to Hanoi. I was a Navy Lieutenant, one week shy of my 27th birthday and two months into combat flying from the aircraft carrier, USS Midway. I found myself on the ground 300 miles from the carrier.

Enemy ground troops surrounded the area, and although they did not know my exact position were firing into the air to make me move and expose my location. No one knew whether I had survived the crash, because I was unable to contact my wingman before he was required to head back to the carrier due to low fuel. I was only able to make radio contact with an Air Force reconnaissance aircraft 8 hours after I was shot down.

I knew I had to travel in a southerly direction to reach a distant safe area. I needed to transit the enemy bivouac area during the first night, and as I was doing so, in the middle of the night, I realized why the anti-air craft guns were there. This was a truck park area that had complete cover (tree foliage) that allowed supply trucks to park in daylight without fear of discovery by aircraft.

Air America aircrew were on the scene in propeller-driven aircraft (including HELOs) at first light on the morning after I was shot down, thanks to the information that the reconnaissance aircraft had passed to them. With little regard for their own personal safety, Air America aircrew repeatedly attacked the anti-aircraft positions that had shot me down and that were protecting the truck park. One of the Air America aircraft was shot down. Air America rescued that pilot but were still unable to rescue me at that time, due to the heavy enemy fire.

While the attacks were progressing, the overhead Air America coordinator advised me by radio which direction to move to get to an area safe enough for a rescue attempt. That attempt was finally successful 48 hours after I had been shot down.

If it had not been for the Air America team effort to secure my rescue from enemy territory, my next thirty years in the Navy and rise to Vice Admiral would not have been possible. Unfortunately, at that time, the U.S. Government could not and would not, for political reasons, recognize this courageous organization who risked their lives for their country and their countrymen

Air America, with its selfless philosophy and rescue of countless air crew members, are unsung heroes who deserve to be memorialized by a commemorative stamp that recognizes their valiant efforts.

Raymond P. Ilg
(VADM, USN (RET)

USN/Tailhook VA 01085

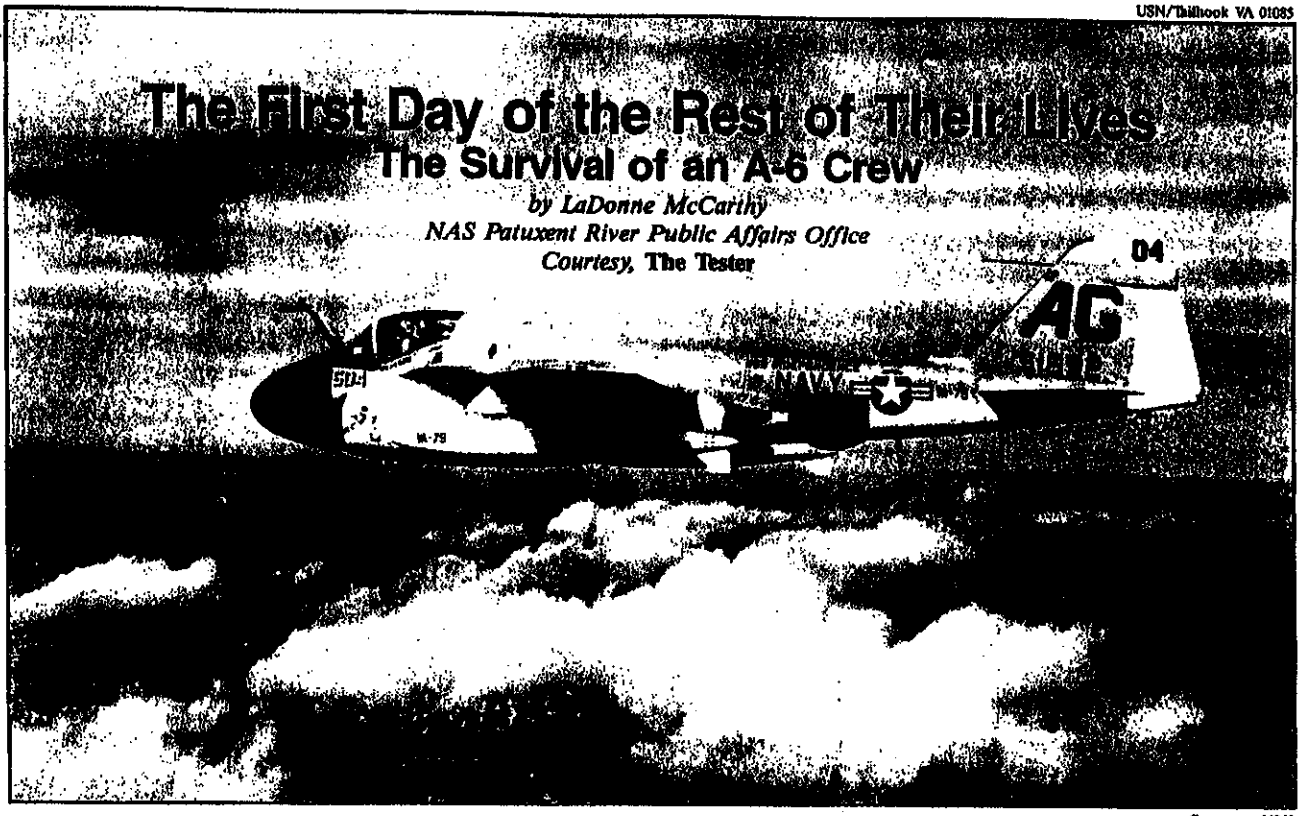
The First Day of the Rest of Their Lives

The Survival of an A-6 Crew

by LaDonne McCarthy

NAS Patuxent River Public Affairs Office

Courtesy, **The Tester**



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"It was the first day of the rest of my life. I thought it at the time, and I still think it now," said RADM Don Eaton in describing the events of 14 July 1965 when he and his pilot, RADM Donald V. Boecker, flew the number-two aircraft in a flight of two A-6A *Intruders* assigned to bomb a small bridge near Sam Neua in Northern Laos.

Back in those days, the two men were squadronmates in VA-75, the first operational *Intruder* squadron, assigned to *Air Wing Seven* on board USS *Independence* (CVA-62). Young and aggressive, the pair had already flown several combat missions over South and North Vietnam, with Boecker as pilot and Eaton as Bombardier/Navigator, since joining the ship only a few weeks earlier. Though he was well aware of the inherent danger of their mission, Boecker later reflected that those earlier missions over the South were not at all what he expected. "I expected to see bullets coming up or missiles," he said, "but on my first combat mission over South Vietnam, I didn't have anybody shooting at me and it was almost like flying a practice training mission over the coast of Virginia."

Though their early days with the squadron were almost anti-climactic, the Vietnam War was heating up, and the pair was about to take center-stage in an 18-hour drama which would have them literally running for their lives. Ironically, Boecker and Eaton, who were roommates at the time, were not originally slated to fly 14 July and it was not until Eaton persuaded the flight schedules officer to put them on the roster that the duo was actually scheduled.

Shortly after takeoff and rendezvous, a system went down on the lead aircraft, piloted by LCDR Bill Ruby, and he passed the lead to Boecker. Because of a shortage of bombs, Boecker's aircraft was carrying five Mk 82 500-lb. bombs, one on each station. Boecker led the flight to the target—a bridge over a river which was part of the notorious Ho Chi Minh trail—at roughly 25,000 ft., arriving at Sam Neua about 1800.

After arming the bombs, Boecker began his roll-in from 19,000 ft. and pickled on target as briefed. The bombs were set to arm four-and-a-half seconds after leaving the aircraft and detonate upon impact. However, shortly after Boecker pickled, a tremendous explosion rocked the aircraft. "One of the 500-lb. bombs had exploded prematurely underneath our wing," Boecker said. "It was more devastating than any missile or gunshot because it immediately knocked out one of our two engines."

LTs Don Boecker, pilot (l) and his B/N, Don Eaton, flew the A-6A Intruder *on its first operational deployment on board USS* Independence *(CVA-62). Their downing and dramatic rescue marked "the first day of the rest of their lives." Remarkably they would both later achieve flag rank.*

"It sounded pretty bad," said Eaton. "Immediately as Don pulled out of the dive, both fire warning lights came on, the hydraulic gauges fluctuated and we started to lose pressure. The fuel gauges were also dropping rapidly, and as I looked to starboard, I could see great amounts of fuel streaming out of the wing. It looked like a very dense vapor trail of fuel, almost like a waterfall."

Boecker shut down the right engine, but the fire light remained on. With the beach approximately 153 miles away, there was little chance the aircraft could make it to the water. With options dwindling rapidly, Boecker pulled out of the dive and struggled to gain altitude. Amid all the confusion, Ruby radioed that the aircraft was on fire and instructed the pair to eject. Grasping the stick with both hands, Boecker desperately tried to lift the left wing,

but the aircraft kept rolling. No longer denying the inevitable, Eaton lowered his ejection seat pan and took off his kneeboard. Moments later, as the aircraft continued to roll, Boecker reached over and slapped Eaton on the leg, a personal sign that it was time to eject.

The initial ejection shots were hard and firm; with ballistic seats, the crew's acceleration was almost instantaneous. Within seconds, the pair was drifting through space. The first to eject, Eaton severely bruised his hands on his way out of the airplane, and to make matters worse, his pistol, which he wore strapped in a holster in front of him, banged him hard in the mouth. Looking around, Eaton said he could see Boecker below him. In the last moments before landing, Eaton said he glanced in the direction of the aircraft and watched it hit the ground with a string of secondary explosions.

As they continued their drift downward, each man furiously calculated his plan of attack. Close enough to hear voices and see villagers pointing at them, the men tugged at their risers, desperately trying to steer to better landing sites. Unable to steer away from the center of a tiny village, a sudden gust of wind interceded on Boecker's behalf and carried him over a small hill about 200 yds. southeast of the village. Meanwhile, Eaton tried frantically to steer away from an impending rice paddy. He managed to avoid the paddy but landed south of Boecker on the far side of a large grassy hill. To make his misery even more complete, Eaton landed in tall grass which made it difficult to judge the distance to the ground. Consequently, he landed standing up which caused him to strain his back and dug the pistol into his stomach as well.

Forced to act immediately, the men set their escape plans into action. "I had to move fast," said Eaton. "I took off my helmet, ripped my nametag off and started to run. As I began running, my leg garters were clicking so I tossed them too. Instinctively, I started to go toward Don to make sure he was okay. But after traveling for a few minutes, I realized this was a bad idea because it was pretty far. I'm not making a lot of progress and I'm giving up time." Realizing the villagers were gaining on him, Eaton instead headed east as he had originally intended, reminding himself all the while that he had to go as far as he could, as fast as he could, for as long as he could.

Busy plotting his own course, Boecker had to make some quick decisions as well. Knowing he would not be able to make it to Eaton before the villagers caught up with him, he headed north toward a hill covered in a thick tangle of jungle undergrowth. Boecker recalled that in trying to grab his survival equipment out of his parachute seat pan, he had accidentally activated the nitrogen bottle that inflated his one-man life raft. "Frantically," he said, "I picked up the raft, and with the superhuman strength born of fear and adrenalin, ripped it apart and threw it aside. I tore it like it was paper. I've tried to do it since then and so have others, but no one could do it."

Hunted like animals and fearing for their lives, each man set out on his own course, literally throwing themselves down steep hills and small cliffs, crossing streams at different points to slow their pursuers while leaving as many false trails as possible. Fortunately, in addition to attending survival training in the States, the pair had received jungle survival training at the hands of Filipino instructors only a few weeks earlier and were well-versed in making their way through dense jungle terrain.

Looking back at his desperate run, Boecker said his mind was spitting out things he had learned in survival school like a computer. Both pilot and B/N agreed that their survival school training was invaluable during the episode because it not only gave them an idea of what to expect, it also gave them added incentive to do anything to avoid capture.

Because the undergrowth was so heavy, progress was slow for both men. Boecker recalls that at points the foliage seemed to form an impenetrable wall which forced him to double back on occasion. So thick was the vegetation that in hours of traveling, Eaton estimates that he only made about three-quarters of a mile from where he started.

Though traveling through the undergrowth was difficult, as the two men look back, they believe it contributed greatly to their ultimate survival. "It made it extremely difficult for Don and I to move." said Eaton, "I also recognize that I was running for my life and so was Don, but the people that were chasing us were not. If it was hard for us then it was very, very hard for them. I literally threw myself down some hills that were almost vertical, but I just rolled down and took my best shot because I knew those guys weren't going to do what I was willing to do."

As the chase continued, Boecker came across what looked to be the perfect hiding place—an abandoned animal den. He burrowed in the hole using underbrush for further cover. With only a few minutes to catch his breath, he heard the posse of 10-15 men approach. "They had found my chute and were actively looking for me," he said.

As darkness fell under the light of a full moon, Eaton too found a spot on the side of a hill beside a large tree. Figuring he could use the tree as a marker of his location in a rescue attempt, he bedded down for the night. From his lair, Eaton could hear the villagers shouting and saw the lights of their lanterns swinging back and forth. It was clear the search would continue throughout the night. He remembers that at one point the villagers got so close to him that he was afraid they would hear his heart pounding. Too on-edge to sleep, the men spent a long, lonely night burrowed inside their jungle hideouts.

Shortly before dawn, the men heard sounds of what seemed to be a large aircraft overhead. Sure enough, as the sun came up, they looked

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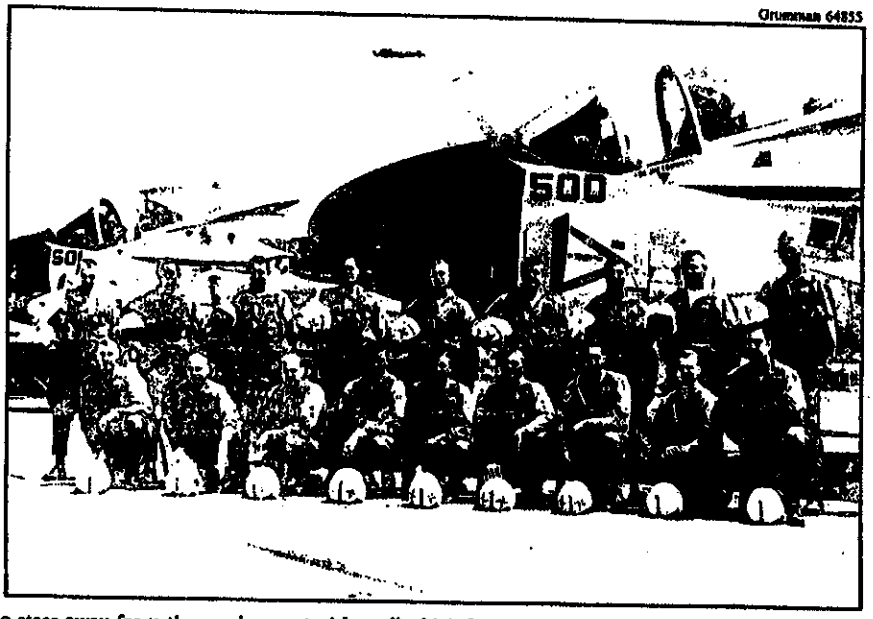

VA-75 Sunday Punchers in 1964. Standing (l-r): LT Howie Young, LCDRs Dick Bordone, Bill Warwick, Pete Easton, LTs George Matt, Pete Garber, Joel Fegel, Don Boecker and CO CDR "Swoose" Snead. Front: LTJGs Andy Miller, Marshall Slaughter, Les Goldstein (AIO), Fred Ganz (MO), LTJG Ken Jones, LTs Jim Fairley and Brian Gallagher.

up to see a transport, the airborne rescue coordinator (a.k.a. "Victor Control"). Seeing the aircraft, both men began to call to it using their PC-49 survival radios. Even equipped with radios, the men were still at a disadvantage as Boecker's PC-49 could transmit but not receive and Eaton's could receive but not transmit. As the control aircraft orbited, it was joined by several A-1 *Skyraiders* and two helicopters. The aircraft flew overhead, spotting the terrain and trying to keep the enemy at bay. By this time it was about 0715. Though he had been transmitting for some time, Boecker still had received no reply from any of the aircraft. Finally, he asked the A-1s to rock their wings if they received his transmission. "They started rocking their wings immediately," he said, "and I felt a whole lot better right away."

Meanwhile, another of the helicopters flew toward Eaton. He transmitted that they were about to fly directly over him and that he would come out into the open for them to see his position. Though an aircrewmen waved at him, the helo kept right on going. "I was crestfallen," Eaton said. "I didn't know why they hadn't picked me up."

About two miles west of Eaton, Boecker's hopes for an early rescue were likewise dashed when the H-34 that had spotted him took several machine gun hits in its main fuel cell and, with fuel streaming out its sides, was forced to limp back to a safe base. Shortly after the failed rescue, Boecker heard the sound of a man approaching. Quickly, he crouched down on his stomach, hid amidst the deep undergrowth and watched in terror as the man walked within eight feet of him. "He was looking right at me," Boecker recalled. "I was petrified. I could feel my heart coming out of my chest. I'm sure he assumed I had a gun and was going to shoot him. I think he made a mental note of where I was and figured he'd come back for me with his buddies." Taking his cue, Boecker charged through the jungle knowing they'd be back shortly. Ironically, Boecker said that earlier he had decided not to carry a gun, and believes to this day that not having a gun saved his life. "If I'd had a gun," he said, "I would have shot him, and I would have been caught immediately." Boecker said he decided not to carry a gun after reading the debrief of a friend, now-VADM Paul Ilg, who had gone down in Northern Laos a few weeks earlier. Ilg had not carried a gun and attributed his survival directly to the fact that he had not had one. Eaton carried a gun, but later said it was the last time he would ever do so.

USN, courtesy RADM Don Eaton, USN

From left: Gay Boecker, RADMs Don Boecker and Don Eaton with Jennifer Eaton gather to celebrate the 22nd anniversary of the former Sunday Punchers' *18½ hours on the ground and rescue in Laos.*

While Boecker ran for his life, Eaton did a great deal of moving that morning as well. Above, a *Skyraider* dove and fired its four 20mm cannons. A tremendous commotion resulted with noise roaring up the valley and lots of secondary explosions and gunfire. As he was smack in the middle of the target area, Eaton feared he would be accidentally strafed. Adding to the confusion, the A-1's wingman rolled in firing rockets. More aircraft arrived and, in the midst of all the chaos, Eaton made a play up the hill for a better resuce position, trading his jungle cover for short grass

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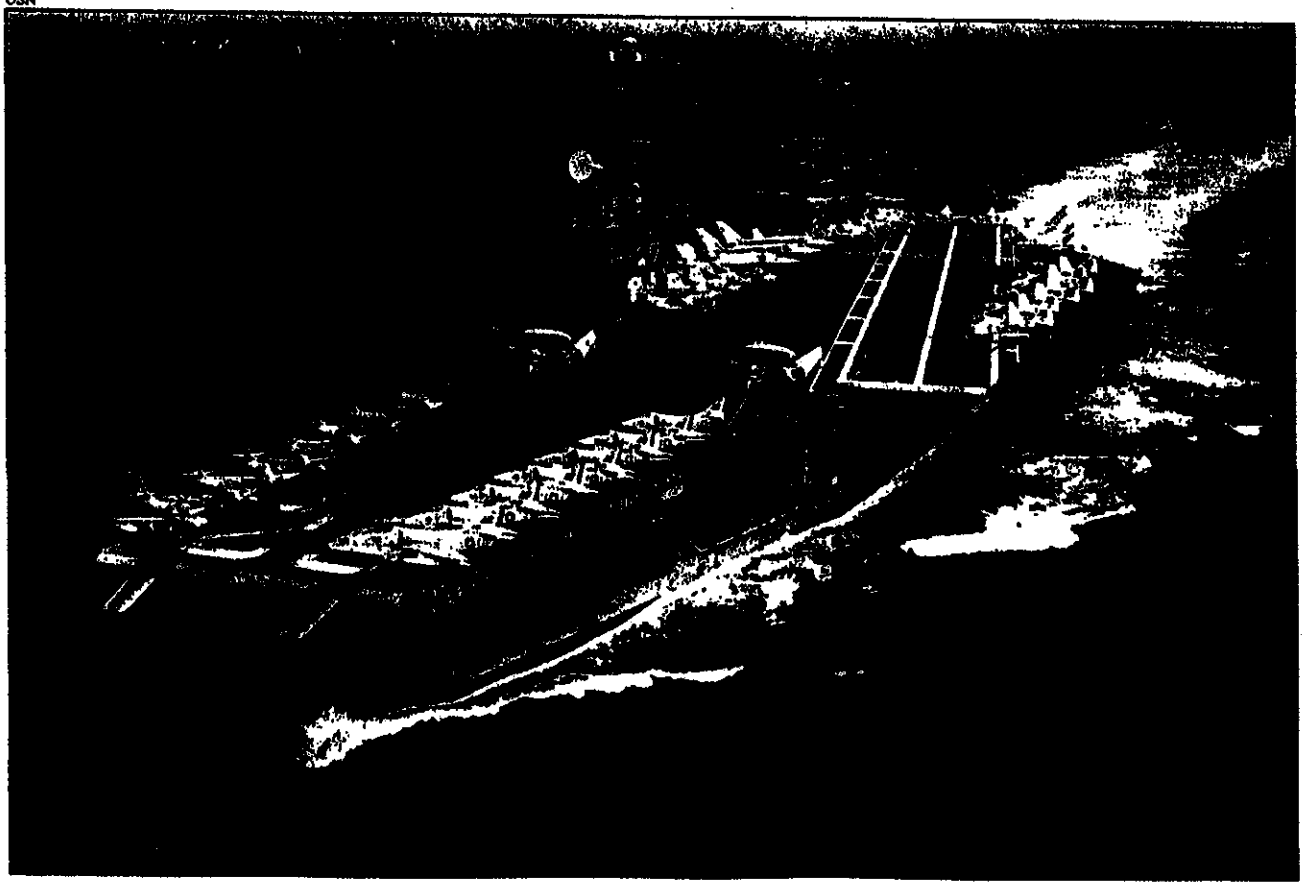


and wide-open spaces. Though he knew it was risky, Eaton fired a smoke flare but was unsure whether it was seen by any of the aircraft passing overhead. Suddenly, a T-28 that was flying nearby broke and headed, no more than two or three propeller widths off the ground, straight toward him. Thinking he was about to be hit, Eaton threw himself on the ground. To his surprise, the T-28 flew by him, rolled up on a wingtip while a man in the back seat waved. As the aircraft flashed by, a UH-34D appeared behind it. Knowing his hands were in no condition to endure a ride in a horse collar, Eaton jumped for the helo as it hovered. With Eaton safely aboard the chopper, the aircraft headed left toward Boecker, who at this point was encircled by the enemy.

The scene was tense, with all sorts of aircraft—helicopters (including an Air Force *Jolly Green*), two T-28s, a *Caribou* and the *Skyraiders*—filling the sky. At times, Eaton watched as the daring T-28 pilots flew below the helicopters. In the meantime, hidden deep in the undergrowth, Boecker was sure the aircraft would have difficulty spotting him. In a last ditch effort, he transmitted that the next time the caravan flew over him, he would light a smoke flare. Upon seeing the flare, a crewman on one of the helos waved but the helo kept right on going. With the *Skyraiders* pulverizing the village, Boecker nervously charged for more open ground. Crashing his way out of the jungle, he made his way to a large tree and transmitted his location. The helo arrived immediately and lowered its collar, but the sling kept getting caught in the tree. When it finally came close to Boecker (still about three feet above him and downhill), he dropped his remaining survival gear and made a frantic leap for the collar.

Up in the helo, Eaton watched as the hoist was pulled in. "I was getting really nervous because I didn't see Don," he said. "Then I didn't see anyone in the horse collar and I though 'My God, they didn't get him.' As it came up a little more, I could see a bit of a branch and then a little bit more and there was Don with his arm barely through the sling, dangling at about 2,000 ft. (above the ground) under a helo moving about 60 kts."

When Boecker was finally hoisted aboard the aircraft, the pair embraced in a joyous reunion—almost 19 hours after the start of their ill-fated flight.

Looking back on the episode, both men say it was an eye-opening experience which changed their lives forever. "Never before and never since have I put out my total physical capability," said Eaton. "I reached out and did things beyond what I ever thought I could do. I sustained my stamina and put exhaustion out of my mind.

"Also, my mental processes were absolutely pristine—anything that was superfluous was immediately rejected. I had no disassociated thoughts. It was one of those times where you thought clearly, logically, progressively and objectively."

As witnessed by his encounter with the life raft, Boecker too said he experienced a similar outpouring of strength and a steely mindset for survival that allowed him to displace fear and get on with the task at hand. "I remember just about every minute of my 18-and-a-half hours," he said. "I didn't sleep. I wasn't hungry, wasn't thirsty. I didn't even think about those things. My adrenalin was pumping at tremendous rates."

Not only did the encounter ensure that each man performed at the limits of human capacity, it also resolidified already powerful feelings of patriotism. "I was so pleased and proud to be an American," said Boecker. "They put forth such a big rescue attempt with combined forces from Air America, the Air Force and the Navy. They probably used about a million dollars worth of fuel, bombs and bullets, not to mention the aircraft that were shot up trying to rescue us. It made me proud to be an American and to know that our country would use so many assets to rescue two Navy flyers."

"From the time that my parachute opened until I saw all of those airplanes, that was the loneliest I've ever been in my life," recalled Eaton. "I was alone in a combat area in the middle of a strange world. I was totally isolated—almost detached from humanity. When those airplanes arrived in the morning, I saw the big hand of Uncle Sam and the United States reaching out and trying to take care of me. It was an extremely uplifting experience."

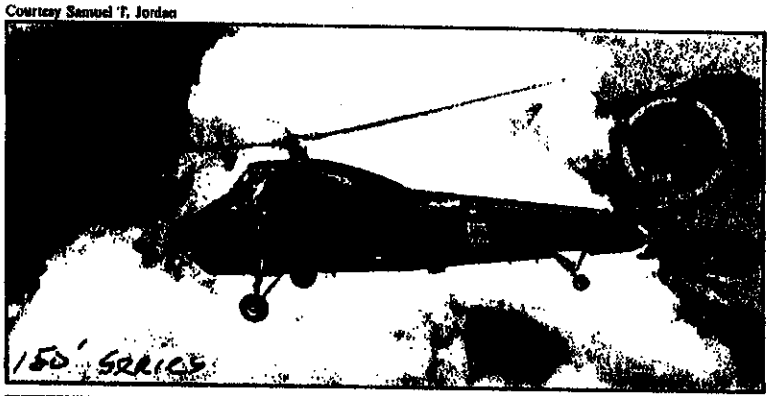
Each year since, on the anniversary of their terrifying 18-and-a-half hour ordeal, the two men have made a point of getting together to celebrate their deliverance from Sam Neua. Whether in person, by telegram or telephone, they have managed to make contact on 25 consecutive July 14ths. This year, to mark their 25th anniversary, Eaton, who now serves as the assistant commander for Naval Aviation Depots at the Naval Air Systems Command, traveled to Patuxent River for a celebratory reunion. Joined by W. Ralph Clarke, an old friend and Grumman technical representative who was in *Independence* at the time of the incident and their wives, Boecker and Eaton happily celebrated the 25th anniversary of the first day of the rest of their lives.

Incidentally, it was only last October that the two men again met Sam Jordan, the humble but heroic UH-34D pilot who performed the daring rescues in the midst of enemy territory.

Courtesy Samuel T. Jordan

Below: *The Sikorsky H-34* Seahorse *served Air America in Laos in resupply and rescue operations.* **Right:** *Air America pilot Samuel T. Jordan at a Meo village in Sal Province, northwestern Laos. Following service as a USMC helo pilot, Sam flew for Air America throughout the Southeast Asian war.*

Courtesy Samuel T. Jordan



. . . All in a Day's Work

by Samuel T. Jordan

The fifteenth of July 1965 was a long time ago, but some things you never forget.

I had been flying an H-34 for Air America, Inc., supplying outposts in the Lima Stie 36 area located about 20 mi. north of the Plains des Jars in central Laos. This outpost surrounded LS-36, a heavily fortified key friendly position with a 3,500-ft. airfield.

Very late in the afternoon of 14 July, I overheard a call from ResCap that an aircraft was down in Sam Neua province near the North Vietnamese border. I was working alone just to the west and could reach the area in 15 minutes. Had there been another of our helicopters nearby, I would have attempted a pickup. All rescue operations, however, required two helicopters and solo attempts were not permitted.

The next morning, I was told that two other Air America helos would handle the pick-up and to continue on my resupply work for the LS-36 outposts. About an hour later, I was called and told that I was now part of the rescue effort and to return to LS-36 for full fuel. An earlier attempt at a pickup had failed when a helo had a hydraulic servo shot out while it foolishly tried to cross the Sam Neua highway that was crawling with 20mm, 37mm and ZPU 14.5mm guns. The well-protected highway curved south through Sam Neua to the enemy-held Plain des Jars area and was a major supply route from North Vietnam.

At any rate, I elected to take off for the pickup with only half a fuel load. My copilot was new to Air America and was unfamiliar with rescue operations and the local area. The pickup zone was at about 4,000 ft. and a hover with a full load of fuel would have been impossible at that altitude. I elected to come in from northwest of Sam Neua, turning east to approach from the north, avoiding the highway.

Another Air America helicopter accompanied me along with an Air Force *Jolly Green* helo. Immediately upon entering the rescue area, we picked up our overhead escort of T-28s flown by other Air America crews. Within moments I spotted LT Don Eaton on a ridgeline. Before I was able to start in for the pickup, I was told to hold off until a positive I.D. could be made. A T-28 then flew low over his head while I circled around to approach the pickup area. I just touched lightly on the tall grass-covered ridge and was off as soon as Eaton was on board. From him, we tried to discover the location of Eaton's downed pilot, LT Don Boecker. All we could find out was that he was nearby.

As we circled the area, some red smoke drifted up from a high stand of jungle about a mile west of the spot where we found Eaton. The two other helos hovered in the area, but couldn't spot the pilot. I could hear incoming transmissions from the ground giving us directions, but we were unable to receive a reply to our requests for more information.

At last, my flight mechanic began to direct me to Boecker on the ground. I was hovering low in the trees when I spotted some gun flashes nearby at the edge of the jungle area. A call for help brought a bomb run by the T-28s that silenced the gunfire.

I hovered in the area over Boecker for what seemed like an eternity. I had no communications at all with my flight mechanic, who spoke very poor English. To complicate the confusion, he had taken his hard hat off for some reason while attempting to retrieve the downed pilot. The 100-ft. hoist was about 10 ft. short of reaching the ground and Boeker must have had to do some climbing to reach the hoist. When I was told by my flight mechanic that we had retrieved the pilot, I started to move out of the area. As it turned out, Boecker was actually hanging from the hoist outside the aircraft. Sensing something was wrong, I asked again if he was on board. After a few moments I was told that he was definitely in the cabin. The total time in a hover over Boecker must have been 20-30 minutes.

All the hovering at a high power setting had used up practically all fuel on board and I had just enough to make a nearby friendly outpost just beyond a large ridge to the west. After pumping a 55-gallon drum of fuel, I departed for LS-36, where Eaton and Boecker were flown to Thailand on an Air America *Caribou*. I spoke briefly with them before going back to my resupply missions.

How they were able to track me down nearly 24 years later is beyond me. It was a wonderful reunion and the start of a great friendship. I must say that both are now looking considerably more elegant than they did on our first meeting.

Editor's Note: Samuel T. Jordan served almost five years on active duty in the Marine Corps, followed by two years in a Naval Reserve unit at NAS Willow Grove, Pa. It was there that he was recruited to join Air America and flew with the CIA's "Air Force" from August, 1961 until April 1975. Sam flew H-34s for six years before transitioning to the Volpar Beech 18 turboprop conversion and deHavilland C-7 Caribou. He was based in Laos from 1961 to 1974, when he was transferred to Saigon to continue his work in Cambodia and South Vietnam. After leaving Southeast Asia, Sam was assigned to Iran and Egypt on other government-sponsored projects. He currently is associated with AMR Corporation—American Eagle, where he works as a training officer.