

Excerpts from Vietnam Air Rescues by Dave Richardson

Vietnam



Air Rescues

"Up in the air, depending on prayer"

By Dave Richardson

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Introduction

(This is my original Introduction, written to my children.)

Winter – 2002

To my four sons, David, Craig, Eric and Mark—

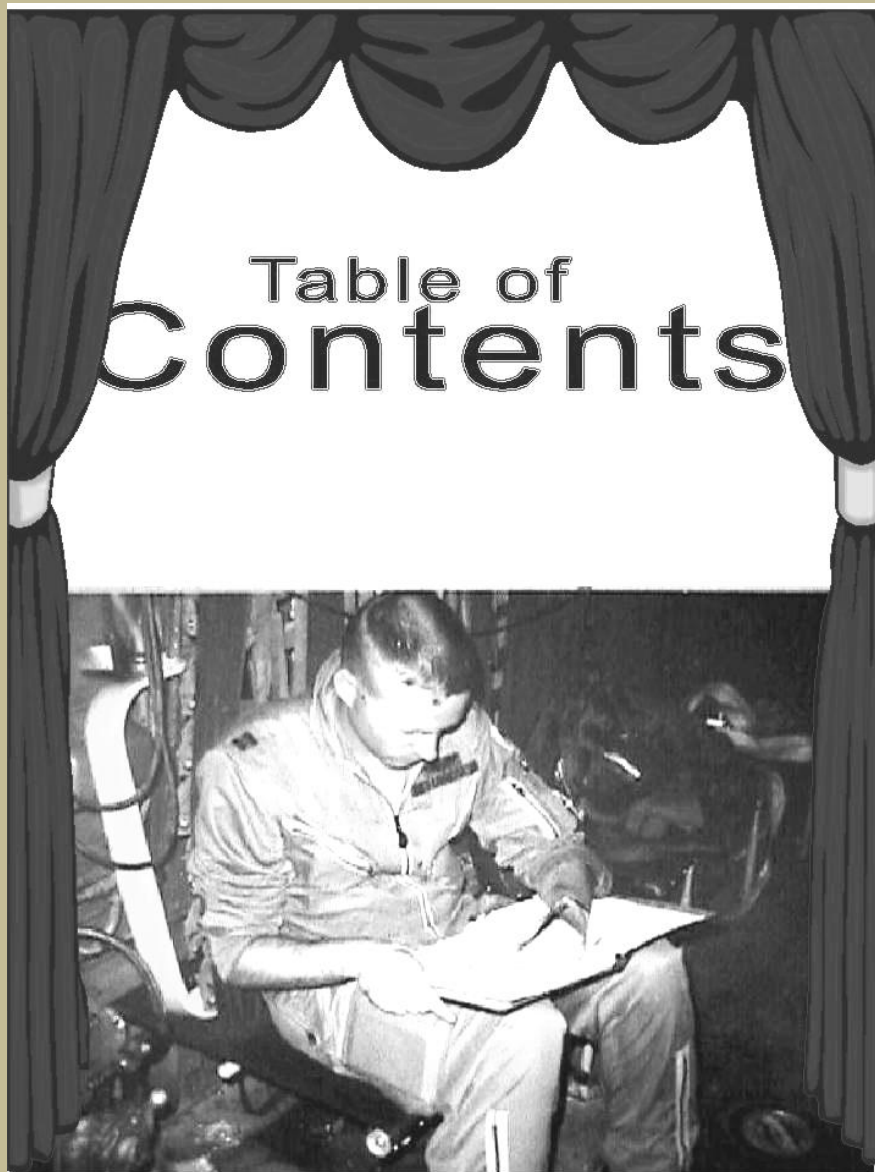
I am writing this to you boys, more than 30 years after the fact, due primarily to the encouragement (badgering) of Craig. The catalyst was me receiving an account of the experiences of the survivor of my final rescue in June, 1968. I wrote a counterpoint to his narrative and found I was enthused about the project.

When I departed for Vietnam, I felt, in my heart, as a Christian, that God was assuring me I would return. Not necessarily in one piece or without a stint as a POW, but I felt assured that I would return. This gave me a calmness and inner peace that was not available to all of my squadron mates. During my tour, I made several rescues, and although some of the missions were quite difficult, I could always feel the hand of God on me. This gave me a confidence that the risks were worthwhile.

Here, in this document, are my remembrances of Vietnam . . .

Love, **Dad**

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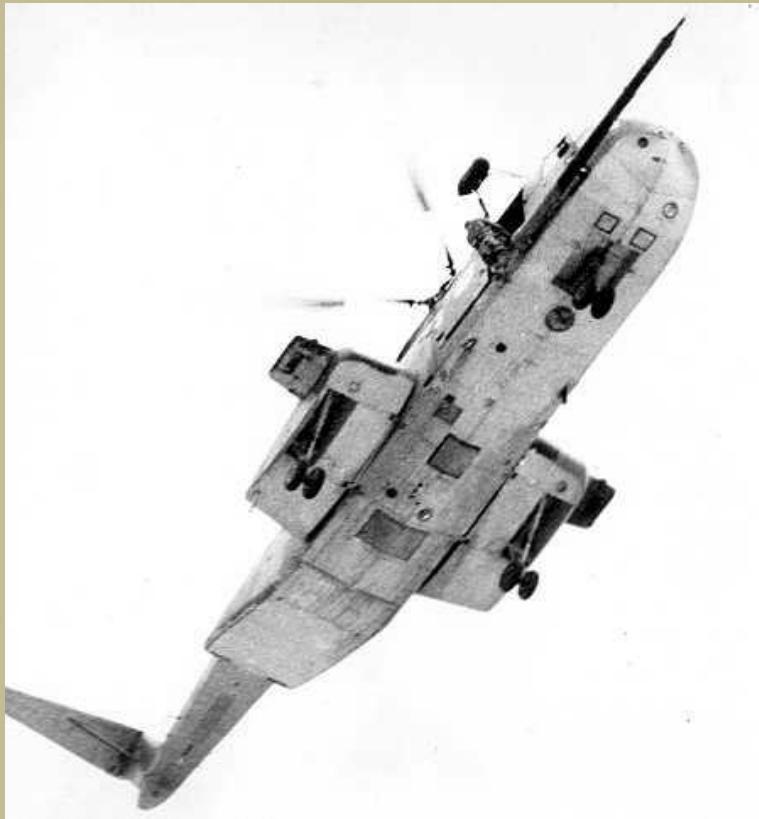
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5th Edition – 2008

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The survivor's view of the helicopter.

A Totally Unauthorized History of the Vietnam War

With all the years that have gone by, few remember the aching division of our country that was caused by the Vietnam War. The questions at the time were

- 1 How did we get into it?
- 2 What are we doing there?
- 3 How do we get out of it?

In this section, I will attempt to give you my perspective on the answers to those questions.

I must caution you that, while all that I will tell you is true, it is also from my own point of view. Please understand that 'political correctness' may make these points of view unpopular today. With that little caveat, I will attempt a (somewhat) short history of the Vietnam War.

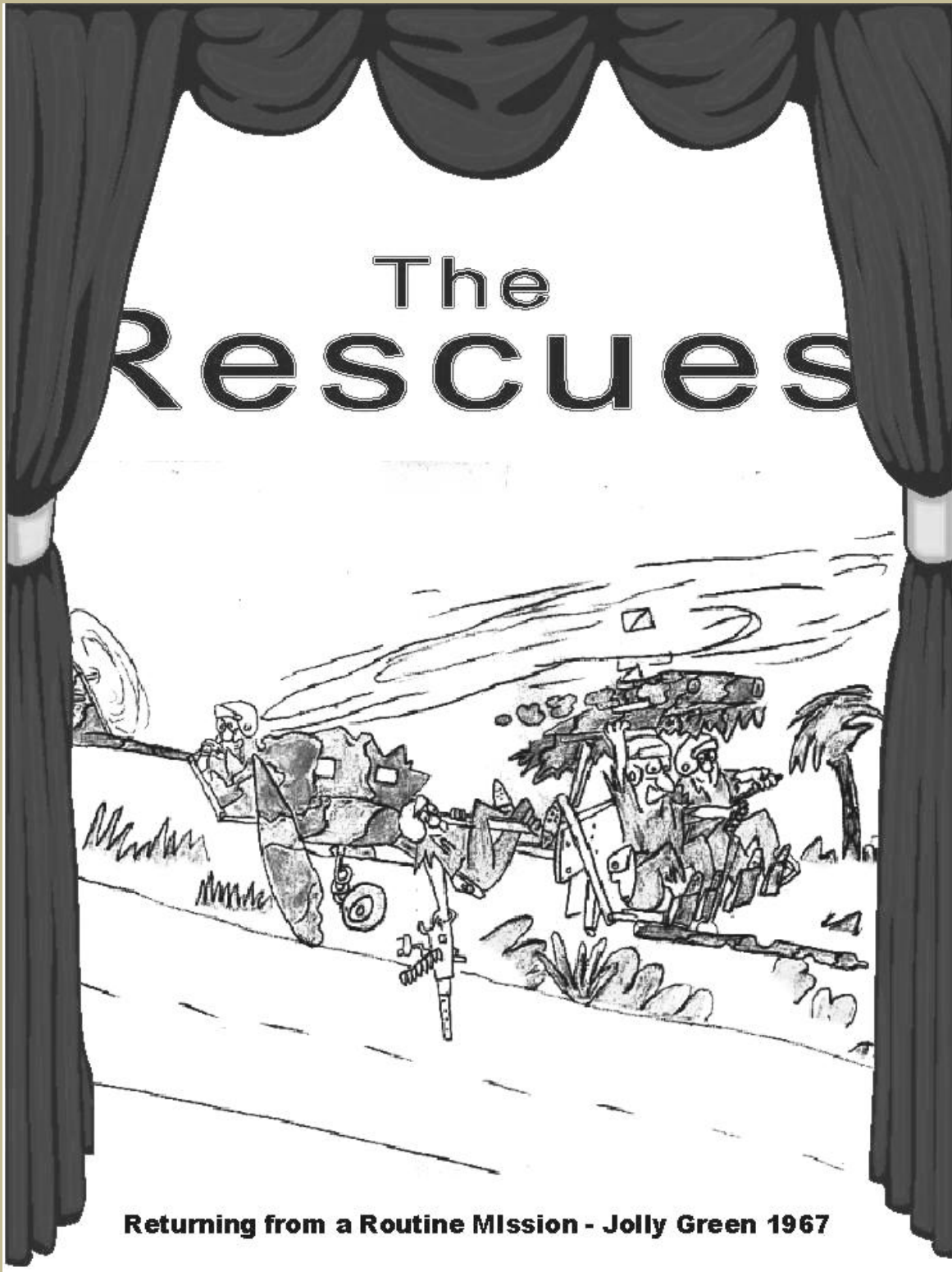
To truly understand what we call the Vietnam War, both a history and geography lesson are in order. What was loosely called Southeast Asia (hence the acronym 'SEA' heard so much during the war period) consisted primarily of 5 countries: They were Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, and North and South Vietnam.

If your geography is a little "sketchy", it might be helpful to consult this map.



(This is only an excerpt from the section which provides a lot of background information and details about their every day life in Vietnam.)

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1st Rescue

Over the River and Through the Woods...

This rescue took place in November, 1967. Embarking on a 3 day alert trip up 'North', we took off early from NKP, planning to arrive at the daytime site (Lima 36) at first light.

As we were overflying the nighttime site (Lima 20A), however, my wingman announced he had hydraulic problems. He stated he thought it was just the gauge, and that the limited maintenance available on the ground should be able to repair it in a few minutes. I advised him I planned to continue on alone to Lima 36.

He reminded me that we were not authorized to fly single ship over enemy terrain, but I reasoned that he could catch up with me shortly, and as there was a heavy bombing schedule laid on for the day, I wanted to be close to the action in case we were needed.

Arriving at Lima 36 as dawn broke; I circled and buzzed the strip a few times. No one opened fire, so I figured that it still belonged to us.

I landed and we began to refuel from the fuel barrels. Not long after we had finished refueling and were assembled in the hut, we received a Mayday (emergency distress) call that an F-4 had been hit over Hanoi. We immediately scrambled and headed on an intercept course.

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F-4

When the Sandy's caught up with me, they inquired where the other helicopter was. I told them not to worry; he would join us shortly.

As we 'homed in' on the aircraft's distress beacon, it became apparent that the pilot had headed WNW toward China, rather than SW away from China and toward Laos.

This presented a problem. The United States was extremely worried at the time that the Chinese would find some excuse to intervene in Vietnam as they had in Korea. As a result, American aircraft were prohibited from flying near the Chinese border. Regardless, we continued to fly an intercept course toward the survivors.

As we arrived in the vicinity of the Black River (the northern and western limit of air operations), we realized we would have to cross the river if we were to rescue the two pilots. The riverbank was heavily defended, so we decided to climb to 10,000 feet and "jink" (maneuver from side to side) and spiral down as we crossed it. The flak (anti-aircraft fire) was heavy, but all five aircraft (one helicopter and four fighters) managed to cross without incident.

While we flew toward the area where the survivors were down, two of the Sandy's sped ahead to reconnoiter the scene, while the other two stayed behind to protect me.

Lead Sandy established voice contact with the pilot, who said he was about 2/3's of the way up a steep ridge, covered with razor grass. Because

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of the grass, he was not able to move. There was no contact with the back-seater.

As I entered the area, I spotted a steep ridge, which was clear of trees but covered with tall grass. At the foot of the ridge was a small hamlet. I observed several military trucks parked there. Some soldiers were busy setting up what looked like anti-aircraft guns, while others were attempting to cut a path up the ridge to the survivor.

Due to ROE (rules of engagement) restrictions, we were unable to open fire on them. I calculated we might have enough time to pick the pilot up before the ground troops reached him. At my instruction, the survivor popped his smoke. Now I knew exactly where he was on that ridge.

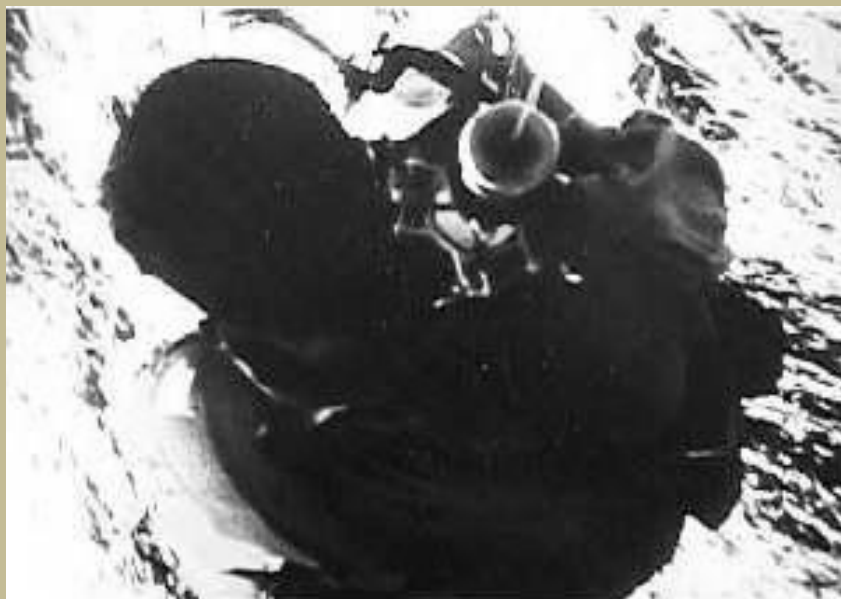
I began to ease the helicopter close to the ridge, hoping to be able to establish a hover over him. It was tricky work. There were strong crosscurrents of wind, which bucked the helicopter around. What complicated matters was the necessity to hover with my rotor tips just a few feet from the steeply angled ridge in order to get over him.

I went into my hover mode, which consisted of entrusting all aircraft gauges and radios except Guard (emergency radio frequency) to my co-pilot, and blocking out everything else as I concentrated on holding the helicopter absolutely still while the hoist was being lowered.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I could sense a brilliant, white light. What was that? Was the co-pilot shining a light in my eyes? That didn't make any sense, yet the light was there. Since I was busy maintaining the hover, I resolved to forget about it.

It was vitally important that the helicopter not be allowed to move even as much as a foot in any direction, or we would risk dragging the survivor through the sharp grass or, worse yet, knock the rotor blades off against the ridge.

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Survivor on hoist

Finally, the hoist reached the survivor and he began to climb onto the paddle seats. We had just begun lifting him off the ground when an enemy soldier rolled over the top of the ridge above me at a distance of about 75-100 feet. He aimed his AK-47 at us and began firing.

'Feeling' rather than hearing the bullets impacting the fuselage just below my seat, I yelled to the guys in the back that we were taking fire and transmitted the same message to the Sandy's.

In the meantime, the enemy soldiers' rounds (bullets) had continued to rise and tore into the rotor blades. The aircraft began to buck and jump as the blades lost their tracking stability.

At that time we flew our helicopters unarmed. Our only weapons were our personal M-16's. My PJ leaned out the door past the Flight Mechanic, who was busy operating the hoist, and emptied his clip into the enemy soldier. Without a doubt, he saved my life.

Our PJ was rather 'gung-ho', and had loaded his M-16 with straight tracer rounds. I saw a bright tongue of flame spurt from the cabin door and rip the head off the soldier, whose body tumbled down the ridge below me.

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Due to the excessive vibration, I was barely able to hold the hover as we got the survivor on board. As soon as he was safely in the cabin, I pulled away from the ridge. The white light immediately snapped off.

The Sandy's, now freed of restrictions, were doing an enthusiastic job of obliterating the hamlet, along with the trucks and guns. The survivor called out that he thought his 'back-seater' was nearby, but we had more pressing problems on our hands.



A-1 rolling in to provide protective fire

The helicopter was vibrating. The vibration was so bad I seriously thought we might lose one of the blades. It was difficult to hold it steady as I turned toward home. Two of the Sandy's accompanied me while the other two remained behind to complete their destructive work.

As we were limping along, one of the Sandy's called out, "Don't look now, but it appears you have a MIG (Russian jet fighter plane) at 6 o'clock (directly behind) and closing!" They both went back to engage the jet while we pondered our next move.

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Soviet made MIG fighter

The classic defense of a helicopter against a fixed-wing fighter is to head straight for your opponent and then autorotate (disengage the rotors and allow the helicopter to free fall). The high sink rate of autorotation, coupled with the jet's rapid closure speed should make him steepen his dive angle until he has to break it off. Then the helicopter can play tag among the ground clutter.

That is the textbook theory, at any rate. I had never heard of anyone actually trying it, and I wasn't about to be the first, not with the control problems we were encountering.

We could see the MIG as a faint speck in the sky. I slid over into a cloudbank, hoping he didn't have infrared missiles and would lose visual contact. We couldn't stay in the clouds for very long. I knew that the peaks of nearby mountains were poking up into those clouds and didn't want to smash into one of them.

The helicopter was still bucking and shaking. I didn't want to perform any violent maneuvers, as I wasn't sure it would hold together. When I couldn't stand it anymore, we dropped out of the cloud layer and anxiously scanned the sky.

My PJ shouted, "There! 10 o'clock!"

I pulled back into another cloud; still praying the MIG was guns only and didn't have infrared or radar homing on board. When we exited a few minutes later, we couldn't see the MIG anywhere.

Where had he gone?

"5 o'clock, high!" shouted my Flight Mechanic.

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I plunged into a third cloud. This time, when we exited, the MIG was nowhere in sight. I can only assume he was low on fuel and had to head for home.

We plodded along our way, shaking and bucking, and were joined by the two Sandy's who had stayed behind to strafe the enemy.

Once again, we were approaching the Black River; this time from the North. There was no way I was going to attempt the 10,000 foot corkscrew maneuver we had done earlier. I was convinced the helicopter would fall apart if we tried.

Operating on my theory that "the closer to the ground I am, the harder I am to see and hit"; I flew at treetop level across the River while the Sandy's did their high altitude bit. The gunners were so busy trying to hit them we roared over in safety before they could realign the guns.

We began to notice a stiffening in the controls. Sure enough, a quick glance at the hydraulic gauge showed a fluctuating, decreasing pressure. We were losing hydraulic fluid! Some of that guy's bullets must have nicked a hydraulic line. This was a new and quite serious problem.

The HH-3E was a large helicopter. The flight controls were hydraulically assisted, much like power steering on a car. It was impossible for the flight crew to control the helicopter if hydraulic power failed completely.

I advised the Sandy's of our problem and that we might have to make an emergency landing. Looking around, I had no desire to set down in the vastness of the North Vietnamese jungle. I resolved to continue flying until the last possible moment.

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After a while we heard the backup helicopter on the frequency. He had gotten his bird fixed and was looking for us. He met up with us, flew alongside and confirmed we had hydraulic fluid streaming out of the bottom of the aircraft.

My best estimate was that we were still about 30 minutes out of Lima 36. Our choice was to land there or crash into the rocks and jungle. There was simply no place else to go. At the same time, I was concerned about the 'back-seater' we had left behind. I hated to think an American was going to be lost when we had the ability to get him.

Finally, I directed the other helicopter to take the Sandy's and go back to try for the other guy. He protested that I would be left all alone, but I pointed out that if we didn't make the strip, our chances of survival in a crash landing were slim. After a bit, he agreed to make a try at rescuing the 'back-seater'.

Wonder of wonders, we made it to Lima 36. As I was attempting to set it down, I lost control and fell the last ten feet or so, resulting in a huge bounce and one of my worst landings to date. But, we were on the ground and safe. Praise God!

I shut down the engines amid cheers from the crew. As we started to kill electrical power, we heard the other helicopter transmitting a Mayday (emergency) call. A 57 mm shell had severed his tail rotor shaft. He wasn't sure how long he could maintain level flight and wanted help.

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57 mm Gun

I was heartsick. We had just barely made it on the ground ourselves. Nevertheless, I was not about to abandon him. I told my crew I could fly the bird by myself. They should wait with our survivor until I got back. If I got back. They were a good crew, and refused to remain behind.

I handed my M-16 to the survivor and told him to sit inside our wooden hut with the gun aimed at the door. He was to shoot anybody who tried to enter that didn't speak English. His eyes got very wide. I told him if we weren't back in an hour, we weren't coming back.

In that event, he was to wait until just before sunset before he dismantled and discarded the weapon. Then he should walk toward the fortress on the hill, with his hands in the air, shouting, "American, American". Perhaps they would take him in. A replacement alert crew was due in three days, after all, and they would get him out.

He didn't look too happy with the situation, but accepted the rifle. We got fired up and took off toward the other helicopter, which had a real

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problem. Unless they maintained 50 knots of forward airspeed, the helicopter would corkscrew, making any landing doubtful.

We pulled alongside them, shaking and vibrating quite badly. Sure enough, his tail rotor was completely stopped. Both helicopters turned and headed back, eventually getting Lima 36 in sight.

Now, we had a different sort of problem—whoever attempted to land first would most likely crash, thus denying the very short strip to the other helicopter.

I was certain I would not be able to make another safe landing, but there was a chance for my wingman. I told him to come in at 60 knots, plop it on the ground at the start of the strip, shut everything down and ride the brakes, hoping he could stop before going over the cliff at the end. He did a great job in getting his bird down in one piece.

Now it was my turn. As we came in for the landing, I lost control about 10-20 feet in the air. The helicopter hit hard. The left gear partially collapsed (apparently my first hard landing had weakened it) and the helicopter tilted over 45° on its left side, resting on the sponson.

In the process I wrenched my knee quite severely, but otherwise, everyone was OK. So there we were, towards noon on our first day of a three-day alert: one survivor, 8 crewmembers and two broken helicopters.

We took a look at the bullet damage. There were a few holes starting just below my seat on the right side. It was obvious the shells had come in my open window, passed in front of both pilots and exited through my co-pilots' open window. I felt as though God must have been working overtime, protecting me from harm.

I asked my co-pilot what the business was with the light shining on me during the pick-up. He got a funny look on his face and said he didn't know a thing about it. He hadn't noticed any light.

It was only later, when I encountered the light again during my second rescue, that I began to believe it was the Shekinah glory of God, protecting me from harm. Every rescue I made, that light was there, disappearing when I pulled myself and my crew out of danger. I have no other explanation for it.

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There were also holes in the rotor blades. That was the source of our vibration. We radioed in our status and were advised to standby—three helicopters were being dispatched. We felt like celebrating. We would get to go home early!



With the Survivor

A few hours later, three helicopters landed. The crews got out and they and the survivor climbed on the third bird.

“What about us?” we asked.

“You have two more days of alert to serve before you can come home,” they replied.

That was my first rescue of the Vietnam War. In my official Mission Report, I omitted the details about my landing and then taking off again, as I felt that information might get me in trouble.

A few weeks later I was present when my helicopter, minus engines and rotors, and with the left gear firmly locked back in place, was sling lifted and flown to Bangkok for repairs. Several months after that, I flew to Bangkok to pick the helicopter up after it had been repaired.

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There it goes! My helicopter departs for Bangkok



Another shot of my Helicopter leaving

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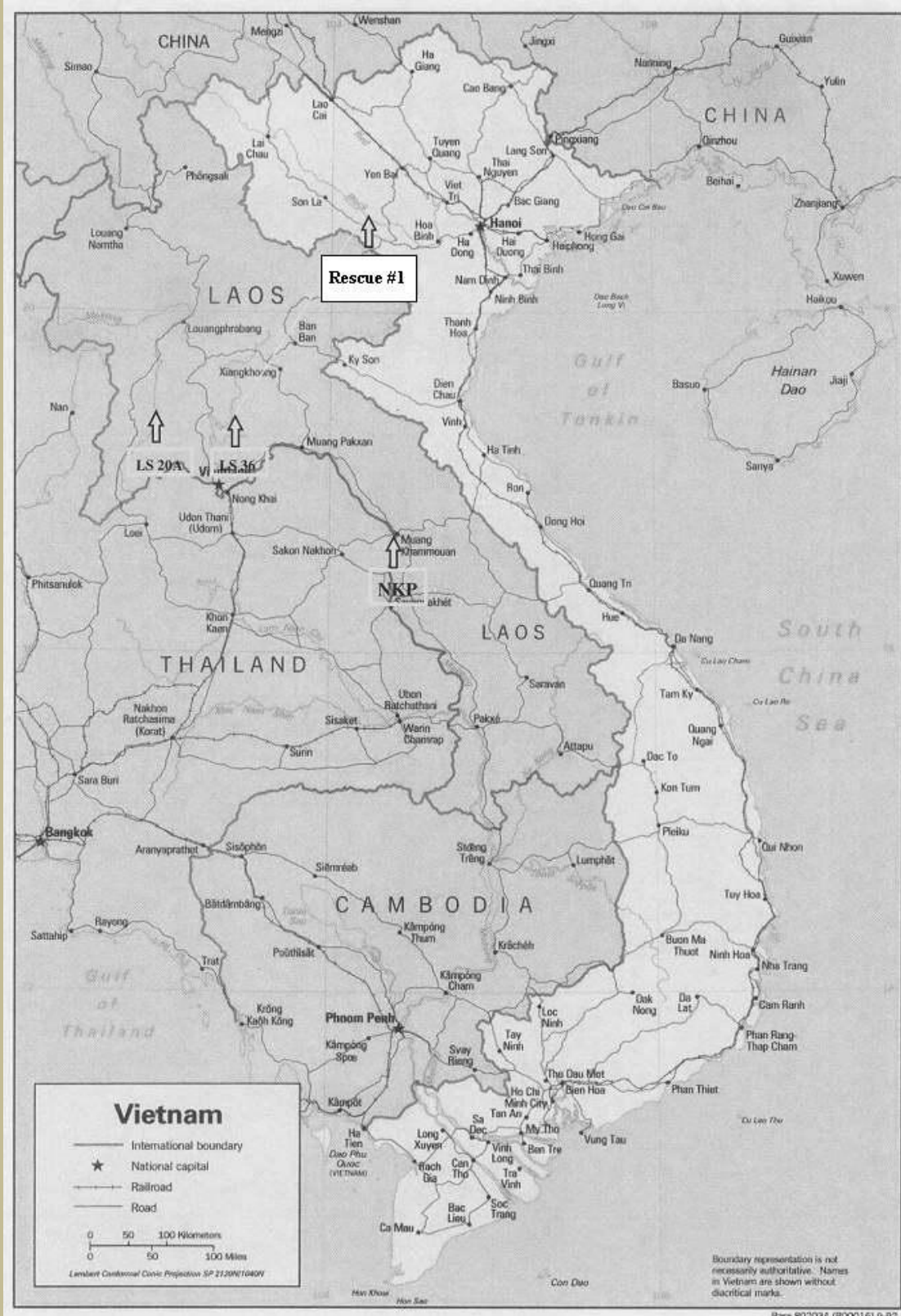
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I received the Distinguished Flying Cross for my actions that day.



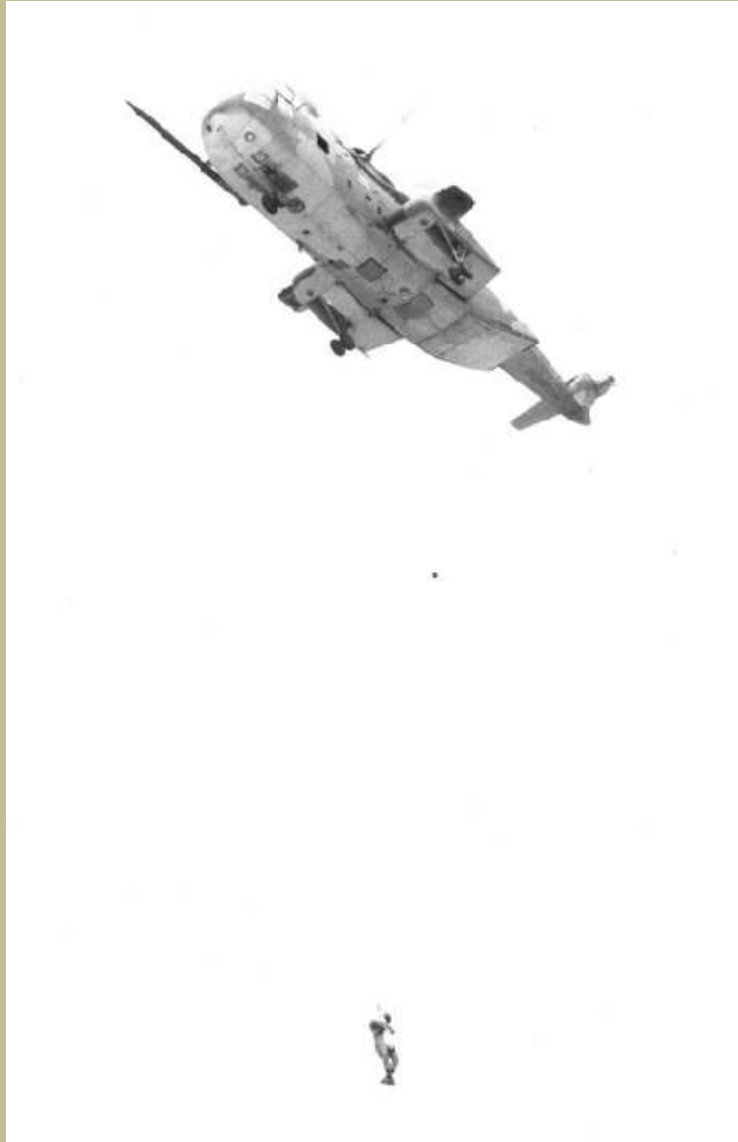
Years later, landing at an Air Force Reserve Base in Florida, I noticed several HH-3E's parked there. One of the serial numbers looked familiar, so I walked over for a closer look. Sure enough, I could see the patches on the right side beneath the pilots' seat. It was the same helicopter I had flown on my first rescue mission.

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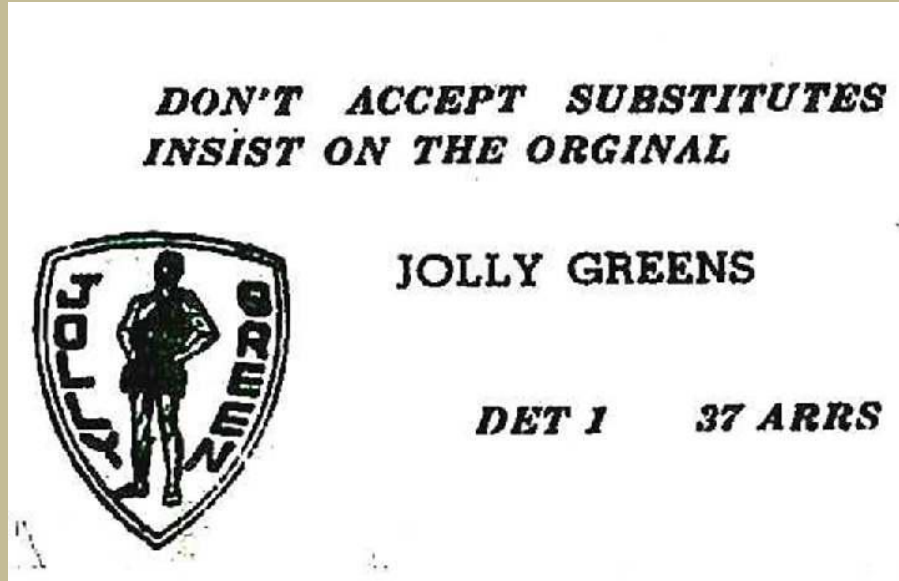
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This is just one of the seven rescues included in Vietnam Air Rescues.

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Dave rescued 9 people on 7 pickups and flew “High” bird on another three pickups that rescued an additional four people. These are the medals in each category, that he received:



Silver Star	Distinguished Flying Cross (3)	Air Medal (4)	Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry	Vietnam Service Medal	Vietnam Campaign Medal
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Excerpt From Terms

The base included the usual amenities such as:

Armory Where the weapons were stored. Before going on Alert, we would be issued our personal weapons from there.

Base Exchange/Commissary Very small, with limited stocks of food and toiletries.

Control Tower Even though I had an Air Traffic Control background from my enlisted days, I never visited the Control Tower.

Fire/Crash Rescue Nice to know they were on duty, but I had no interaction with them.

Hospital This is where the Flight Surgeon hung out. Fortunately, I had no need of his services.

Intelligence The intelligence section was known as the TUOC (**Tactical Unit Operations Center**, the intelligence section where missions were briefed). Our last stop prior to assuming alert was there.

Life Support Where our parachutes and survival equipment were stored and maintained.

Living Quarters We were housed in long, wooden barracks called "Hooches". They were built up off the ground because the area flooded when it rained, which it did quite a lot. Each 'hooch' had a maid assigned, who did general cleanup and laundry. We all chipped in to cover her pay, but I do not remember how much it was.

Jargon

In this section, I have tried to alphabetically list the various terms used in the book which the reader may not be familiar with. This is only a sample of the jargon contained in Vietnam Air Rescues.

- AAA** Anti-Aircraft Artillery
- Air Medal** 5th ranking U.S. combat award
- AK-47** A sub-machine gun of Russian design—the communist equivalent of the M-16
- Article 15** One of the lesser forms of Court Martial in the military
- Autorotation** A maneuver in which the rotor of a helicopter is disengaged in flight. The weight of the helicopter spins the rotors, allowing a safe landing if done properly.
- BDA** Bomb Damage Assessment
- Blood Chit** A strip of cloth on which is printed an American Flag and a message in several languages promising to reward anyone who helps the owner
- CBU** Cluster Bomb Unit, a hollow casing filled with steel ball bearings packed around an explosive. In some cases, the ball bearings were replaced with tiny, explosive mines.
- CIA** Central Intelligence Agency
- Cocked** An aircraft which has all its switches set to the "on" position is said to be cocked. One needs merely to apply power to start the aircraft
- Crown** The call sign of the orbiting communications relay aircraft used in Vietnam.
- DEROS** Date of Estimated Return from Overseas. Generally, one year after arrival.
- Distinguished**
- Flying Cross** 4th Ranking U.S. combat award
- DMZ** Demilitarized Zone, the buffer area that existed between North and South Vietnam.
- Drop Tank** A gas tank fitted to an aircraft. It can be jettisoned in flight.

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We hope that you enjoyed the first rescue from Dave Richardson's book Vietnam Air Rescues. There are two sections which explain common terms that are used in the book. This is helpful in understanding some sections where Dave used the terms that were appropriate.

The number of pictures Dave shares with us in the book is amazing and adds a lot of detail to the information he shares. It's nice to see actual pictures from the events.

This e-book only contains a small part of the information in the actual book which is available to download from Dave's site or the print book is also available from Dave directly and on Amazon.

We invite you to visit www.vietnam-air-rescues.com for more details, more pictures and to order your own copy of this personal story.

Front of Dave's Jacket



The Jacket Sleeve



These pictures are from Dave Richardson's Rescue Jacket and show the number of people that he rescued and the number of missions he flew.

www.amazon.com/Vietnam-Air-Rescues-Dave-Richardson/dp/1434891348

For much more information, visit www.vietnam-air-rescues.com