

The rescue crew had to play it by ear---But somehow they managed!

The First Successful Rescue of a Hun Pilot in SEA

By Ron Bigoness and Jay Strayer

Editor's Note: Search and Rescue (SAR) stories have always had a warm place in the hearts of aviators. This one will be a special story for F-100 pilots because it's about the first successful combat SAR for a Hun driver at the beginning of the Vietnam era. The tale is told by two eyewitnesses—the downed F-100 pilot, Ron Bigoness, and the rescue chopper pilot, Jay Strayer, both Captains at the time.



The aged HH-43B was scarcely qualified for hostile SAR ops, but it was all they had.

Ron Bigoness' Story

My squadron, the 615th of the 401st TFW out of England AFB, was the first TFS to operate in North Vietnam (NVN) and Laos. We were TDY to the Philippines in June, 1964, when Lt. (jg) Everett Alvarez, the USN pilot, was shot down in Laos; thereafter becoming the very first US aviator POW in SEA. Shortly after that event, several of us flew “retaliatory” strikes in Laos near the Plain-of-Jars. That ‘64 TDY provided most of us with our first taste of combat.

The 615th returned to SEA in March, 1965. This TDY sent us to Da Nang, South Vietnam. On March 31, 1965, I found myself leading one of the very early “Operation Rolling Thunder” missions headed up North. My two-ship flight's mission that morning (call signs Panther 10/11) was a weather recce for the strike flights scheduled for that afternoon. The target for the strike package was on the border

between NVN and Laos at the northern end of the infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail—a place called Mu Gia Pass.

When we arrived at altitude in the target area, there were multiple layers of clouds below. Descending through the layers we finally got under the broken ceiling at about 1,500 feet. We set up our weaving recce formation headed toward the pass, individually jinking like crazy. But as fate would have it, I was immediately nailed in the tail section by automatic weapons fire.

“I'm hit!” I called out to my wingman, Lawrence “Dutch” Holland. “Yeah, you're on fire, Lead! You better get out!” Dutch replied.

“I ain't getting out of here yet. This thing is still flying!”

My immediate concern was maintaining aircraft control. Somehow; I was able to get the nose headed up before the flight controls froze, and the good old Hun eventually climbed to about thirteen grand. I still had trim control, but soon all systems failed, and every red light in the cockpit was flashing.

The heading remained between 200–220 degrees, sending me toward the nearest friendlies. The right wing was on fire, and there were small

explosions in the aft section; but that J-57 just kept on churning! As we topped out, the airspeed fell off, and the nose dropped below the horizon as the old bird tried to maintain the “trimmed-for” airspeed of around 400 knots. About then, with frozen controls and throttle, I was just a passenger riding a roller coaster. But as long as I was getting further and further away from Mu Gia Pass, I was more than willing to go along for the ride ... with good ol' Dutch in chase.

As we descended through about 8,000 feet, the speed and lift increased, the nose rose, and we climbed back to about ten grand. However, as the next descent began, the aircraft started a slow roll toward the inverted. Either rolling or upside down, I knew the nose would never come above the horizon again. It was time to leave. But I knew the leaving wouldn't be easy because I was doing about 450 knots, nose down, and upside down—well out of the safe ejection envelope.

I raised the ejection handles which blew the canopy and ejected. Upon hitting the slipstream, my helmet was torn off along with my kneepad and other unsecured objects; and, worse yet, my right arm was jerked out of its socket. Then came the chute deployment. It

looked like a streamer because of the high speed, and I just knew that was gonna be the end. But suddenly the streamer ballooned into a “good chute,” albeit one with two adjacent panels blown out. Those missing panels compounded my concern about my impending penetration of the rapidly approaching, triple-canopy jungle.

Meanwhile, Dutch had watched my ejection, seen the apparent streamer, and noted the two blown panels. He also saw the stricken bird go in, leaving a long flaming scar on the ground. Dutch circled until he saw me disappear into the vast jungle, and wisely marked the range and bearing of that spot in reference to the wreckage, having figured out rough coordinates for both. Then he climbed for maximum endurance altitude and got on the horn with the initial “May Day” call. The SAR effort was about to begin.



Ron Bigoness flew the Hun at England AFB, Aviano, DaNang, Clark AB and Phan Rang. After being shot down in 1965 he returned to Viet Nam in 1968 for 220 more combat missions for a total of 250. He was also an F-100 IP and a maintenance flight test pilot.

The SAR Situation

Editor’s Note: As the Vietnamese War intensified, the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service (ARRS) found its worldwide plans for deployment and its existing rescue equipment ill suited to the SAR mission in a hostile combat environment. As they scrambled to provide a rudimentary capability to support the growing U.S. airpower presence in SEA, they were unable to deploy intact and experienced units. Rather, they deployed personnel and equipment piecemeal from existing units and stationed them TDY at bases that offered maximum utility to support the developing tactical warfare operations. One such base was Nakhon Phanom (NKP) in Thailand.

The Aircraft Commander (AC) of the HH-43B helicopter which eventually found and rescued Panther 10 was Jay Strayer. In the letter he wrote to Ron years later, he described the SAR situation he encountered upon his arrival at NKP.

Jay Strayer’s Story

I was stationed at George AFB at the time, and arrived TDY to the then unheard-of -place called NKP. The red dust was terrible in the heat of summer.

There were six of us “heli” (helicopter) pilots assigned to the new Pacific Air Rescue Center’s Provisional Detachment 3, located there. None of us had served together before, so we suffered a bit of conflict as we struggled to come up with operational plans and tactics to conduct combat rescues. Good personal equipment (PE) for our aircrews was woefully lacking and the

venerable HH-43B “Husky” was way out of its design environment in the new combat SAR role.

The new Det. 3 didn’t even have any survival vests. Luckily, I had brought with me the WW II survival vest that had been issued to me back at Kincheloe AFB. In a former life I had been stationed there supporting the F-106 ADC mission. For about \$6 US apiece, we got a Thai lady to make very serviceable copies for each aircrew member. GI weapons were also scarce, so most of us carried our own handguns. My weapon was a Ruger Blackhawk 357.

The Husky was originally designed to respond to aircraft crashes fairly near airports where a rescue unit was stationed, carrying a 1,000 pound bottle containing fire retardant and a couple of firefighters dressed in silver fire-proof suits. So, its operational range was very limited—about 75 miles. But thanks to Yankee ingenuity, one of our pilots (Fred Glover) came up with a way to use up to three 55-gallon drums as jettisonable auxiliary fuel tanks. You don’t want to hear about the plumbing, but needless to say, the smoking lamp was never lit when that configuration was installed. Each drum extended our normal sortie time by about 35 minutes and 30 miles. We cleverly named this jury-rig the Range Extension Fuel System (REFS).

Our tactics always included flying with two rescue helicopters if assets were available. We dubbed the two choppers “low bird” and “high bird.” The low bird was the lead and the first to attempt rescue when the downed aircrew was located. The high bird would set up in trail about a

mile or two away as a radio relay and spare in case lead aborted or its crew became “rescuees” themselves. Once launched, we were on our own because the sophisticated SAR “system,” which subsequently developed from our early, and hard, lessons learned, was yet to come. Hell, we didn’t even know to call for fighter cover!

All of us were fresh from the States, and none had any combat time or even knew how to spell the words. We were just hell bent to rescue fellow Americans who were in deep trouble.



Jay Strayer checked out in the HH-43 in 1963 and upgraded to the HH-53 in early 1970. He flew Jolly Greens out of Udorn. His adventures included piloting one of the raiding HH-53s that attempted a rescue of our POWs out of Son Tay Prison in NVN.

The Main Event

Ron Bigoness: After Dutch Holland put out the initial “May Day” call on Guard about 1000 Hours Local, he contacted the airborne alert HU-16 “Albatross” (Call sign Basil 66, playing the later-to-be developed role of the C-130 “King” bird) on a secondary SAR frequency and told them his lead was down about 65 miles from NKP in Laos. He gave them my coordinate information and

reported that he was unable to contact me via his hand-held UHF survival radio. The proto-King bird asked him to orbit the area, conserve fuel, continue trying to contact me on the UHF, and stay as long as he could. Dutch did just that until he RTB’d at BINGO fuel ... but he never heard from me on the ground.

Jay Strayer: At NKP, two Huskies were rapidly prepped to include installation of the REFS on both birds. They launched at 1050L as “Alban 21 and 41,” climbed to 4,000 feet, and headed northeast into Laos — with no fighter escort. Based on the estimated 65 mile distance to the downed F-100 and with our REFS, this should have been an easy rescue. But I screwed up and got the outbound heading wrong. So we wound up spending lots of valuable time searching in the wrong area about 25 miles north of the actual crash site’s location. By the time we realized our error, we had already gone through all of our aux fuel. Very frustrated, we finally corrected our initial error and moved south to intersect the right radial off of INVERT, the NKP TACAN.

Ron Bigoness: While the SAR was mounted and the Huskies launched, I was taking stock of my situation. As I descended toward the ground ... I was concerned about further injury to my arm and shoulder as I crashed into the jungle canopy. Luckily, my arm didn’t catch any limbs as I passed through the branches. The chute hung up in the treetops leaving me suspended about ten feet above the jungle floor. I got out of my harness and managed to

drop to the ground with only minor further injuries.

I could hear my wingman, Dutch, circling helplessly overhead, but I couldn’t see him through the thick jungle canopy. As I moved about in the dim light below it, my shoulder was very painful. I tried to raise Dutch on my hand-held UHF survival radio, but the radio wouldn’t work. I guessed that the battery was dead. Our entire supply of PE came directly from our TDY kits which, obviously, were not well maintained.

It was a little after 1030L when the noise from Dutch’s plane disappeared, and it suddenly got real lonely. After that, I heard nothing ... except for screaming monkeys!

Jay Strayer: We arrived in the vicinity of the downed F-100 about 1150L and searched diligently and frantically for what seemed the longest time with no useful results. We had heard a few beeps from Panther 10’s URT-21 radio beacon, but the signal was faint and neither of us (*the two Huskies*) could home in on it. At 1230L, we were almost bingo fuel when one of my crewmembers caught a glimpse of a flashing, bright glint of metal and steered me to it. It was the still smoking wreckage of Panther 10’s plane, so we knew we were getting close.

We circled it at 3,500 feet four or five times. Suddenly, the URT-21 signal strengthened and we were able to home on it with the ADF. At 1250L, we spotted a parachute in the trees and dropped a smoke grenade to mark it. Shortly after the visual on the chute, the two PJs

(“Parajumpers”—SSgts. Enson J. “EJ” Farmer and Herbert Romisch) on my low bird spotted some smoke coming up from a small (really tiny) clearing near the chute. Upon closer approach, the PJs saw Panther 10 beside his smoking fire below, wildly waving one arm. Wasting no time, we went to hover directly above him and practically in the 100 foot treetops because our hoist cable was only 100 feet long! (see *Husky in the trees photo.*)

Ron Bigoness: After about two hours on the ground listening to the monkeys, and starting a fire hoping to create a smoke beacon since my UHF radio was useless; I heard the noise of the circling SAR flight. When I heard the choppers, my dismal thoughts soared with hope. I tried to position myself in a spot where I could see through one of the few small openings in the jungle canopy.

One brief moment in time which I vividly remember was when I looked up through one of those small breaks and saw a PJ (Sgt. Farmer) looking out the back of a Husky and staring straight at me. I’ll never forget it. I was the proverbial needle in the haystack of the jungle! And, they had found me!!! I wildly waved my one good arm and he waved back. I could almost taste a cool one in the Club. But Jay and his crew’s pick-up work was just beginning.

Jay Strayer: All we had at that time, for lowering a PJ or bringing up a survivor with our power hoist cable was the ancient “horse collar.” Unlike the tree penetrators that would come later

and could carry both a PJ and a survivor, this one person device was not very sophisticated. So, Sgt. Farmer donned the horse collar and Sgt. Romisch lowered him into the dimness below.

Upon reaching the ground, his first words were, “Don’t worry Captain, we’ve got you now.”

When Sgt. Farmer discovered the pilot’s arm and shoulder injuries, he told the captain that it would hurt like hell, but that he’d have to put the horse collar under both his arms. This he did, and up went the captain, screaming in agony.

He was still screaming when Sgt. Romisch pulled him in. And he kept screaming as Romisch began lowering the horse collar to Sgt. Farmer, still on the ground. When the cable was about 20 feet down, I told Sgt. Romisch to stop

and give the pilot something for his pain—it was tough enough holding the hover in the tops of the trees without this distraction, and I really did “feel his pain.”

On the ground, Sgt. Farmer became concerned that the hoist had stopped. What was going on? His concern was growing because he had removed his survival vest to get into the horse collar easier (unbeknown at the time to me, the AC), and he realized that he’d be in deep trouble if we had to suddenly depart the area for some reason—and leave him with no survival equipment, particularly a radio to help us find him again. (Rescue men too, as well as fighter jocks, were learning their lessons at the “school of hard knocks.”)

In a couple of minutes, the morphine administered to the injured pilot took effect, and Sgt.



In shock and severe pain from a dislocated shoulder and fractured upper arm, Bigoness is pulled aboard the HH-43B helicopter.



Once he was safely on the ground at NKP, more morphine was quickly administered.

Romisch resumed and completed the retrieval of Sgt. Farmer. We proceeded to RTB to NKP as fast as we could go, all of 85 knots, and landed long after the fuel low light came on. We logged 3+30 hours on that sortie which established a time-in-flight record



Bigoness, shortly after his ordeal. He returned to flying status after five months and finished his tour in South Vietnam in 1968.

for the HH-43B. And ... we had saved our first F-100 pilot; who happened to be the first Hun driver successfully rescued in the long, difficult conflict; just beginning ... way back then.

Epilogue

Ron Bigoness: An HU-16 flew me from bare-base NKP to Ubon where U.S. Army doctors put my arm back in its socket and pronounced me fit for further travel. (Also, it turned out that my upper arm bone was fractured, but we didn't know that at the time.) The following day I was returned to my squadron at Da Nang where I remained for about a week before departing for the States. After five months rehabilitation at Wilford Hall Hospital in San Antonio, I was discharged and returned to flying

status. I managed to get back to Nam in 1968 by volunteering to complete my tour, flying another 220 combat missions before being reassigned to USAFE HQ.

Jay Strayer: After surviving the steep learning curve of my TDY introduction to combat SAR operations, I managed to get back to SEA two more times. Strangely, I never “got” – meaning was never credited with – another successful combat rescue. I did, however, participate in the planning for the November 21, 1970 raid on the Son Tay Prison Camp, 21 miles northeast of Hanoi. I also flew one of the Jolly Green's trying to rescue some of our POW friends. I was bitterly disappointed to find they had been moved. But, that's another story.

Editor's Note: Regrettably, lots of SAR operations don't end in the relatively happy way this story did. Case in point is Ron's wingman on that 31st of March, '65, mission over Mu Gia Pass. Just nine weeks later, Dutch Holland was shot down over South Vietnam. He survived the ejection, but got into a fatal shootout with the Viet Cong —his Combat Masterpiece pistol was no match for their AK-47 assault rifles. A rescue helicopter arrived on scene too late to help, but just in time to see the VC dump Dutch's limp body into a ditch ... a bad and sad ending for a very good guy.

To paraphrase the title of Ernest K. Gann's bestselling 1964 book about how fate and luck are so intertwined, particularly for aviators: “Fate Is (indeed) the Hunter.”