

BULLWHIP 01

By Allen Cates: Air America Association

The Vietnam era Airborne Command & Control Center, called AB Triple C operated in northern and southern Laos. The first one was a C-47, and later C-130s were used. ABCCC stayed on station 24 hours a day, and in the north of Laos they were known in the daytime as Cricket, and at night it was replaced by another C-130 called Alley Cat.

On 19 May 1970, I was flying an H-34 helicopter for Air America loaned from the United States Marine Corps by order of President Kennedy and Johnson. On this day, I was operating in northern Laos at LS-32 (BOUAM LONG) located northeast of the Plain of Jars. Three Air America helicopters were working LS-32 that day. Two H-34s and one Bell-205.

There is a road coming from North Vietnam into the Plain of Jars that was heavily guarded by the North Vietnamese with 37MM and 23MM guns. Air America aircraft working LS-32 launched from LS-20A and flew west of the Plain of Jars to avoid the road.

U.S. Air Force aircraft routinely made photo reconnaissance flights along this path searching for enemy activity. Air America aircraft were tasked with SAR for northern Laos, and in 1964-1965 was stationed at LS-36 statically with instructions to monitor a radio in case an SAR situation developed. At that time the AB Triple C aircraft was code named CROWN.

SAR activity was sometimes intense and other times quiet. Usually, it was quiet, and with advanced communications thru antennas at various locations, it was no longer necessary to standby at LS-36.

Air America aircraft were required to report to Air America operations every 30 minutes with an "Operations Normal" report. Two-way communications allowed the aircraft to standby while working. This practice allowed operations to know where every aircraft was located in a general area and could direct aircraft to a search and rescue location in a matter of minutes.

Usually, the senior aircraft commander would be in charge of a SAR situation. The senior pilots were H.R. Casterlin and F.N. Smith flying the Bell. Air America operations were contacted by 7th/13th Air Force informing them an Air Force aircraft had been shot down southeast of LS-32 and two flight crew members had bailed out and needed to be rescued. Operations radioed the three helicopters in the immediate area. We were given the frequency to contact Cricket and immediately came under their control. The coordinates Cricket provided showed the downed pilots to be very close to the heavily guarded road.

All three-aircraft headed in that direction. When close to the road I noticed puffs of smoke and at first thought, it was cloud formations because it was an overcast sky.

Casterlin informed me I was being bracketed and receiving fire from the road. The Bell was much faster and quickly evacuated the area. I was too high to try descending and elected to go higher. But, at 12,500 feet the H-34 quit climbing, and I knew I needed to get out of the area and come in from a low altitude.

We then received word the coordinates were incorrect and given new coordinates further to the south. Casterlin and Smith went around the Plain of Jars to the west and Woozley, and I flew directly over the Plain. We joined up where it was reported the survivors were located in a valley covered with forest and high trees.

Air Force rescue helicopters had departed Thailand at the same time we got the word from Operations. One developed a hydraulic malfunction, and they had turned around about the same time we were under fire from the road.

The bailout area appeared to be relatively safe for the time being, and we reported to Cricket we were going to pick the survivors up by hoist because there was no place to land and we wanted to get them out quickly before the enemy discovered their location. Cricket advised us the Air Force rescue helicopters had turned back toward Laos and asked if we would allow them to pick up the survivors.

Woozley calmly told Cricket the area was not considered safe and both the survivors and the Air America helicopters were vulnerable. He went on to say it was all right with us if the Air Force made the rescue, but we were not going to hang around and watch.

There was a minute delay, and Cricket told us to make the rescue. The Bell went in first, and we acted as SAR for him. I could see the hoist go down and one survivor place himself in the horse collar. But, the hoist didn't go up. I could see the survivor waving his arms, but the hoist remained below the helicopter.

I called on the radio to the Bell asking if there was a problem. There was no answer. There was a problem. The hoist on the Bell was not as good as the one on the H-34 and failures were more common. It had failed at an inopportune time, and the flight mechanic could not bring the survivor up by hand. A comedy of errors had now occurred. Not only had the hoist failed but the radios failed as well. The flight mechanic was trying to signal the survivor the hoist had failed, and he needed to get off to allow another helicopter to complete the pickup.

The survivor was not about to get off. He had survived being shot down and the bailout in enemy territory, and he was now being rescued, or so he thought. He was not getting off now. No way!

Finally, he realized the situation, and he released himself, very reluctantly, I was told later. I didn't know for sure what was happening because the Bell could not communicate, but I figured the hoist had failed and I moved in over the survivor when the Bell moved off. The terrain was high enough to require maximum power to hover out of ground

effect. Woozley was watching over me. I eased in slowly making sure I had room to move off and not hit the trees if I settled.

It was my second SAR in a little over a month. I had picked up Navy Lt. M.P. Hamilton in southern Laos after his A-7 Corsair had been shot down after a bombing run. We had experienced a lot of ground fire and hit in the rear fuselage. So, I was apprehensive and a sitting target above the trees. Filipino flight mechanic Romeo Nery had been with me that day.

I was able to establish a hover with some power left over. Filipino Flight Mechanic M.A. Leveriza was a professional. He directed me over the survivor while I set a stable hover looking at the horizon. Leveriza dropped the hoist, and the survivor placed the horse collar around himself, and Leveriza pulled him up. I went into forward flight, and as soon as I had altitude and could visually see Woozley, I told him to go after the second survivor, who was close by but a few hundred yards away.

Woozley's pickup went the same way as mine, and he joined with me, and we took both survivors to LS-20A. We shook hands with them, and we may have exchanged names, but I don't remember doing it.

The Bell was already on the ground and fixed their radio. The OPS Manager at 20 Alternate directed the Bell to take the survivors to Udorn where they had launched in their F4 Phantom.

About the time they got airborne, the Air Force rescue helicopters arrived and demanded the Air America helicopter to turn around so they could take the survivors to Udorn. Short of murder Casterlin was not too keen on turning around, but he gave the survivors the information and allowed them to make the decision.

It took all of about two seconds. They declared they were rescued by Air America and they were going home with Air America. The Bell kept on going south to Udorn.

The Bell crew was treated royally when they arrived in Udorn. Woozley and I? We remained up country and kept on working unknown and unrewarded, but dinner had a better flavor that night when we finished the day's work.

Several years later I was sent an official letter from the Department of the Air Force and informed the aircraft was a RF4C out of Udorn, Thailand. The pilots we rescued were Capt. F.P. Norton and Major C.A. Crawford. Their call sign was Bullwhip 01.

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