

AN EXCEPTIONALLY TAXING DAY: The Rescue of BULLWHIP 01

By Dick Casterlin, Air America Association

"I had another interesting one the other day [19 May]. A couple of pilots were down and we were given a set of coordinates on the map. I knew the area well as we had worked there during the PDJ operation.

The weather was bad, as we are having an early rainy season and we had to work our way around to the area. I was getting groundfire when I tried to let down to proceed into the area. Next the flack started coming up. It was really heavy, but we managed to get out ok. I started asking about the coordinates and discovered that we had been given the wrong ones.

After finding out the correct ones we made the pickup. I had some trouble with my hoist and radios and was unable to pull the man into the ship, but an H-34 [pilot] was able to do the job. The pilots were the happiest guys I have known. They had a party for us that night, but I was too tired to go, as in the two hours it took to do the job, I had completely exhausted myself. It was worth it, as we saved two pilots.

We had five saves this month.

I am sending some letters under separate cover to place with the others to keep for posterity."

29 May 1970 Letter Home.

Unlike the undeclared, but indisputably hot war in South Vietnam, under the Geneva Accords of 1965 Laos was designated a strictly neutral country where foreign military units were forbidden to work. This political facade never changed, but neither protagonist honored this protocol-with the communists violating it to a much greater extent. Therefore, in 1964, when Laos was in imminent danger of falling to the communists and intelligence

sorely lacking, U.S. overflights and armed reconnaissance missions were authorized by USG. At the time the Lyndon Johnson Administration "wise men" elected to pursue a pragmatic and largely disjointed approach to conduct the Second Indochina War as it applied to North Vietnam and Laos. It was akin to "too many cooks in the kitchen." Moreover, at the cost of many good airmen, military search and rescue vehicles were either forbidden to enter the country or were inadequate for the work. They seemed an afterthought. ¹

Although the USAF gradually assumed a greater responsibility for SAR work in the late summer of 1965 with their CH-3 and then more powerful HH-53 helicopters with trained crews and superior equipment especially manufactured for the demanding job, AAM never relinquished the 1964 U.S State Department mandate for their pilots to conduct SAR missions in Laos. As any participant of a SAR can attest, none were exactly the same. There were too many variables involved: weather, terrain, enemy situation were but a few. ²

Since the RLG lost or abandoned northern territory at Na Khang (LS-36), Phu Pha Thi (LS-85), and other locations where USAF assets formerly staged for rescues in NVN, AAM helicopter crews were again challenged to perform yeoman SAR work, an extra hazardous mission that except for a "Catch-22" provision was never foreseen in the original Madriver contract. Nowhere was this more prevalent than in Military Region-2 where AAM helicopters were concentrated and worked in close proximity to major strike activity and consequently downed military pilots.

¹This aspect of SAR work in Laos is more adequately described in Books Four and Five.

²USAF HH-43's were first introduced, but despite courageous efforts by the crews, proved inadequate to accomplish the mission.

In contrast, USAF helicopter assistance was often far removed from the battlefield at Udorn and Nakhon Phanom bases, where to satisfy military SOPs, crews required lengthy briefings regarding many categories before launching north. However, USAF tardy participation in the Lao Theater did not relieve AAM of SAR duty in other portions of Laos.

With the level of large AAA weapon activity in and around Bouam Long diminished and considered basically over, attempts by the defenders to retake outlying posts and clear the immediate area began in earnest. Against this end, I was sent north in Bell 205 XW-PFH with Frenchy Smith and F/M Ortillo to work at Sites-32 and 50. Since my monthly time was already 63 hours, Frenchy was allowed to log the ferry flight time, while I logged time toward deadhead pay.

Customer Jerry Daniels had planned and arranged one Special Mission for the day. During the siege on Site-32 these missions were generally staged out of Phu Cum where crews would wait impatiently for A-1E cover and a propitious time to launch. When fixed wing A/C were unable to air drop munitions and supplies to beleaguered sites, our missions usually involved resupply, troop movements, and extraction of wounded. Also involved in the area that day were two H-34 crews composed of Captains Tim Woosley, Al Cates, their First Officers Manus Disoum, Kiattiyos Vongprasert and Fight Mechanics Stan "Stash" Waite and M. Leveriza. After completing the mission we all continued to work less invasive areas at Bouam Long and Phu Cum.

Since our helicopters were all equipped with operational UHF radios we always had our selector switches set on a preferred frequency (usually Company monitored 228.5) that also included a preset guard frequency (243.0, 259.0 backup). This was standard practice enabling us to monitor Mayday calls from any stricken

A/C. In addition, we had access to tactical and other SAR frequencies for King, the HC-130P SAR controlling A/C.

Later in the day, with weather conditions worsening, a youthful voice issued a blanket radio call from the high-flying King SAR control A/C requesting that any AAM helicopter pilot contact the SAR ship. Since we were still part of the rescue equation, and Jolly Green crews were likely hours and miles away in UTH or NKP, minutes even seconds counted when airmen were on the ground. Therefore, with a narrow window of opportunity before the enemy had time to react, it was incumbent that we immediately respond. Normally during such situations all normal work in the concerned area ceased and AAM pilots hearing the call for help proceeded to the area in question.

After contacting the King controller and obtaining the downed ship's coordinates, but no other intelligence, I landed at Phu Cum to identify and plot the location on my chart. SARs could be lengthy and unknowns always cropped up when one least expected, so against the possibility of delays and unforeseen events, I instructed Ortillo to hurriedly pump two barrels of A-4 jet fuel (kerosene) into the tanks.

After marking the UMT coordinates on my old, shopworn map, I was shocked to discover the AF people had recorded the downed A/C at Nong Pet, the Route-7/71 junction at the mouth of the narrow valley leading to Ban Ban. I was well familiar with the location that everyone generically called the 7/71 split for identification during the previous year's PDJ operation. Even throughout the period we "owned" the PDJ, the often contested cross-road area never presented a particularly safe area to work. Now firmly under enemy control, Nong Pet was considered a very high AAA threat by the Customer and our Flight Information Center (FIC) people. Certainly the location had to be a mistake. No sane knowing person would attempt to send unarmed helicopter crews into such a hornet's

nest. Moreover, I recalled my "40 mile thumb rule" gleaned from years of experience that concluded the high-flying navigators in the control ships often reported positions 40 miles from an actual location. I attributed these errors mainly to the navigator's inexperience fostered by military yearly tours which plagued American participation in the entire SEA war. The NVA had no similar problem. Their people were involved for the duration or death, whichever occurred first.

In denial, assuming a plotting error, I explained the current high threat at Nong Pet to the King listeners. Then hopeful for a fresh set of coordinates in a slightly less invasive area, I requested the King crew reexamine their coordinates and check their source for validity and reliability. The controller came back with the same location. No. No. It had to be an error. Still not convinced of the location's viability, I requested yet another assessment. The controller was patient with me, insisting the issued coordinates were correct. I was not happy.

By that time, Ortillo had completed refueling PFH and it was time to depart for the projected coordinates. While we were shut down, Tim and Al went on ahead, as had Porter Captain KD Nolan with Customer Jerry "Hog" Daniels onboard. A STOL pilot working alongside us in the trenches, I had known KD for years and earnestly liked the man. We often talked, joked, and swapped war stories at The Alternate. KD was also involved in a later phase of the T-28 Alpha program. On one mission, after experiencing a problem during a SAR mission he attempted a landing at Na Khang, flipped over, but miraculously survived. The next time I saw him, I admonished him to use more caution-certainly an oxymoron in our line of work. Faster than a helicopter, presenting a smaller target than an H-34, KD was planning to assess the area situation, search, report the weather, and conduct communications with U.S. military A/C. Since we were entering an unknown situation with no briefing,

relieved from obtaining these variables would tend to help us focus only on the task at hand and facilitate our mission.

In addition to low clouds in the south, and since there was still enemy activity west of Bouam Long, instead of conducting a direct flight to Nong Pet that would involve crossing or paralleling the east-west stretch of Route-71, we elected to circumnavigate southeast, skirt Bouam Long to the east and then turn south toward Phou Nok Kok, a familiar checkpoint, at the western portion of the Ban Ban Valley. This position was about 25 miles from Phu Cum, but as we were considerably faster than the lumbering H-34's, I calculated we would arrive about the same time as the other helicopters. Then after arrival, the process would necessitate negotiating an eight mile long gauntlet of hills southwest along a narrow valley toward Nong Pet. This might be accomplished safely, and avoid the danger of a Route-7 overflight by terrain following and hugging the northern high bank of mountains lining the defile. By the time we arrived at the junction, although there had been no mention of USAF or T-28 escort, perhaps there would be air assets available to assist us in the recovery attempt and also validate our SAR SOP. If not, any problems could be sorted out later.

After arriving at altitude in the weather impacted area, I observed the H-34's and Porter circling in the general vicinity of the eastern tip of the old Black Lion position. The congestion did not seem wise to me, so to preclude a midair collision, I remained on the northern portion of the valley where I believed my ship was masked from the road.

Because of a necessity to launch and expedite the mission, we had not briefed each other regarding our plans, but independently accepted the SAR task. This was the norm for AAM pilots and as most of us had participated in previous SARs we generally knew the rules and what was required.

Since the USAF had taken over much of the SAR work in recent years, the requirement for us was relatively rare and largely depended on our proximity to the scene. We did not always work close to each other and merely converged on a spot from all quarters when called. Generally the senior man in a group was accorded mission commander status. Sometimes we briefed on guard or other FM, VHF, or UHF radio frequencies. Although not highly trained for SAR work, most of us were former military aviators and had some hoist training experience. Mine was acquired in the ocean just off the beach at Cubi Point, PI. I also participated in an actual SAR on Japanese freighter 80 miles north of Okinawa.

Generally at some time in their AAM career everyone had their chance in the barrel. I would wager there were few if any seasoned AAM helicopter pilots or crews who had not participated in some form of SAR operation; perhaps not always conducting an actual rescue, but perhaps as a backup, or on the periphery waiting to assist. Since we were in different programs, I had never flown with either Tim or Al, but as former marine aviators and AAM oldtimers, each were reputedly good pilots and already had SAR recoveries under their belt-Al most recently. The only thing I did not know about the men was how each reacted under fire, a criteria I used to judge a man's worth in a tight spot. At any rate, I was happy to have the H-34 crews along, for I was certain we would require all the assets and human expertise we could muster that day for the developing bag of worms confronting us.

An extensive unbroken cloud layer of undetermined tops stretched east from Phu Nok Kok limiting our orbiting altitude, but no precipitation existed to hamper visibility. However, in contrast, looking southwest from my altitude there was no perceptible ceiling. The clouds were impenetrable, appearing to plunge nearly to the ground in the direction of the mountain bracketed slot leading toward Nong Pet. In addition, heavy rain

showers created marginal visibility. Rather than descend and attempt to proceed toward the junction we elected to initially search our immediate area. However, no smoke, beeper, or any sign of aviators was evident.

To assess enemy presence I suspected were lurking below me and better judge worsening weather conditions in the direction of Nong Pet, I commenced a slow circling descent close to the northern hills. Using a time honored technique I developed to eliminate invariable radio chatter, rotor, and transmission noise that tended to mask groundfire in my sound attenuating helmet, I keyed my ICS button to more clearly discern the Rice Crispy snap, crackle, and pop sound of small arms fire. This method would help prevent me from getting into a precarious situation I could not handle. Therefore, I continued to slowly spiral down until sounds of shooting became too intense. Then I climbed back out of rifle range.

By this time, it was obvious the current weather pattern was quickly moving east and would shortly force us into the Ban Ban Valley. The H-34 pilots were already in the valley where I had previously been warned by the Alternate Customer that six 37mm guns were positioned in deep earthen pits to survive AF bombing strikes. Although difficult to hit, the sites presented a downside for enemy gunners, as the tight holes restricted the ability to elevate, and traverse the gun barrels.

Woosley was orbiting further east than Cates. As I looked in their direction multiple 37mm bursts blossomed under Tim's A/C. It was only the second or third time I had observed the black puffs, first observed over Routes-6 and 61 while returning late in the day from eastern sites to RON at Na Khang. From my angle, it appeared communist gunners were unable to traverse their weapons, but I was unsure if they could adjust fused rounds to Tim's altitude. With unpleasant mental flashes of having to descend into

that dreaded valley to effect another crew rescue, I advised Timmy he was being shot at and to vacate the area.

We had already been in the area too long, allowing the enemy to react. Due to deteriorating weather precluding a thorough search and increasing enemy fire, lacking any sign of downed aviators, it was obvious we were not accomplishing any useful function and might create other problems. Moreover, since the SAR had been relatively disorganized from the start, rather than further complicate the situation it was obvious that we should leave before one of us was forced down. Therefore, we collectively reverted to the policy of "every man for himself."

Both Woosley and Cates heeded my warning and began climbing northbound. Cates ascended, to 12,500 feet the H-34's approximate service ceiling. At that altitude the A/C ceased climbing, so he was obligated to mush through clouds under IFR conditions. After the other A/C cleared the valley, I elected to retrace our inbound track and head north to skirt the LS-32 area to the east. As I reached the foothills leading to my intended track out of the valley, a volley of red tracer fire streaked by my right side. The large caliber fire was likely from the invisible Route-6, one of the feeder trails leading into the valley, or from a gun dragged from one of the numerous caves dotting the northern valley. No one else onboard observed the momentary fire, but that was academic, for we were instantly out of range. Relatively unconcerned, I had not heard any hits or felt concussions, but was unsure about the status of PFH's main rotor blades. Therefore, in the event of battle damage and unsure if I might have to ground the A/C, I headed for Site-50 where security was relatively better than at Bouam Long.

A Raven forward air control (FAC) pilot had been monitoring our conversations. He called to advise that we had been searching in the wrong area, something I suspected from the onset. He

indicated the actual downed aviators were located at UMT map coordinates UG4242, three miles north of Route-72, eight miles east of Xieng Khouang Ville in the foothills of Hill 5669. The area appeared isolated with no reported activity reported over the downed pilots' survival radios. Unfortunately the Raven O-1E pilot, merely relaying the message, was nearing Bingo fuel state and would soon have to RTB Long Tieng before any of us could arrive in the area.

A quick check of my chart indicated the area in question was a 16 nautical mile direct flight from Nong Pet over harsh terrain, but from Site-50-well you guessed it-almost 40 miles. So much for King Control's people. The Casterlin thumb rule still remained inviolate.

THE SHOOTDOWN

Not revealed to us until years later, an Udorn based RF-4C from the 11th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron with the Bullwhip-01 call sign had been hit, likely by an entrenched 37mm guns, in the vicinity of Ban Ban. The crew of PIC Major Cyril "Cy" CA Crawford and Captain "Fred" FP Norton headed south and bailed.

Sometime during the SAR process, Jolly Green crews launched from UTH, but upon receiving the original coordinates, one ship suddenly developed a hydraulic problem at the border and both A/C turned around and RTB.

Based in UTH since December 1969, Crawford and Norton were mid-way through their overseas tours. (Crawford had logged 25 missions.) The men were part of the Fast FAC Reconnaissance program. Bullwhip aircrews often conducted recce missions twice a day over the most heavily travelled NVA supply routes and afterward debriefed with collocated Laredo FAC pilots. Slightly more than three hours generally elapsed from the time Bullwhip crews first recce a target to the time an F-4 FAC controlled strikes on the

LOCs. Since an F-4 Phantom rapidly consumed fuel, refueling took place three times during a mission. Some days, they photographed F-4's firing missiles into caves that contained trucks, guns, and other war supplies.

On this particular day, bad weather restricted operations in the Ban Ban Valley. Falcon-01, Fast FAC F-4 pilot, Alea Harwich who controlled strikes, also experiencing adverse weather conditions asked Crawford if he could join on him. "Affirmative."

With slightly better weather conditions to the east, the Bullwhip 01 reconnaissance pilots were conducting a photo run in the Route-7 valley generally between Ban Ban seven miles east to the distinctive double looped "M" in the Nam Piou. Briefed as to the AAA danger, committed to flying underneath the existing overcast at over Mach One, they encountered a well-organized flak trap consisting of 23mm and 37mm guns. Numerous tracers crisscrossed the wall of steel thrown up into the air and the F-4 was hit.

Crawford immediately turned south and began a steep high speed climb intending to vacate the area and fly as far south as possible toward home plate. As status of the two engines was unknown, the climbing maneuver was also calculated to slow the A/C without having to reduce throttle levers, allow the pilots to analyze flashing warning lights, and to commence emergency procedures.

Most sophisticated A/C, particularly U.S. combat jets are equipped with redundant flight controls. The Phantom aircraft was designed and manufactured with a redundancy of three hydraulic systems for boost and to ensure a pilot smooth movement of the control surfaces at high speeds. One system on the Bullwhip A/C was lost during the initial groundfire. A second system powered the ailerons. However, with the right aileron missing and losing hydraulic fluid, it did not appear the system would continue viable. The third and final system powered the elevator control.

Failure or a drastic malfunction of these hydraulics would cause the elevator to move full down resulting in the airplane pitching straight up rendering it uncontrollable.

With pressure on the final system rapidly going south, within a short time all hydraulic function was lost. At about 16,000 feet, with the controls frozen, Crawford radioed his decision to eject. Falcon-01 who had been covering the mission radioed a Mayday to King and remained with the crew until reaching a bingo state and relieved by an A-1 pilot, Zorro-44.

The Martin Baker device was designed to secure a pilot in his seat under a drogue chute until descending below 12,000 feet. Then at a predetermined altitude an altimeter was programmed to open the main parachute. Estimating they punched out at a higher altitude (perhaps as high as 30,000 feet), Norton recalled a lengthy ride to the ground. As time dissolved into a blur, it seemed like an eternity before his chute deployed, the seat separated, and a prolonged period of falling through the undercast ensued, while he anticipated clearing the cloud layer and what lay underneath.

The final seconds of the experience were equally exciting. At some point in the descent, Fred's parachute had a full gore panel torn out, causing him to steer in the opposite direction to the tear.

While exiting the overcast, he spied a road to his right; to the north lay a heavily forested hill with a trench system on top. Hoping to achieve cover and concealment after landing, he steered toward the tallest trees on the hill. Crashing through a high, dense canopy, his parachute caught on an obstruction just as his feet touched the ground. At first glance, it looked like he was in a secondary forest with relatively good ground visibility and virtually no weeds or bushes at ground level.

After activating quick disconnects on the parachute apparatus and assessing his options, deciding he required more cover, Norton moved uphill toward the trenches. However, just before the treeline ended he stopped, electing not to proceed further because of a lack of knowledge regarding potential minefields around the fortifications or personnel on top of the hill.

Also penetrating tall trees, Major Cy Crawford became tangled in branches. Temporarily incapacitated by shock, it took some time before he employed the tree lowering device to reach the ground.

About this time Zorro-44, who replaced Falcon-01, arrived in the area.

Cy had heard stories about other pilot rescues in Laos. He did not know exactly what lay ahead, but was confident of deliverance.

THE RESCUE

Knowledge the two aviators landed in a less impacted area than Nong Pet was like a breath of fresh air to me, however, I still intended to land at Phu Cum and shut down so Ortillo could conduct a quick airworthiness inspection. The H-34 drivers, slightly ahead of me and with no similar issues, elected to fly at altitude across the PDJ, first traveling south and then assuming a dogleg southeast to the target site. Flying across such territory marked a dangerous procedure for a helicopter pilot during any phase of the Lao war.

While I carefully scanned my map, Ortillo discovered no battle damage to the main rotor blades or any major components. Normally, assuming sufficient fuel, during a situation like this, I would fly a "safe" path west of the PDJ and then work my way east to a point near Phou Sao and then north between Phu Kabo and Xieng

Khouang Ville. But these were unlike ordinary times. If I was going to participate in phase two of the SAR, I would have to deviate slightly, generally following the identical flight path as Tim and Al, but at a lower altitude and increased speed in order to join on them. If all went smoothly, I calculated that unless unforeseen elements entered the equation, just enough fuel was available to complete the mission and RTB to Long Tieng.

As we proceeded south over the old Momentum site at Phou Vieng (LS-06) toward the outer fringes of the northern PDJ, I harbored reservations about the ultimate conclusion of the mission. During past SARs we rarely intentionally overflow areas of known AAA activity. However because of constantly changing operational requirements, we had evolved considerably since the early days when caution ruled and circumnavigating the enemy was the norm. It appeared that the nature of SARs always elicited the worst in our people, stimulating us to abandon common sense and accept undue chances to accomplish a mission. With due respect to other pilots, the responsibility of rearing and nurturing my growing family did tend to instill an added modicum of caution in my upcountry operations. Still, I could perform any job-but in my way.

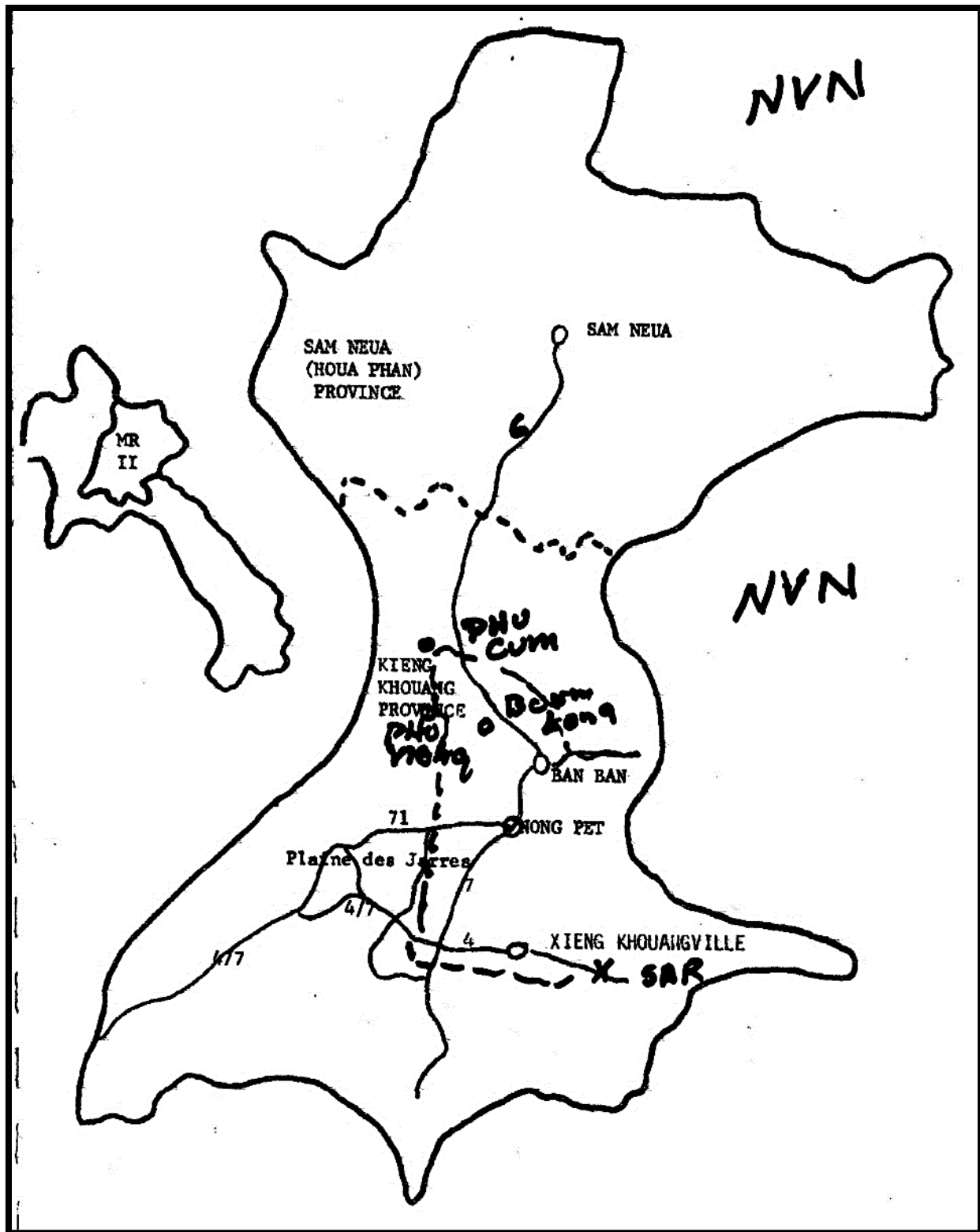
I called the H-34 pilots and learned they were in the vicinity of Arrowhead Lake just north of what used to be the historical Phong Savan market town, so far without incident. This was amazing and equally relieving. Perhaps my crew would be equally fortunate. However, PDJ weather was excellent and with the slapping noise of the H-34's rotor blades at altitude, alerted enemy gunners might be seeking to claim yet another airborne victim that day. To further diminish the gap between us, I increased speed.

With an element of doubt creeping into my reasoning and adrenalin coursing through my body, my anal sphincter muscles began twitching slightly. This condition was humorously called a "pucker factor" in the trade. Not uncommon under extreme stress, it could

be elicited by the time to reflect on the what ifs, while enroute to a target area.

Soon the torture was over. I caught up to and passed the H-34's near the western end of the Xieng Khouang Valley. Something of a first, I was elated at what we had accomplished thus far. Apparently, the element of surprise proved successful and all three of us would likely arrive in the target area about the same time.

Using the masking potential of the elevated Phou Gnouan mountain range, I descended, skirting the Ville to the north. From the 1969-early 1970 PDJ operation and after years of working in the Phu Khe vicinity of the Ville, I was quite familiar with and felt reasonably comfortable traversing the area. From the time Lima Lima served as the area supply base in the center of the PDJ, I had flown many missions, and supplied many of General Vang Pao's hilltop LZs strung along the north side of the valley, I had ranged further east around Phou Nampong overlooking parts of Route-72, and on occasion flown almost to the NVN border. Moreover, even though there were no friendly people likely in the immediate area, and except for possibly hunters or wandering bands of PL, there was no reason



Area of the Bullwhip shoot down and SAR in Xieng Khouang Province. Dotted line indicates our egress from the Ban Ban valley past Lima Site-32 to Lima Site-50; then across Lima Site-06 and the PDJ to the pilot's location in the eastern Xieng Khouang Ville valley.

for there to be a problem in these scrubby foothills. Still it was denied area and anything was possible.

While we were some distance from the pilot's location, with no A/C wreckage or smoke to guide us, the aviators reported themselves in relatively good condition and talked us toward their position. To their knowledge, there was no overt enemy activity. Still we had to be careful, for sometimes the enemy moved in, waited patiently, and set up a trap to down rescue ships. Another thought occurred to me. Despite an enemy LOC being located just to the south, it was probably not well developed yet, not used in the daytime or at this time of year.

As I closed on the aviators, I felt good regarding our chances to complete the mission, but bearing in mind that only 50 percent success was not the goal. A complete mission would only be achieved when we were all back at Alternate with our charges. ³

We had been delayed initially by the King personnel erroneous Nong Pet coordinates, but our response afterward was timely. From past experience we knew time was an essential factor in any crew extraction and it was imperative we complete the job and depart ASAP. From all outward appearances, the enemy had not yet moved into the area, but we knew full well they would soon enter the scene. History attested to this.

Since the terrain was rolling, uneven, covered with low brush, bushes, and not conducive to landing a hoist recovery was indicated. Unlike the H-34's hoist and yellow horse collar, some of our 205's were equipped with a removable Cool Breeze (Breeze Eastern) hoist and a jungle penetrator. Electrically activated this device could be independently operated by either the pilot

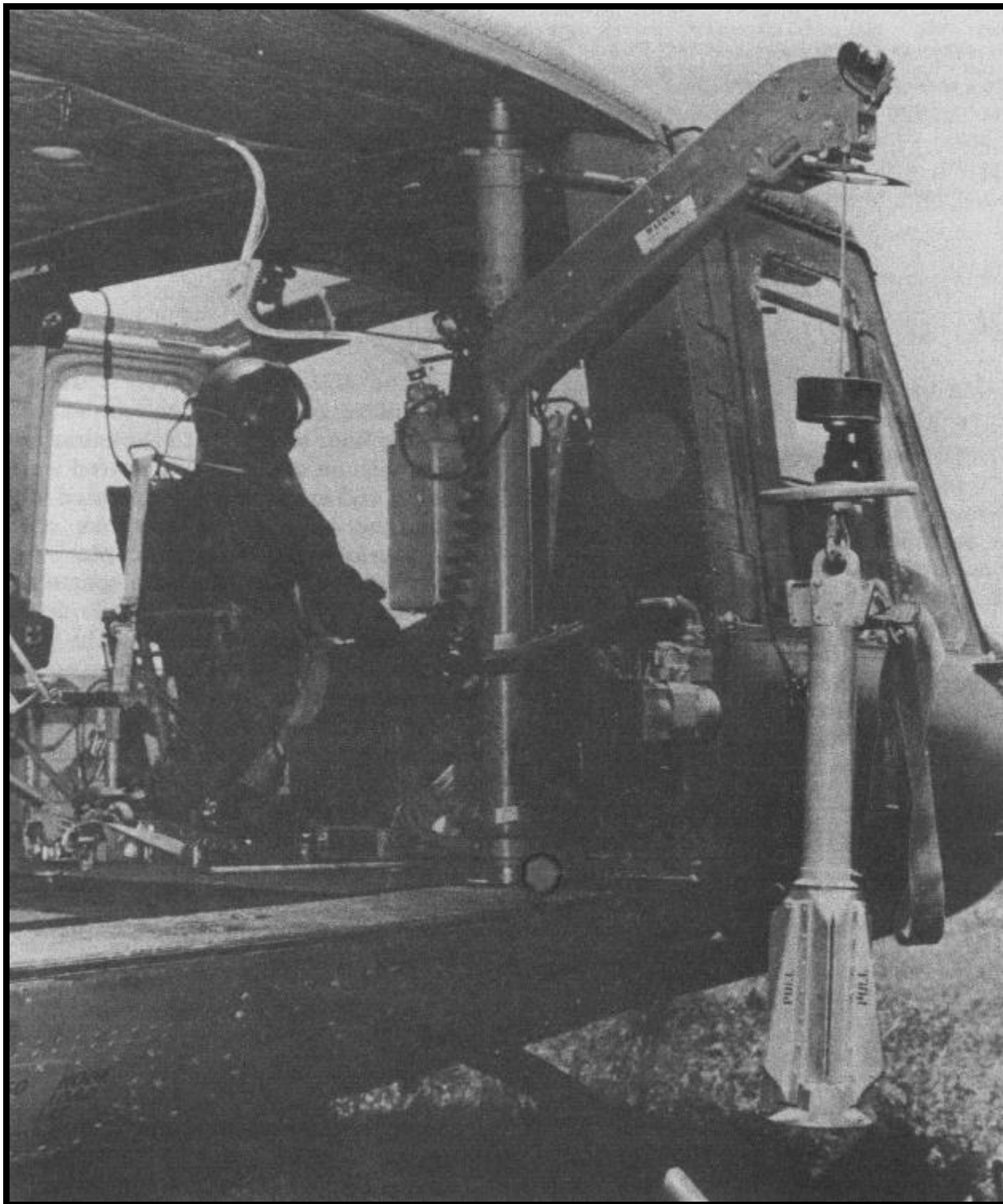
³I might have been considerably more concerned about the valley below us had I been aware of the construction progress of some new segments of the road from the east and the intention to create a major enemy logistical bypass for Route-7.

from the cockpit or the Flight Mechanic from the cargo compartment. It was significant that we had progressed from more difficult rescue attempts that in lieu of landing necessitated using field expediences like ropes or straps to complete the job. Some of our original 204B's came equipped with an overhead hoist system, but difficult to maintain and prone to damage, most were soon removed.

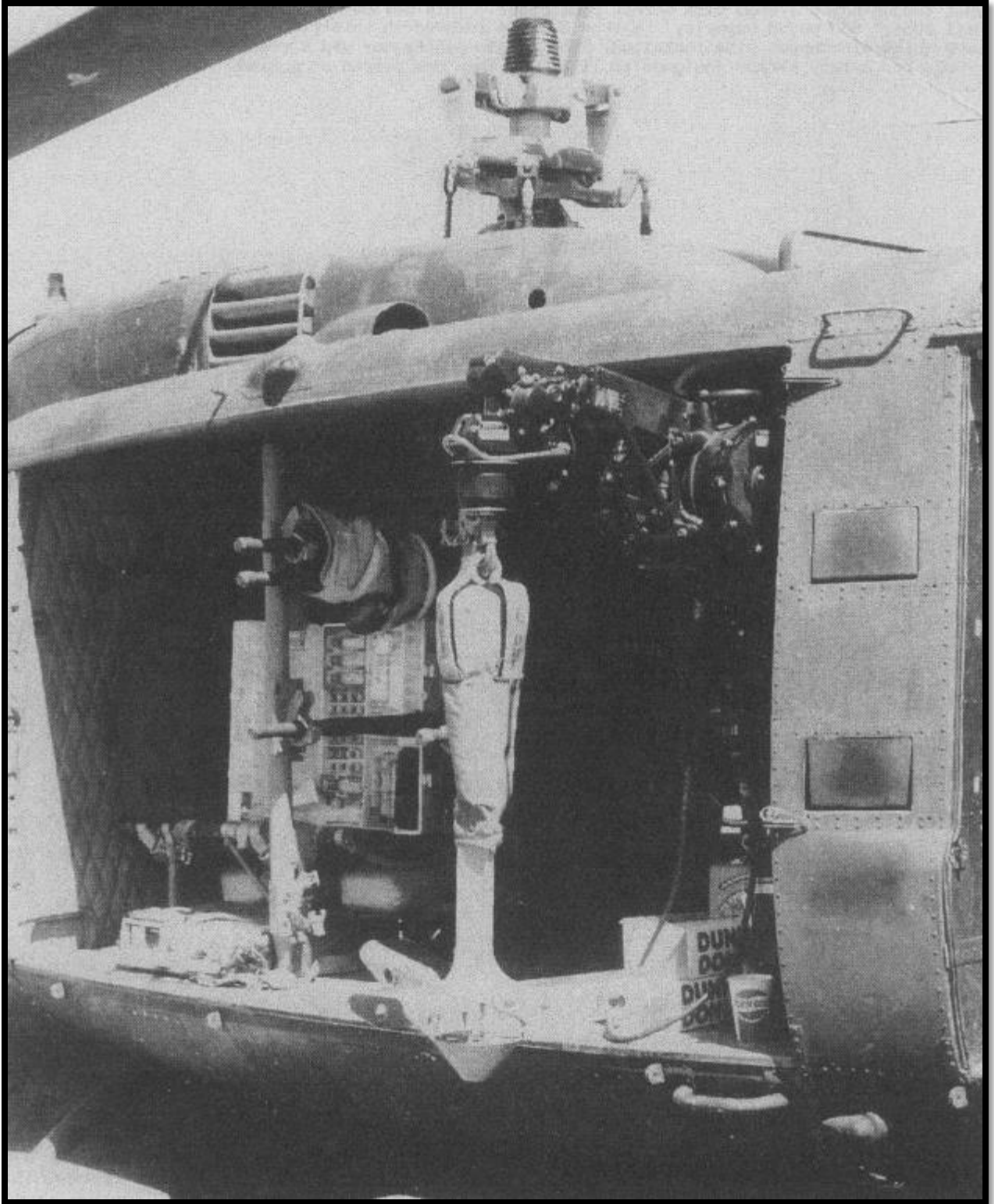
The expensive Cool Breeze winch hoist was attached to floor and roof mounts just inside the small right front cargo door behind the PIC's seat. ⁴ During a hoist operation the small door was locked open, and the hoist apparatus rotated from the stowed position to a fixed point 45 degrees outside the helicopter where the cable would clear the fuselage and skid to allow the lowering and raising cycle. Like the H-34, hoist cycles were time limited to allow cooling of the winch motor. As trees were tall in Indochina, the cable was quite long and the original system incorporated provision for a manual device (squib or guillotine) that was designed to allow the crew to sever the cable at the drum should the braided wire become entangled in trees, brush, or other encumbering items.

As opposed to the ancient but time honored yellow horse collar, which if not worn properly could be dangerous in the hands of the uninitiated, the unique jungle penetrator was developed in the mid-1960's to accommodate more than one person and perform what the name inferred-it penetrated the abundant SEA's triple canopy jungle. Of course, the AF had first priority

⁴Differentiating the 205-UH1D-from the Bell 204B models, the 205 had been lengthened at the Hurst, Texas factory and could easily accommodate the hoist.



The right side of a Bell UH-1D displaying the position of the rescue hoist with a semi-deployed jungle penetrator. The penetrator strap was used to secure the occupant (s). The up limit ring and switch is located at the top of hoist arm.



UH-1D with both the large and small cargo doors removed displaying a fully deployed hoist with attached jungle penetrator. The foldable "seat" prongs could accommodate one or more aviators.

over the first ones manufactured. The seat was designed with three prongs; when deployed the device could accommodate two or even three individuals, if the total weight did not exceed the cable's 600 pounds tensile strength.

One downed pilot (Norton) heard us coming and moved to the best open area he could find. After making a quick pass over him to ascertain no enemy were concealed or waiting within rifle range to bring me down, I settled in a low, steady hover facing southwest beside Captain Fred Norton and instructed Ortillo to commence deploying the hoist.

While Ortillo labored at his task Woosley and Cates identified and went after the second pilot who was a few hundred yards upslope in the trees. Crawford had never used a Horse Collar before but quickly figured it out and had no problem as Waite reeled him into the cargo compartment.

Al returned to a hover between us while scanning the area for impending trouble and making himself available should it become necessary.

When the heavy penetrator almost reached the ground, the large man opened the device, unzipped the cover, plopped on one of the prongs, and secured himself with the nylon strap. Certain he was saved, he stowed his survival radio in a pocket of his survival vest and looked down at the ground to minimize the impact of dust and debris while preparing to be hauled into the Bell. Thinking this phase of the mission a piece of cake, I instructed Ortillo to raise the man into the cabin.

What happened next marked another first for me, poignantly evidencing that I had not experienced all there was to learn. Mainly, the aviation business was indeed a continuing learning process-nothing should ever be taken for granted. As precious seconds ticked by, I divided my attention between the cockpit and outside the A/C looking for any undue activity. While focused on

this activity, unknown to me, experiencing a problem with the penetrator Ortillo attempted to wave the man off the seat. After a short time dangling just above the ground, Norton looked up and saw the F/M motioning him to get off. He complied. The penetrator was adjusted and moved into position in front of the pilot. The Captain then returned to the seat.

The next time I looked down to my right, the penetrator and our intended "pluckee" still remained on the ground. Curious, not privy to my F/M's problems, I asked Ortillo over the ICS why the man was not being reeled in. Complete silence. Frustrated, I kept badgering him with the same question. Were we experiencing an English problem? Finally Ortillo answered that the up-cable reel switch was not functioning properly. I said to continue activating the up/down switch, hoping this was the cause of the problem. He indicated that he had already attempted this several times with negative results-no up or down movement. Apparently nothing would rectify the problem. What a situation. I was over a downed pilot with a rescue assured, a plus in the ego department, and now we were unable to complete the extraction. It was the ultimate frustration.

I could not maintain a steady hover over the pilot forever and could see Al Cates hovering upslope impatiently waiting to help. Since we had exhausted the possibility of performing the job, I told Ortillo to have the pilot move off the seat. This was easier said than done, for Norton was not about to vacate the source of his salvation a second time. Believing his recovery nearly achieved, he had turned his radio off, and to prevent dust clogging his eyes was again looking down with his arms wrapped around the penetrator's stout shaft.

I hovered there a few minutes attempting to obtain his attention. The delay seemed longer, for every second I expected ground fire to commence in our direction. I had few options. In

desperation, I activated the switch to the cable cutting guillotine device. Nothing. ⁵ Next I considered descending beside him to alert him to the problem, but the terrain sloped abruptly to the right and there was no excess cable extended to accomplish this. Another option was to lift the man high enough off the ground to clear obstacles and haul him a short distance downhill to a flat portion in the valley where I could land and pick him up. However, I rejected this alternative as being too dangerous for the pilot and the possibility of enemy presence.

Something had to be done quickly. With all options exhausted, I radioed Cates, and assuming we could eventually get the man off the penetrator, requested he pick up the pilot. Woosley was busy extracting his pilot, but replied that he was only too happy to help.

Then Murphy struck. The SOB was always present, only requiring the proper time and place to emerge. Marking another first during my tenure, all radio transmitters and receivers failed on my side of the cockpit, rendering me to shouting instructions to Frenchy across the centrally mounted pedestal. Oddly enough, French's radios still worked.

Finally, Norton confused by the delay, glanced up and Ortillo conveyed to him to again depart the penetrator. Conscious something was wrong with the device, unaware there was another helicopter hovering close by to participate, the captain was understandably reluctant to get off the seat and fully prepared to ride the penetrator any place I chose. Then when he realized I might sever the cable if he did not dismount, he complied.

Because of the weight of the cable and heavy penetrator, the slim Flight Mechanic experienced a difficult time raising the

⁵ Like the H-34's, the explosive cable cutting device in the Bells was not installed to prevent inadvertent accidents. This never changed and crew complaints always fell on Maintenance Department deaf ears.

hardware into the cockpit. Therefore, to facilitate Al's extraction, I slowly hovered high toward the valley. Frenchy clearly understood the predicament. Taking the initiative and without hesitation, the Captain unstrapped and departed the cockpit to aid Ortillo. It seemed an eternity, hovering out of ground effect and exposed to the unknown, before Smith climbed back in his seat grimacing in pain. While retrieving the cable and cumbersome penetrator, he nearly fell out the cabin door and had been struck in the leg by prongs of the metal penetrator.

By then, both pilots were safely off the ground. It was time to leave the SAR scene before sierra hit the fan.

Because of the unanticipated delay and extended hovering operation, we had consumed substantially more fuel than I anticipated. This was confirmed by the fuel gage needle fluctuating south and a winking red low level fuel warning light on the console. If the system was properly calibrated, perhaps we had approximately 30 minutes remaining before flameout. Frenchy, an easily agitated individual was squirming in his seat. Unlike Smith, who had been shot down earlier in the year, I was not particularly concerned by the fuel state, for during the 1969-1970 PDJ operation I had easily operated this same ship on the red light to LL some 25 to 30 miles west, always arriving with fuel to spare. The total distance to Long Tieng over my planned route was nearly 40 miles, perhaps less with a favorable wind and shortcuts. All things considered, including time to ascend, weather, winds, rougher terrain, and the enemy gauntlet, I felt confident we could achieve our destination. If not, as a last resort, we could use Padong as an alternate landing site and if no fuel was available there, have a drum of A-1 fuel delivered to the site. Attempting to convey all this to my cockpit mate above the rotor slap and transmission noise was quite difficult and Frenchy did not seem particularly convinced.

After departing the Xieng Khouang Valley, we proceeded southwest at a moderate altitude between Phou Kabo, where I was hosed on my first day upcountry as a Captain, and towering Phou Sao. Intimate with the area after years of working sites there, I attempted to avoid most portions of Route-4, and when able turned more west-southwesterly toward Site-5. I breathed considerably easier after passing these potential hot spots.

When abeam Padong, I pointed out the strip. Frenchy began shouting, waving his arms, and badgering me to land there and refuel. We were all fatigued and he was hurt, but I knew he was assuming an ultra-conservative approach to our dilemma. Moreover, by my calculations, flying the shortest route available, we were passing the site with sufficient time and fuel to continue on to Site-20A. Besides, the chances proper jet fuel was available at Site-05 were slim and I was unsure of the current security.

There were often diverging opinions between pilots regarding how to conduct a job. This flight was a prime example of conflicts that could arise from two Captains in the cockpit.

Naturally, as the senior man, I was in charge and made critical decisions, but at these times I wished I was flying by myself like during the early days upcountry when I was only responsible to myself and F/M for decision making.

I elected to continue and soon after clearing Padong Ridge, it was all downhill to The Alternate.

Our faster speed enabled us to arrive 10 to 15 minutes before the H-34 pilots. In order to take advantage of remaining fuel or fumes in the tanks and to avoid any stray enemy rockets that occasionally still fell in the valley, I landed and parked down slope close to the karst on the ramp's southeast side. While taking on fuel from the mobile tanker, Bob, the older, baldheaded Air Operations man, who had replaced Tiny when he became a Thai unit case Officer, walked across the tarmac to our ship. After listening

to our hairy story, aware Jolly Green crews were enroute and since we had to RTB for radio repairs, he insisted we deliver both pilots to UTH. This was fine with me. Why should USAF AARS pogues receive credit for a recovery when AAM pilots had endured arduous battle conditions to successfully perform it? Bob's proposal was especially appealing when we learned the AF pilots had a change of heart regarding the maintenance problems when discovering the second set of coordinates were located in a less innocuous area.

After the H-34 pilots landed, Vang Pao's doctor conducted a quick physical assessment of Crawford and Norton. A few minutes later, the AF pilots began transfer to our ship. Scheduled to deadhead both ways that day, I switched seats with Frenchy. Highly fatigued from the stress and strain of the extraordinary SAR, I looked forward to relaxing, my only duty being to make radio calls.

The two pilots appeared fine after their ordeal, but were highly dehydrated. Extreme stress caused this. I had seen this condition before and was not at all surprised when one man quaffed my entire canteen without once removing it from his lips.

As Frenchy air-taxied from the parking ramp toward the runway and commenced a sharp left turn toward the runway, the flight leader of the Jolly Green contingent requested we return and relinquish our precious load. Wrong. Not wanting to engage in an unpleasant exchange over the air and sound arrogant, I somewhat tactfully responded that I had been instructed by The Alternate Customer to proceed to UTH and I was not returning to Long Tieng.



Protected by a large, partially forested karst, the Long Tieng concrete Air Operations building was situated among other structures on the lower western side of the loading-unloading parking ramp.

Author Collection.

There was no way these tardy AF individuals were going to strip the glory of this SAR from the people who actually performed the work. Moreover, after consultation, our two pilots concurred, indicating we should proceed south.

After years in the field either participating or performing rescue missions, I could only surmise what the AF Jolly crews were thinking and saying about AAM. But I was thick-skinned and considered this a non-issue for me. After all, finally participating in a SAR from alpha to omega and returning to UTH with two live, healthy pilots was a first for me. Therefore, it was with an enormous sense of accomplishment and euphoria that we ferried the jet jockeys to "home plate" to ace out a notorious foot dragging AARS unit. ⁶

Upon arrival at the Udorn airfield, the tower operator courteously directed us to land in the grass beside the parallel taxiway where an AF reception committee consisting of high level officers, squadron mates, and buckets of champagne waited for the returning heroes. After the hairy mission that had initially been a "bag of worms," it was gratifying to observe the full spectrum of a successful SAR including the happy squadron mates.

We deposited the joyful aviators and like a victorious gladiator in a Roman coliseum or a flag draped Olympic winner circling the track, slowly air-taxied back to the AAM ramp.

After the A/C was secured, I walked into the CPH office to debrief all there with details of the extraordinary and eventful SAR. This included an account about the curious and yet unresolved hoist malfunction. Wayne Knight called Chief Flight Mechanic, Gaza Eiler, to the office to listen to the story and investigate the problem. The hoist apparatus was a very expensive mechanism and its failure to properly operate, a distinct concern. Gaza, as

⁶In all fairness, the rescue unit (s) was obligated to adhere to their ultra-strict regulations-Rules of Engagement-before launching on a SAR mission. On the other hand, any delay did nothing to assist the unfortunate persons on the ground, which on a really bad day could have been us.

puzzled as the rest of us, returned to the line with a maintenance crew to troubleshoot the problem.

I had not quite finished having a well-deserved cool one when Gaza entered the Club Rendezvous Bar and requested my presence on the flight line. He had solved the hoist problem and the explanation was simple, but proved somewhat embarrassing. With the cable extended its full length on the tarmac, he proceeded to demonstrate that with the small cargo compartment door not fully extended to its stop and the hoist apparatus deployed and locked in position, the door contacted and interfered with the up limit switch. This prevented cable retraction. Normally we only used the hoist to lift a barrel or two of jet fuel into the cabin and this jamming had never been witnessed or occurred before during the heat of battle or in any phase of rescue operations. Moreover, despite our vast SAR experience, none of us had been intelligent enough to solve the problem. Granted, the hoists were fairly new to us and we only had minimum practice utilizing them, but now after years of flying the machine, we acquired a fresh perspective regarding Bell auxiliary A/C equipment. Fortunately no one had been hurt, and except for some wounded pride, we learned the hard way with our buddy Murphy at the helm.

I never learned what caused the radio panel failure on my side of the cockpit. Perhaps constant keying of the hoist switch by Ortillo and me caused an excessive heat buildup that led to an electrical overload.

As with the H-34 hoist system, the Maintenance Department had elected not to load the guillotine device with an explosive charge (shotgun shell) because of the possibility of inadvertent discharge. This was not generally publicized and an item we usually discovered after the fact, like during a SAR gone bad.

The AF conducted a party that night in the "O" club for the returning warriors. All of us who participated in the rescues were

invited. However, I was too whipped to attend and am not sure if anyone represented our group. Unlike some of our other pilots, I did not believe in mixing socially with our AF counterparts. Aside from the kinship of aviation, I did not feel much in common with them and there was a lot of jealousy regarding the money we earned. I continued to be upset about their rules and regulations regarding SAR operations, allowing too much time to elapse before launching, and their airborne control's poor reporting of coordinates. Keeping my distance, I did not wish any of this to rub off on me.

On 23 May CPH Knight composed and then disseminated a letter of commendation to each of the crewmembers participating in the convoluted rescue:

"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 on 19 May as 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 all of you.

Well done!"

Although largely unknown to a majority of us, our efforts were greatly appreciated by some USAF personnel in the 7th AF ABCCC control center in Udorn who were aware of our capability and success rate. As one high ranking officer relayed to an accomplished author:

"ABCCC was important in SAR and was responsible for most rescues in northern Laos. They monitored 119.1, the Air America frequency. 'We monitor Air America and if a pilot went down, the faster you got them out the better our chances were. Very few we got out after spending a night or two out there.' The sky was full of Air America helicopters up there and most of the rescues made

in Barrel roll were made by Air America...Some people badmouthed Air America [crewmembers] that they're overpaid but they earn every penny they get-or in my books-and they did a fine job. They rescued most of our people and they got nothing extra for rescuing a pilot. That's part of their duty and they zigged into those hot areas to do it. When they zigged in, they usually did it without A-1 [support]. They come, get them out and get out fast. That was our best rescue system." ⁷

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