

Some of the problems encountered during rescue attempts in the period before Air Rescue Service helicopters and trained rescue personnel reached Southeast Asia were illustrated in a rescue operation that occurred in October 1963. On the afternoon of October 8, GRAD OK 01 and GRAD OK 02, a pair of Farm Gate T-28s, rolled in on a target in the mountainous jungle area near the Laotian border west of Da Nang. The American pilot of GRAD OK 02 bore in low on his bomb run unaware that it was to be his last. The second pilot watched as GRAD OK 02 went out of control near the end of its dive and disintegrated upon impact. GRAD OK 01 returned to base and at the mission debriefing reported the aircraft down in the jungle near a swollen stream that flowed into the Buong. Maj. Alan W. Saunders, Commander, Detachment 3, Pacific Air Rescue Center, was notified at his office in Saigon. Saunders gathered the members of his rescue team, a two-man explosive ordnance detail, a flying safety officer, and a photographer. Within the hour they took off for Da Nang on a C-123.

When Saunders reached Da Nang he assumed the role of on-scene-commander. Briefers told him that two U.S. Marine H-34s had flown to the crash site only a few hours earlier and disappeared in an area known as "V.C. [Viet Cong] Valley". This upped the ante.

At dawn Marine helicopters lifted two Vietnamese Infantry companies to the area of the downed aircraft. As the helicopters landed, enemy troops firing from the surrounding hillsides wounded three U.S. Marine crewmen and killed a Vietnamese soldier. Farm Gate T-28s, B-26s and a Vietnamese Air Force propeller-driven A-1 Skyraider responded by strafing the enemy positions. An American L-19 light observation plane directing the strike aircraft took a hit that punctured a fuel line and wounded the Vietnamese observer. The American pilot nursed his crippled craft with its suffering Vietnamese observer back to a forced landing in friendly territory. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese Army force landed and began hacking out a larger landing zone to facilitate future landings. When that task was finished the troops started working their way to the site of the H-34 crashes. They reached the downed helicopters the next morning, October 10, only to find the remains of 10 of the 12 persons who had been aboard the two aircraft. The other two, if they survived, were probably carried off by the Viet Cong.

On October 11 Marine helicopters airlifted Major Saunders and his rescue team to the landing zone where they encountered heavy fire from hostile forces located nearby. The pilots diverted to a clear area along the stream about two-and-a-half miles northeast of the T-28 wreckage. Saunders then led his party through the dense jungle underbrush rather than along the trails to lessen the risk of encountering Viet Cong booby traps. It was several hours before they hacked their way to the partially submerged wreckage of the T-28. They found a wing partially under water at the edge of the swollen stream and a horizontal stabilizer on the opposite bank. The rest of the debris was either under water or strewn out along the opposite shore. The photographer made pictures while the flying safety officer cut a spar from the wing to document the location of the crash.

The Marine helicopter crew, not wanting to fly after dark, radioed Saunders to be back at the landing zone no later than 1700, or risk spending the night in Viet Cong territory. Still fearful of communist booby traps or ambushes along the jungle trails, the tired party started cutting their way back through the tangled jungle underbrush. The flying safety officer sprained his ankle jumping a ravine and had to be carried, further slowing their progress. The hot sun was moving closer to the horizon when Saunders radioed for a thirty-minute extension on the pickup deadline. Reluctantly the marines agreed, and the exhausted men struggled on through the stifling heat and binding bush, reaching the landing zone with only ten minutes to spare. The first helicopter appeared overhead promptly at 1730. The flying safety officer and one of the explosive ordnance detail members had just climbed on board when enemy fire ripped into the engine, putting the H-34 out of commission. The crewmembers, the flying safety officer, and the man from the explosive ordnance detail scurried from the damaged chopper to seek cover along the edge of the landing zone. While a U.S. Army Bell UH-1D "Huey" helicopter and a pair of T-28s bombed and strafed the ridge line, Saunders crept back to the disabled H-34, and determined it was impossible to fly. As soon as the hostile fire was silenced the second H-34 set down and snatched the Americans to safety. The 120 Vietnamese Army troops in the clearing spent the night in Viet Cong territory before being lifted out the next morning.

Meanwhile, Saunders returned to Saigon to check on business at Detachment 3 and file reports on the search and rescue effort. On October 14 he flew to Da Nang once again, this time to organize a return to the T-28 crash in an effort to find any clues as to the fate of the crew. He arranged for a Green Beret team to lead a Vietnam Army ranger unit providing escort. At dawn a Marine H-34 carried Saunders, the Green Berets, and the rangers back to the landing zone originally cut out of the jungle on October 11. Some enemy resistance slowed their progress, so that they did not reach the T-28 wreckage until the following day. The unexamined portion of the debris rested on the opposite side of the swollen stream, so the Green Berets

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led the Vietnamese rangers across the swiftly flowing water. Viet Cong ambushers opened fire on the party as it emerged from the stream but were soon silenced as the Vietnamese Army pressed ahead with its clearing operation. The night passed quietly, but the communists attacked at dawn forcing the South Vietnamese rangers to take up positions on a ridgeline overlooking the crash site. After the area finally was cleared, Saunders organized an intensive search that lasted for three days. Other than the pilot's headset, no sign of the missing men was ever found. Saunders believed that either the Viet Cong had killed the two men, or they had been carried away in the fast moving waters of the swollen stream. A helicopter then extracted the team without further incident.⁴⁷

Saunders' efforts in the GRAD OK 02 mission underscored the fact that combat rescues required more than a crew, a helicopter, and good intentions. During this "dark age of SAR", men often died in attempting a rescue simply because the available crews lacked rescue training and were ignorant of proper recovery procedures. There was a misconception on the part of some Army helicopter crewmen, shared by their Marine and Vietnamese counterparts, that rescue entailed nothing more than flying over a downed crewman and picking him up. In each case, problems encountered in mountains, jungles, and water pickups required specialization, as the following cases illustrate.

On March 9, 1963, an Army OV-1 "Mohawk" twin-engine reconnaissance aircraft crashed near the top of a 6,000-foot mountain in the central highlands. Two Marine H-34D helicopters attempted to land a four-man American-Vietnamese rescue team at the crash site. One of the helicopters hovered over the tall jungle canopy while a Vietnamese airman was lowered on a cable. The short cable forced the helicopter to hover close to the tree tops. Suddenly it stalled and fell through the trees killing the dangling Vietnamese. The crewmembers crawled from the burning craft before it exploded; however, the severely burned copilot died during the night. The next morning, a second Marine helicopter, attempting the same pickup, met with the fate of its predecessor. This time two crewmen were injured, but no one was killed.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, two men died and two others were injured during the rescue attempt.

There were other rescue fiascos. Darkness was closing in on the coast of Vietnam on a November day in 1963, when a U.S. Army helicopter pilot lost his bearings and flew his Huey into the water off the fishing village of Nha Trang. The next morning the copilot was found, cold, tired, with his arm broken, but alive near the beach. At the debriefing, he said that after plowing into the water all four men on board successfully abandoned the sinking helicopter. Though caught in an outgoing tide, optimism heightened when other Army helicopters appeared overhead and an Air Force C-47 dropped flares to make it "bright as day." With the shore clearly in sight, the men waited in the water for a quick pickup. Instead of dipping in to