

RESCUE STORIES OF YESTERDAY

“First Rescue Mission into Laos: 18-19 November 1964,” originally published in *“Pedro News”* issue January 2005, written by John Christianson

<https://www.ragay.nl/hh-43-sea/nkp>

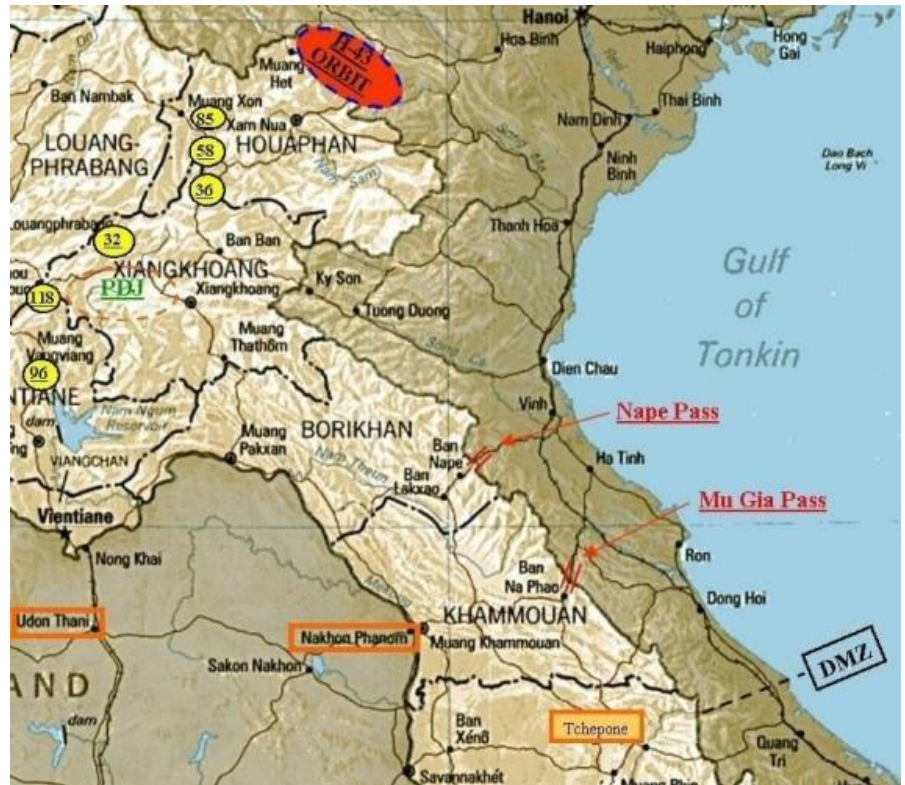
Area of operations Thailand, Laos, & North Vietnam – published in “Pedro News”, Jan2005

On 18 Nov64 “Ball 03”, one of two F-100Ds escorting a “Yankee Team” RF-101C reconnaissance mission, was shot-down while exchanging fire with an enemy anti-aircraft gun position. “Ball 03”’s Wingman called “dropkick” (a distress signal used in place of mayday to confuse any listening enemy troops) to the Air America Air Operations Center in Vientiane, reporting that “Ball 03” had crashed just south of Ban Senphan in central Laos near the North Vietnamese

border. The Air America Operations Officer in the Operations Center diverted a C-123 to reconnoiter the area and act as an Airborne Controller until relieved by a USAF HU-16B from Korat AB. Once in position, “Tacky 44”, the HU-16B, requested that US Navy A-1 Skyraiders fly to Ban Senphan, to search for wreckage and the pilot, and suppress any enemy opposition if it were encountered.

Within minutes of their arrival on the scene, the Navy Skyraiders received ground fire from Pathet Lao emplacements near the location that “Ball 03” was believed to have been shot-down. The A-1's attacked the gun positions taking minor flak and small arms hits to their aircraft. During the action, one of the Skyraider pilots spotted what appeared to be a burning crash site in the jungle approximately five miles away from the coordinates originally furnished.

Two HH-43B's were put on alert and launched with DET. Prov.3, PARC crewmembers (those TDY from 33 ARS, which were being replaced by DET. Prov.2 crews around this date), then proceeded the 10 miles to the Mekong River near Nakhon Phanom and Thakhek, Laos. At that time, the US Ambassador's permission was required to cross the Mekong River into Laos and the



crews did not receive this permission during their holding orbits on the Thai side of the river. Running short of fuel, both aircraft returned to NKP for refueling.

At the same time, a C-124C landed at NKP with departure destination Naha AB, Okinawa (returning the aircraft and crews to 33 ARS).

TWO of the original pilots, knowing that they were being replaced by the DET. Prov.2 guys, asked Jim Sovell and myself if we would take their place. Jim and I said yes. They got on the C-124C and went home and a few minutes later both aircraft were launched, this time with clearance to cross the Mekong and with Jim and I on board as co-pilots. I believe Jim Crabbe was Aircraft Commander, TSgt Reed was the Flight Engineer and SSgt Bennett the PJ.



HH-43Bs "Pansy 88" and "Pansy 89" at NKP 18 Nov 1964 – Alerted for a downed F-100D "Ball 3" over Laos – LtoR: 1Lt John Christianson (CP), Capt Jim Crabb (RCC, 33ARS), TSgt Reed (FE, 33ARS), SSgt Robert Bennett (PJ) – photo coll. J.Christianson

Shortly after we crossed the Mekong River, we picked up two U.S. Navy A-1 Skyraiders for cover. We were sent to investigate a fire in the jungle which approximated the shootdown coordinates. The call-signs for our two HH-43Bs were "Pansy 88" and "Pansy 89". We flew blindly into Laos with no intel as to where the bad guys were. To our knowledge, we encountered no groundfire nor did we see any bad guys. The fire was just that – a jungle fire and not one caused by a crashed F-100D. We made our way back to NKP without any complications.

Before darkness temporarily ended the rescue efforts, the HU-16B coordinated thirteen F-105s, eight F-100s, six Navy A-1's, two HH-43Bs, and a pair of Air America Sikorsky H-34 's in a concerted effort to find and rescue the downed pilot.

The coordination and control of these diverse elements provided a preview of SAR efforts that would be conducted over the next decade



HH-43B "Pansy 88" or "Pansy 89" at NKP 18 Nov 1964 – LtoR: SSgt Robert Bennett (PJ), Capt Jim Crabb (RCC, 33ARS), 1Lt John Christianson (CP) – photo coll. J.Christianson

19 November 1964 : Airborne at first light, "Tacky 65", another HU-16B, pilot Capt. Weeden, from Korat AB, and four F-105s returned to the Ban Senphan area. At mid-morning the On-scene Commander in "Tacky 65" sighted the pilot's parachute and the wreckage on a rocky outcropping only fifty yards from the nearest anti-aircraft position. As the F-105's attacked the gun position, "Tacky 65" ordered the HH-43Bs at Nakon Phanom and their propeller driven escorts to be launched. However, poor weather conditions kept the helicopters grounded for nearly two hours, before a pair of Air America H-34's took off and joined four American piloted T-28s out of Savannahket. "Tacky 44", a second HU-16B, pilot Capt. Kaiser, relieved "Tacky 65" as the On-scene Commander and began to control the rescue effort. Upon arrival at the crash site the co-pilot from one of the Air America choppers was lowered to the ground. He found that the pilot had died of injuries sustained when he landed on the karst. The pilot was recovered, wrapped in his parachute, and flown to NKP. "Tacky 44" flew the remains to Don Muang AB, Bangkok.

When the Air America H-34 pilots dropped into NKP prior to their mission, they asked if we had any weapons that they could borrow, as, at the time, they carried none. We loaned them a couple of BARs and carbines. They also informed us when we told them of our mission the previous day, that we were very lucky guys as the route we took in and out was right through "Injun Country" and loaded with bad guys. Ignorance is bliss, sometimes. Someone was looking out for us.