

The first large-scale search and rescue effort of the Indochina war took place on November 18 and 19, 1964, and involved Air Force, Navy, and Air America aircraft. It began when Ball 03, one of two F-100s escorting a Yankee Team reconnaissance mission, was shot down while trading fire with an enemy antiaircraft gun position.⁹⁹ 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 at 11:27 in the morning. Ball 03 crashed just south of Ban Senphan in central Laos near the North Vietnamese border. The Air America operations officer at the Air Operations Center diverted one of their C-123s to reconnoiter the area and act as airborne controller until Air Force HU-16s arrived from Korat. Once in position, Tacky 44 (call sign for the H-16 control ship) asked that U.S. Navy A-1E Skyraiders fly to the Ban Senphan area to join the search for the wreckage and pilot and to suppress enemy opposition if it were encountered. Pansy 88 and 89, Air Rescue Service HH-43s at Nakhon Phanom, were put on alert.

PANSY
CS FOR HH-4

Within minutes of their arrival on the scene, the Navy Skyraiders were hit by antiaircraft fire from Pathet Lao emplacements located near the place where the F-100 was believed to have been shot down. The A-1s attacked the enemy guns, took some flak and small arms fire, but escaped major damage. 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. Tacky 44 ordered the HH-43s at Nakhon Phanom to take off.

The Navy Skyraiders met Pansy 88 and 89 east of Thakhek and escorted them to the crash site. After carefully surveying the burning jungle, the chopper pilots found no wreckage and decided that the fire was probably of natural origins. Pansy 88 and 89 returned to Nakhon Phanom, ending the first Air Rescue Service chopper sorties into Laos.¹⁰⁰

Before darkness temporarily ended the rescue efforts, the HU-16 coordinated thirteen F-105s, eight F-100s, six Navy A-1Es, two Air Rescue Service HH-43s, and a pair of Air America H-34s in a concerted effort to find and rescue the downed pilot.¹⁰¹ The coordination and control of these diverse elements provided a preview of search and rescue efforts that would be conducted over the next decade.

Airborne at first light, Tacky 45, another HU-16 from Korat, and four

GENESIS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

F-105s returned to the Ban Senphan area. At mid-morning the aircraft commander of Tacky 45 sighted the downed pilot's parachute and the wreckage on a rocky outcropping only fifty yards from the nearest antiaircraft position. As the F-105s attacked the gun position, the on-scene commander contacted Nakhon Phanom and ordered helicopters and their propeller-driven escorts. However, poor weather conditions kept the helicopters grounded for nearly two hours before a pair of Air America H-34s took off and joined four American-piloted T-28s out of Savannakhet to provide escort. Tacky 44, a second HU-16, relieved Tacky 45 as the on-scene commander and began to control the pickup attempt. Upon arrival at the crash site the copilot of one of the Air America choppers was lowered on a cable. He found that the flyer had apparently died of injuries sustained when he landed on the karst.¹⁰²

On November 21, an RF-101 on a Yankee Team mission was lost forty

Combat Rescue in Southeast Asia

The survival of a independent government in South Vietnam is so important to the security of all of Southeast Asia and to the free world that we must be prepared to take all necessary measures...to prevent a Communist victory.

-- SECRETARY OF DEFENSE ROBERT S. MCNAMARA²⁹

The first large-scale combat rescue effort in Southeast Asia began on November 18, 1964. An Air Force F-100 fighter aircraft was shot down by enemy antiaircraft fire in central Laos near the North Vietnamese border. An ARS HU-16 was dispatched out of Thailand to direct the search and rescue operation. Arriving at a safe holding area, the HU-16 asked for tactical support aircraft to locate the survivor and suppress any enemy resistance near the rescue scene. Meanwhile, the rescue HH-43s at Nakhon Phanom were placed on alert.

Some Navy A-1E Skyraiders responded and flew to the last known position of the downed F-100. Immediately upon their arrival, the Skyraiders encountered enemy fire from Pathet Lao antiaircraft positions. While attacking the enemy gun emplacements, one of the Navy pilots observed what appeared to be the burning crash site of the missing Air Force fighter. The HH-43s were instructed to take-off and rendezvous with the Skyraiders for escort to the suspected crash site. Once on scene, however, the helicopter pilots were unable to find any wreckage and determined that the fire was due to other causes.

NOV 19 The following day, another HU-16 was launched to resume the search. At mid-morning the downed airman's parachute was sighted.

The HU-16 relayed the position back to base and called for the helicopters to proceed to the area and make the pick-up. However, poor weather conditions delayed the helicopters from taking-off for nearly two hours. Finally, a pair of helicopters belonging to Air America--a government contracted company--got airborne and headed out to the rescue site. Fighter aircraft sent to suppress enemy ground fire, made it possible for one of the helicopters to get into position over the downed pilot. The helicopter's co-pilot was lowered on a cable to retrieve the airman. However, he discovered that the man had died of injuries apparently sustained when he landed.³⁰

This massive search and rescue effort typified the pattern of events that characterized the recovery of downed airmen in Southeast Asia. Combat rescue missions generally occurred in three distinct phases: search, suppression, and recovery.³¹ During the search phase, any means was used to pinpoint the survivor's location. This usually required radio contact with the survivor or his wingman who could report the distressed airman's last known position. An ARS HU-16, HC-54, or in later years, HC-130, aircraft on ground alert or fixed in a nearby precautionary orbit was notified of the situation and assumed responsibility for the rescue effort as the airborne mission commander (AMC).

Once the survivor was found, a forward air controller (FAC) could be called in to direct the suppression phase. Acting as the on-scene-commander, the FAC kept the AMC informed of all developments regarding the rescue site. Requests for suppression forces were passed to the AMC who in turn forwarded the requirement to