

Air America SAR

THIS WAS THE FIRST LARGE SCALE MISSION AGAINST TARGETS IN LAOS. THE POLICY HAD BEEN FOR A

maximum of four combat aircraft over Laos at any given time. The strike force on this day, 13 January 1965, consisted of 16 F-105D Thunderchiefs, eight F-100D Super Sabres as MIGCAP and flak suppression, and a pair of RF-101C Voodoo reconnaissance aircraft to take the pre- and post-strike photos. The target was the highway bridge at Ban Ban, Laos.

I was on my third pass against the bridge, guiding an AGM-12 Bullpup missile, when the aircraft (an F-105D) took a hit from a 37-mm or 57-mm anti-aircraft gun in the fuel cell just aft of the cockpit. I immediately jettisoned all remaining stores, lit the 'burner and headed south. About four miles from the target area, the flight controls failed, causing the aircraft to make a sudden pitch-up.

Excessive g caused me to black out, and when I regained consciousness, I pulled the ejection handles. The ejection seat was of the old type, and it really gave me a kick in the rear. I separated from the seat and started tumbling end over end. When I got the tumbling stopped, I got a chance to look up at the open 'chute - or rather, partially open. The 'chute risers were all twisted. Observing that my 'chute was only about a quarter open, I shook the risers real hard and it blossomed. I then watched my flaming Thunderchief spin to the ground, crash and explode.

I was still over a 1,000 ft above the ground when I heard what sounded like rifle fire. Moments later, I found myself hanging in a tree. I released the 'chute harness and dropped to the jungle floor. The rifle shots that I'd heard on the way down continued to dog me, and a number of them passed through the heavy foliage of the nearby jungle. I now realised that the 'rifle shots' I was hearing were actually some of the rounds of 20-mm ammunition aboard the Thunderchief I had ejected from. I had landed only a few hundred feet from the aircraft crash site, and the intense fire of the wreckage was cooking off the ammunition.

I heard the noise of jet engines and looked up to see F-105 aircraft circling my position. I removed the emergency radio from my survival gear and attempted to contact the circling 'Thuds' above me. No answer! I tried again as they passed right over me, dipped a wing, then flew out of sight. The other aircraft were at bingo fuel, and had departed for home. Never in my entire life could I recall having such a lonely feeling as I did sitting in the middle of that jungle. I knew I had to shake that feeling, work my way to the best possible position, and wait for a pick-up.

I worked my way out of the jungle and into a large valley. Wanting to position myself on high ground, I decided to climb the slope across the valley to the top of a nearby ridge. The elephant grass that covered the slope made it like walking on ice. I made it about halfway up and had to stop. I was exhausted. I had to relax and calm myself and get ready for the rest of the walk to the top.

Suddenly, I heard the faint sound of aircraft engines. I called on the emergency radio and received an immediate response. The pilot informed me that he was a C-123 and that he was with Air America. Air America was the CIA-operated airline flying supplies all over Southeast Asia, supporting anyone that was anti-Communist. They also were the best rescue chance that we fighter jocks had going at this time in the war. As the engine noise became louder, I started to direct him to my position. He passed right over me, but now I could not see him as the sky had become heavy with cloud cover. He turned back toward my position and started another run. Closer and closer he came. When I felt he was directly over me, even though I could not see him, I called him and told him. A few seconds later I saw the big twin-engined transport descend out of the clouds. He located my position and set up an orbit about a mile away so as not to draw the 'bad guys' to my position.

The Air America pilot advised me that he was in contact with a helicopter, also Air America, and for me to remain where I was. As I waited for the helicopter

to arrive, every minute dragged. It seemed like every minute was taking an hour. Finally, I heard the C-123 driver giving directions to the helicopter as to my position. I then saw the chopper, an H-34, come over the ridge and drop down into the valley below me. As he came up the valley toward me, he took some small arms fire from the nearby jungle, but did not sustain any major damage.

The chopper approached me, lowered the sling, then slowly moved up the slope to get into position for my pick-up. His blades started hitting the elephant grass that was growing on the slope all around me. Elephant grass grows quite high in Southeast Asia, and is very sharp when being blown around by helicopter rotors. The sling was only a few feet from where I lay, but the helicopter was forced to back off when he saw his blades hitting the grass.

The C-123 pilot got on the radio and told me to stay put. The chopper would return, extend the sling a little further, and drag it past me. I would have to grab it as it went by, and hold on as the helicopter started to pull up. It was the only way the helicopter pilot could make the pick-up on such a steep slope. I watched as the sling came directly at me, grabbed it, and hung on for dear life. As I was hoisted into the helicopter, the longest 50 minutes of my life came to an end.

The Air America helicopter flew me to a Lima Site somewhere in Laos. After about an hour at the Lima Site, a single-engined, turboprop Pilatus Turbo-Porter arrived and took me to Udorn for debriefing. I learned from the Air America guys that our mission had been delayed twice due to bad weather. That meant the Air America rescue choppers had prematurely been released from their rescue mission. My guy had been on a supply run when he heard my 'May Day' call. Loaded with personnel (he did not say what kind), he landed in an open field and told them all to get out. He and his winch operator then headed north in my direction.

It had really been my lucky day.

Lieutenant Colonel Albert C. Vollmer
13 January 1965