

PJs In Vietnam
13Oct65 SAR

On 13 October 1965, Maj James Randell was making a second bombing pass on a bridge in NVN when his aircraft was hit and he was forced to eject. His wingman radioed news of the shoot down to an HC-54 orbiting over Laos. The HC-54 flew towards the bailout scene and requested that the helicopters and A-1s be scrambled. Only one CH-3 was available, so it proceeded single ship. Major Randell had landed in a valley near a village. Armed villagers searched for him as he evaded to a nearby hilltop and made radio contact with his wingman. Randell was told that a CH-3 was on the way to pick him up. Captain Jerry Jennings was this CH-3 pilot. The flight to the scene of the SAR took about an hour. His HM, SSgt Harold Schrader rigged the floor mounted winch, to be used as a make shift rescue hoist.



Photo from Robert Baldwin

HMs rig make shift rescue hoist. Robert Baldwin (left) assists unknown HM in rigging the improvised hoist.

The helicopter made one low pass over the survivor and immediately took light ground fire. A-1s attacked several armed men who attempted to stop the rescue of Maj Randell. As the CH-3 pulled into a low hover, the jerry-rigged winch jammed. Fortunately, the vegetation below the helicopter allowed Capt Jennings to lower his CH-3 right into it. As the rotors contacted the vegetation, grass and small branches flew everywhere. SSgt Schrader reached out and helped Major Randell into the chopper. The other crewmembers on this mission were copilot Capt James O'Dell and PJ TSgt William Daniels. The flight back to NKP was uneventful.

13 October 1965 (from Hobson)

F- 105D 61-0180 562 TFS, 23 TFW attached to 6235 TFW, USAF, Takhli
Maj James Edward Prestle Randall (survived)

A Rolling Thunder strike on a bridge near Ban Bung in a mountainous area of western North Vietnam just 20 miles over the border from Laos accounted for another Thud. Maj Randall was the Squadron operations officer and his aircraft was hit by ground fire on his second pass resulting in his ejection a few miles from the target. He was slightly injured on landing and was fortunate to be rescued as he was pursued by villagers with rifles. A USAF CH-3C rescue helicopter that refuelled at Lima Site 36, a forward site in Laos, dashed into North Vietnam for the pick up. Piloted by Capt J W Jennings this was one of the earliest rescues accomplished by 38th ARS with its new Jolly Green Giant helicopters.

Major James E. Randall, USAF, "Triumph 01, F-105D, 562 TFS, Takhli RTAFB, October 5, 1965, Rescued





On October 13, 1965, at 1410, Compress control at Udorn reported Triumph 01, a F-105D down 90 miles north of LS-36, just northwest of Dien Bien Phu, close to the Laotian border. Crown 27, a H-130P airborne SAR controller said he and a USAF Sandy A-1E were going to the border, I assume Laos-NVN border, and hold. At 1420 a Jolly Green CH-3C was airborne and the Sandy A-1E was aloft at 1435. Sandy made radio contact with the pilot at 1455. The Jolly Green estimated arriving at 1525. Jolly made the pickup while taking ground fire. I believe this was a F-105D 61-0180, 562nd TFS, Takhli RTAFB, down near Tuan Gio, NVN not far from Dien Bien Phu. The pilot was Major James E. Randall.

Randall was flight lead for a four ship formation tasked to destroy a bridge in far northwestern NVN not far from Dien Bien Phu. Another 15 F-105s were attacking dams, roads and bridges all over Vietnam. Looking ahead, Randall spotted his bridge. The four Thuds prepared for their attack run, Randall pushed into a steep dive, the others followed and at about 8,000 ft. Randall released his bombs, and then pulled up. Then boom, he felt a jolt. He had been hit by AAA in the rear end. His warning lights were humming. He was losing his hydraulics, and his control system died on him. He was still flying at 600 mph when he ejected. Randall said to himself, "I'm not going home tonight."

His leg was bleeding, he dumped his parachute and harness and helmet, and limped into the undergrowth. Enemy forces approached as Randall hid as quietly as he could. They moved toward the wreckage, allowing Randall to crawl uphill to a small clearing. He pulled out his radio and called for help. He waited two hours, but he then heard the sounds of freedom associated with the incoming SAR rescue force. A Jolly Green hovered over him, took hostile fire, but managed to get Randall aboard, and out they flew.



As an interesting aside, in 1990 a Frenchman named Dominique Eluere was shopping in an Army surplus store in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), spotted an American pilot's helmet, and bought it. The helmet still had the oxygen mask attached and had the marking of "562 Tac Fighter Sq" on one side, and "Jim" on the other. In the middle was a small embossed label saying, "Maj. Randall." Eluere decided he simply had to return it to Randall and after some exhausting and time consuming research, finally found him after 22 years. Eluere met a Vietnam vet named Gary "Paco" Gregg," told him about the helmet, asked Gregg for help, and Gregg took on the job. Gregg had fought at Khe Sanh. Gregg finally got the helmet back to Randall --- quite a surprise after all those years.

Randall talks of the ordeal in a very nice interview that can be seen at [The Gazette's web site](#), along with Phillips' article.

Capt. Thomas W. Sima, USAF, "Olds Lead," F-105D, 36th TFS, Takhli RTAFB, October 15, 2013, POW
Capt. Robert H. Schuler, USAF, "Olds 02," F-105D, 36th TFS, Takhli RTAFB, October 15, 2013, KIA



Tale of Colorado Springs Vietnam war vet's lost helmet spans globe, decades

By [Dave Philipps](#) Colorado Springs Gazette July 21, 2013



James Randall was shot down almost 48 years ago during a bombing run over North Vietnam.

In the decades that followed, the retired U.S. Air Force pilot often replayed the crash in his mind: Parachuting into enemy territory, tearing off his chute and helmet, then running to the cover of the jungle where he hid until a daring helicopter rescue lifted him out under enemy fire.

After the war he toyed with the idea of going back to Vietnam to search for the gear he abandoned, but success was so astronomically unlikely that he would quickly toss the idea aside.

Imagine his surprise this June when he picked up his phone and a stranger on the other end said, "Colonel, I have something that belongs to you. We found your lost helmet."

"I couldn't believe it, I was elated," said Randall, who is now 86 and lives with his wife on the edge of Black Forest. "It had been gone for 47 years. Can you even imagine?"

The stranger, a Vietnam vet named Gary "Paco" Gregg, told the old pilot a story of chance encounters, dead-end searches, Vietnamese flea markets, and an iconoclastic French sword maker in Cambodia who had been searching for the helmet's rightful owner for 22 years.

"I think I had tears in my eyes when I'm telling him this," said Gregg, who lives in Lincoln, Neb. "Finally, we had found the man!"

Soon the helmet was on its way from southeast Asia.

The tale of the helmet weaves together the worst and best aspects of humanity, beginning in war, where men who had never met went to great lengths to kill one another, and ending in peace, where men who had never met went to great lengths to help one another.

"It's pretty amazing," said Randall. "If it wasn't true, I wouldn't believe it."

'You had a job to do'

The day Randall was shot down in 1965, he was leading a flight of four F-105 fighter bombers to destroy a bridge in far northwestern Vietnam.

A major at the time, Randall had already flown 118 combat missions.

"All of them were dangerous," he said. But, he said, he did not dwell on the risk. "You had a job to do."

The son of a librarian and a railroad worker, Randall grew up during the Great Depression in the segregated schools of Roanoke, Va.

When World War II started, he yearned to become a pilot. A few men he knew had become Tuskegee Airmen - the first black military pilots who trained at Tuskegee Army Airfield in Alabama, starting in 1941. Randall signed up in 1945, as soon as he was old enough.

After basic training, he was sent to Tuskegee Army Airfield for pilot training.

The war ended and all pilot training was canceled. He was discharged in 1946 and applied to college, assuming he would never realize his flying dreams. Then in 1948 the War Department sent a letter asking him to become a pilot in the newly-formed, integrated, Air Force.

Randall graduated from fighter pilot school in 1950.

He was deployed to Korea in 1952, where he flew the P-51 Mustang on bombing missions to knock out bridges and rail lines.

Randall flew 75 combat missions over Korea.

"I got lucky. There were guns all over but I was never was shot down," he said on a recent afternoon in his home office. Even after the close calls of Korea, Randall never thought of leaving the Air Force.

"I just love flying," he said. "I never wanted to do anything else."

'Losses were appalling'

In Vietnam, Randall flew the F-105 Thunderchief single-seat fighter, nicknamed the "Thud," able to carry more explosives than the 10-man bombers of World War II.

He was part of Operation Rolling Thunder, an early attempt to cripple North Vietnam's fighting capability by destroying supplies and transport routes behind enemy lines.

Pilots streaked in from Thailand at high speed, dove over the targets and released about 6,000 pounds of bombs before thundering back over the border.

It was effective but dangerous. The Vietnamese had one of the best air defense systems in the world. The landscape bristled with anti-aircraft guns and missiles.

When Randall arrived in August 1965, Thuds were being shot down at a rate of two per week.

"The losses were appalling," another F-105 pilot, Ed Rasimus, wrote in his 2003 book, "When Thunder Rolled." "For every five pilots that started the tour, three would not complete it."

In three years, 330 Thuds were lost, he wrote. By comparison, 74 aircraft have been shot down in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2003.

"You tried not to think about it," Randall said.

He had four kids at home.

The day he was shot down, Oct. 13, he had flown 43 missions in just over two months.

He was not particularly worried about his 44th. It was a simple hit and run, taking out a bridge 50 miles over the border near the town of Dien Bian Phu.

It was a clear day, perfect for flying. The Thuds flew high over the jungle of Laos, then, just over the border with North Vietnam, the mountains faded into a broad valley patched with farms and split by a twisting river.

That day, 15 other F-105s were hitting dams, roads and bridges all over Vietnam, according to press reports.

Ahead Randall saw the bridge.

The four bombers, flying in formation, prepared for their run.

They turned on the "pickle button" on their control sticks that would drop the bombs.

Randall pushed his Thud into a steep dive. The others followed.

Eight thousand feet above the bridge, he pushed the button, released the bombs, and pulled up.

Then he felt a sudden jolt. Anti-aircraft guns had hit the rear of his jet. Warning lights started going off.

"I knew right then I was in trouble," he remembered.

The gauge for the hydraulic system that powered the controls was dropping. The backup system was dropping too.

Randall watched the nose of the plane slowly come level with the horizon, then drop below. His control system was dead.

Nothing to do now but eject, he thought. He was still flying at about 600 mph.

Slight wind help his escape

The force of the ejection ripped off Randall's gloves and watch.

He opened his eyes, drifting thousands of feet above the valley. He could see a small village between his feet.

Of the 53 F-105 pilots who went down over Vietnam that year, 24 were rescued, 15 were captured, and 14 were killed.

Randall's first thought was "I'm not going home tonight."

He got lucky. A slight wind carried him across the valley to the edge of the jungle.

When he touched down, he pulled off his parachute and helmet and limped on a bleeding leg into the undergrowth. He crawled into the brush and watched with held breath as a group of men with rifles approached, picked up his helmet and other gear. They looked toward the jungle. Then they headed off toward the wreckage of the jet.

Randall worked his way uphill to a small clearing. There he radioed for help.

After waiting just over two hours, the whine of an American rescue party echoed over the valley.

Randall had never heard such a welcome sound, but the noise attracted the Vietnamese, who began shooting.

The helicopter hovered low over the clearing as it took fire. Randall raised up his hands and two men in the crew locked arms with him and pulled him aboard.

A few days later he was recuperating in the United States.

A long, winding road back to owner

What happened to the helmet is unknown.

Randall stayed in the Air Force for another 15 years and retired as a colonel in Colorado Springs in 1980.

In the years after the crash, he imagines, a villagertook his helmet and sold to someone else, who sold it to someone else, who sold it to someone else.

Somehow, the helmet traveled 1,000 miles south to Ho Chi Minh City, where in 1990 a Frenchman named Dominique Eluere, known worldwide for making fine samurai swords, spotted it at an Army surplus stall in the city's hardware market.

A student of military history, he paid a trifling amount he now doesn't recall.

In his home office, Eluere studied the helmet: It was hard, white plastic with a blue stripe down the middle. On the left side was a scuffed sticker of an eagle holding a sword under the words "562 Tac Fighter SQ" and on the right side, the word "Jim." In the middle, a small, embossed label read "Maj. Randall."

Seeing that he might have a chance of finding the owner, Eluere decided it was only right to return it.

"A helmet is something very personal. A kind of crest," Eluere said by email from Phnom Penh, Cambodia. "So if it would be mine, I'd love someone give it back to me."

He started searching in history books and then the Internet. When he met Americans, he would ask them for ideas of how to find the pilot. After several years of little progress, a journalist he met found records that showed the helmet was from the 562nd Tactical Fighter Squadron, which flew F-105s out of Thailand during the war, and that a "Maj. Randall" had been in the unit.

"But how to find him, and if he is still alive?" Eluere said. His quest was far from over.

In 2007, he became friends with Gregg, a retired stone worker from Nebraska who had fought in Khe Sahn, Vietnam in 1966 and 1967, and for years had been returning to Cambodia, working for a non-profit organization that provides education for the minority Montagnard people.

One day over beers, Gregg told Eluere he was also involved in tracking down information on troops who were missing in action. Eluere perked up.

Eluere showed Gregg the helmet.

"I would like to get this off my shelf. Let's find this man. You are an American, can you help me?" Gregg remembers him saying.

Gregg replied he would do the best he could.

"It proved darn near impossible," Gregg said in a phone interview.

The Air Force told him it had no record of a Maj. Randall shot down in Vietnam, he said. He eventually learned through historic records that there had been a pilot shot down named James Randall, but had no idea how to find a person with such a common name. Internet searches turned up nothing helpful.

In May, Gregg ran a notice in the Vietnam Veterans of America magazine asking if anyone had information.

A few weeks later, when Gregg was visiting his son for his grandson's graduation in Colorado Springs, he got an email from a former officer in Randall's squadron, saying Randall was still alive, and lived just a few miles away from where Gregg was.

Gregg called Randall immediately and they met the next day. Sitting around his son's kitchen table, they emailed Eluere, who sent back a photo of the white helmet.

"That's it!" said Randall, clapping his hands and laughing.

The helmet even had his oxygen mask attached.

A few days later, Eluere shipped the helmet to Gregg. Gregg plans to present the helmet to Randall at a gathering of the Tuskegee Airmen in St. Louis on Aug. 1.

"When you understand such long an uncertain search is over, you feel both joy and sorrow," Eluere said. "But we shall stick to joy. A good action is never lost. Only what is not given is lost. All the time the search last I had the idea to go and return the helmet myself against a hug and a cold beer. But when I received a message from Colonel Randall I understood it wouldn't be kind to let him wait any longer. So I shipped the helmet to Paco. I'm pretty sure he will drink the beer properly and with pleasure."

Randall smiles and shakes his head when he tells the story of the men who did so much to return his helmet.

"It's incredible," he said. "They could have kept it. They could have sold it. Instead they gave it back. I'd kind of like to know how the helmet got to that market in the first place, but I guess it doesn't really matter. It's here."

The walls of Randall's home office are covered with the accomplishments of his flying career: citations for the Bronze Star, Air Medal, Legion of Merit, models of the jets he flew and a copy of a painting of him from 1970 that hangs in the Pentagon. He plans to clear a spot for a custom glass case for his helmet.

"It's made it this far," he said. "I want to make sure it is taken care of."

Pilot's Helmet Lost 48 Years Ago In 'Nam Returned

Daedalian Colonel Jim Randall, USAF (Ret), a member of 11th Flight was shot down 48 years ago during a bombing run over North Vietnam and parachuted into enemy territory. He took off his helmet and parachute and then ran into the jungle where he hid until a daring helicopter rescue lifted him out under enemy fire. He never gave it a thought that he would get his helmet back. To his surprise a phone call to him from a stranger in June 2013 who said "Colonel I have something that belongs to you. We found your helmet." "I couldn't believe it." said Randall now 86 and living in Colorado Springs.

The stranger, a Vietnam vet named Gary Gregg, told him how he came across Jim's helmet by chance encounter with a Frenchman who had been searching for the helmet's owner and had the helmet for 22 years and was living in Cambodia. The helmet had Randall's name in it. "Finally we found the man," said Gregg who lives in Lincoln Nebraska. Soon the helmet was on its way from Southeast Asia.

The day Randall was shot down Oct 13, 1965, he was leading a flight of four F-105s to destroy a bridge in North Vietnam. Randall, a major at the time, had flown 118 combat missions. All were dangerous but he did not dwell on the risk. "You had a job to do." Randall grew up during the Great Depression in Roanoke, Virginia. When World War II started he yearned to become a pilot. When he was old enough he signed up in 1945 and became a Tuskegee Airman for training at Tuskegee Army Airfield, Alabama, to be a pilot. The war ended, all pilot training ended, and he was discharged. In 1948 he was asked by the War Department to become a member the newly formed Air Force.

He graduated from fighter pilot school in 1950. He deployed to Korea in 1952 flying the P-51 Mustang. He flew 75 missions knocking out bridges and rail lines. He continued his flying career in the Air Force and eventually was assigned to fly the F-105 in Operation Rolling Thunder. Of the 53 F-105 pilots who went down over Vietnam in 1965 24 were rescued, 15 were captured, and 14 were killed.

After his Vietnam tour he continued serving in the Air Force retiring in 1980. Randall's helmet somehow made it 1000 miles south to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), where in 1990 a Frenchman named Dominique Eluere found it in an Army surplus stall in the city's hardware market. He searched for years trying to find out who the helmet belonged to without any luck. In 2007 he became friends with Gregg, a retired stoneworker from Nebraska who had fought in Khe Sahn, Vietnam in 1966 and had been returning to Cambodia working for a non-profit organization providing education for minority Montagnard people.

Eluere told him about the helmet with the name of Randall on it and his search for the owner. Gregg said he would help him try to find the owner. The Air Force told him it had no record of a Major Randall shot down in Vietnam. Gregg ran a notice in the Vietnam Veterans of America magazine asking if anyone had information. A few weeks later he got an email from a former officer in Randall's Wing saying he was alive and lived in Colorado Springs.

Gregg was visiting his grandson's graduation in Colorado Springs. He called Randall and they emailed Eluere who sent back a photo of the helmet. "That's it," said Randall clapping his hands and laughing. The helmet even had his oxygen mask attached. A few days later Eluere shipped the helmet to Gregg. Gregg presented the helmet to Colonel Randall at a gathering of the Tuskegee Airmen in St Louis in August 2013.

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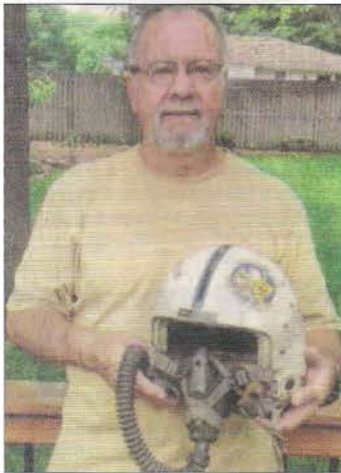


Photo courtesy of Gary Gregg
Gary "Paco" Gregg holds the helmet that belonged to Jim Randall.

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Jim Randall holds a model of the F-105 he flew in Vietnam. Beside him, on the desk, is the helmet he thought he had lost forever 48 years ago in Vietnam. Before being returned the helmet made a journey of thousands of miles to reach its destination.

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