

FROM: Det 6, 38th Air Rescue Squadron, APO US FORCES 96227 28 Oct 65

SUBJECT: Mission Narrative Report

TO: Hq PARE (DOARO), APO US FORCES 96553

1. Mission number 38-1055-23 Oct 65.
2. Notification: Det 6, 38th ARS First notified by Bien Hoa COC. Coordination and dispatch made by 38th Air Rescue Center.
3. SAR aircraft used: 2 HH-43F's. All crewmembers from Det 6, 38th ARS.

PRIMARY ALERT CREW

RCC Capt Dale L. Potter
 CP Capt David C. Henry
 HM TSgt Richard A. Conner
 RS SSgt Leon Fullwood

SECONDARY ALERT CREW

RCC Capt Raymond L. Marden
 CP Capt Raymond H. Matthews
 HM TSgt Dominick J. Coenari
 RS ALC William H. Pitsenberger

4. Cover aircraft used during pilot pickup. Two (2) USAF A-1H's, 3 army OH-1H armed helicopters, one USAF forward air controller in an O-1F.
5. Location of pickup: One half ($\frac{1}{2}$) mile SW of Plei Me Special Forces Camp. 1336 N 107 SSE.
6. Terrain and type of pickup utilized: Small jungle clearing covered with dense elephant grass and small bushes. Pilot picked up from a two foot hover.
7. Signaling equipment used: URG IG radio was used by downed pilot and smoke rockets used by FAC to mark pickup location.
8. Recovered pilots name: Captain Melvin C. Elliott.
9. Summary of events:

At 0030L, 23 Oct 65, two Det 6, 38th ARS HH-43F helicopters were dispatched by the 38th Air Rescue Squadron SARCC to the Pleiku area for the purpose of recovering Captain Melvin C. Elliott who had bailed out of his A-1E at 0130 hours on 22 Oct 65. The bailout has occurred while Captain Elliott was participating in the air to ground action around the Plei Me Special Forces Camp.

Because of the long distance involved between Pleiku and Bien Hoa (218 N.M.) and the lack of navigational equipment in the HH-43F a FAC O-1F was sent to accompany the 43's. Because of fuel limitations the flight was to stop at Ban Me Thout for refueling.

At departure time the weather between Bien Hoa and Pleiku was reported 2500' scattered 10,000 feet broken to overcast with scattered rain showers. Fifteen minutes after departure from Bien Hoa the flight was in weather at 7000' indicated. A climb was made to 9,500' and the rest of the first leg to Ban Me Thout, Vietnam was 50% on top and 50% in weather. Turbulence and sporadic rain showers were encountered in the clouds. The cloud deck ended at Ban Me Thout and a VFR approach was made and refueling accomplished. Due to the weather the first leg required 2+00 of flying. Departing Ban Me Thout at 0245 the last leg again was made in weather at 5000' indicated, arriving Pleiku at 0400 hours.

At Pleiku contact was made with TASC-TWO, for final briefing on the pilot pickup. The recovery operations plan called for the pickup to be made shortly after day light at approximately 0715 hours. Because of the large Viet Cong force around the Plei Me Camp and the concentration of automatic weapons, three air strikes were planned for between 0645 and 0715 to silence as much ground fire as possible. At this time I was briefed on Elliott's location in the jungle outside the Plei Me camp by a FAC who had just returned from there.

Departing Pleiku at 0530 hours we proceeded to Army Holloway for refueling and coordination with the Huey Fire Control Team. At Holloway their COC directed us to a 0600 briefing for army chopper personnel who were going to participate in the recovery. At this briefing I was informed that the Army was going to use one of their slick UH-1B's for the pickup and that the plan had been approved by the TASC-2 Commander. I was invited and volunteered to proceed with the Hueys to Plei Me and watch the show.

Departing Holloway at 0630 hours 23 Oct 65 in company with 4 armed UH-1B's and 1 slick UH-1B we proceeded to the Plei Me area. The air strikes were made as scheduled but the FAC on scene became unsure of Elliott's position so the pickup attempt was called off. The uncertainty of Elliott's position at this time stemmed from the fact that the night before (22 Oct 65) the army had made an unsuccessful attempt in recovering him and in doing so had revealed his position to the V.C. This forced Elliott to change his position, and caused a temporary situation where

his exact location was unknown. Heavy automatic weapons fire was still prevalent in the pickup zone at this time.

With the pickup postponed indefinitely all helicopters returned to Holloway Field at 0815 L 23 Oct 65. After landing at Holloway the recovery of Elliott went into a hold status until the FAC's could again pin point his location.

At 1030L the FAC's again made radio contact with Elliott and were able to plot his position. At this time Elliott said the location he was now in seemed relative quiet and he believed a successful pickup could be accomplished. At this time I was at TASC-TWO Headquarters discussing the situation with the senior TASC-TWO controller. With the new information I decided to shoot for a 1130L pickup of Elliott. A call was made to the army COC at Holloway and arrangements made for a 3 ship HH-1B fire control team to provide cover for the pickup.

At 1110L we departed Holloway in company with the three armed Hueys for the Plei Me Camp. Arriving over Plei Me at 1120, contact was made with the FAC who was to mark Elliott's position for the pickup. The FAC informed us that a C-123 which was making supply drops to the camp was receiving heavy fire from a point close to Elliott's position. Before the pickup could be made this gun position would have to be neutralized. At 1130L two A-1E's that were flying CAP over the site were called in to strike the gun position. A double napalm drop was made and the ground fire ceased.

At 1135L all helicopters, the FAC, and Elliott went to guard channel for communicating. During the pickup the FAC marked Elliott's position with a smoke rocket and we made our approach in over the Plei Me Special Forces Camp to his position which was $\frac{1}{2}$ mile SW of the camp. The location of the pickup was a 300' by 35' opening in the jungle. This opening was carpeted with 6' elephant grass and various small trees. When we were about $\frac{2}{3}$ of the way down the length of the clearing Elliott was spotted coming out of the trees on the left. I made a rudder turn to the left to put the side cabin door on his side. Because of the grass and small trees a landing was impossible but we were able to hover at a 2 foot altitude. Elliott crawled through the grass and vines to the helicopter and was pulled into the cabin by the crew chief and the pararescueman. Take off was immediate and we departed the area by the same route used for the approach. Time in the clearing was 2-3 minutes. Throughout the approach and while we were hovering, the army HH-1B's were laying down a solid blanket of rocket and machine gun fire around our position. Their coverage was outstanding.

The HH-1B formation commander said we received ground fire on take off but it was not effective. We were probably not in sight of the V.C. gunners and they were only firing at sound.

At the time of his pickup (11/43L), Captain Elliott had spent 34 hours hiding from the Viet Cong who surrounded the Plei Me Special Forces Camp. Several times during this period the Viet Cong had made intensive searches for him. Captain Elliott is to be commended for the initiative and patience that he exhibited while waiting for rescue. The conditions that he faced were quite hostile.

Once the actual rescue pickup was started coordination and timing among the different parties was outstanding and the mission was completed in minimum amount of time.


DALE L. POTTER
Captain, USAF
Rescue Crew Commander

Rescue at Plei Me

by Kevin Generous

At 2:00 A.M. on the pitch-black morning of October 22, 1965, U.S. Air Force Captain Melvin Elliott of Glendale, Arizona, flew his A-1E Skyraider at 10,000 feet over North Vietnamese ground units surrounding Plei Me Special Forces Camp in South Vietnam's central highlands. Elliott and his wingman had rendezvoused with a C-123 floreship and were awaiting the arrival of an army CV-2 Caribou cargo ship on an aerial resupply mission to besieged Plei Me. Although the primary mission of Elliott's 1st Commando Squadron—based in Bien Hoa, 325 kilometers south—was to train South Vietnamese pilots in the propeller-driven fighter-bombers, when necessary the squadron flew close air support for isolated Special Forces camps in the mountains near the Laotian border. During his ten months in South Vietnam, Captain Elliott had racked up over 200 such combat missions.

Three days before, 2,200 troops of the North Vietnamese Army 33d Regiment had assaulted Plei Me in the initial phase of a dry season offensive designed to expand Hanoi's control over the strategic central highlands before American combat forces arrived in strength. However, Plei Me, a dusty border camp 345 kilome-

ters from Saigon, was proving to be a tough nut to crack; the NVA failure to overrun quickly the crude triangular fortress would soon turn the tactical initiative over to the newly arrived U.S. Army 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). By late November, the 1st Air Cav would engage and defeat three NVA regiments—including the 33d—in the bloody battle in the Ia Drang Valley.

This was Elliott's second trip over Plei Me. Following the initial North Vietnamese assault, Elliott had led a flight of four Skyraiders in support of the twelve American Green Berets and 450 montagnard irregulars inside the Plei Me compound. After seeing North Vietnamese infantry hurl themselves in human waves against Plei Me's walls, Elliott was only mildly surprised by the camp commander's desperate instructions to the Skyraiders: "Bomb our perimeter ... use napalm if you have it." The Skyraider pilots obliged, dropping their canisters within yards of the defenders—at times from altitudes of only 100 feet—temporarily breaking up the Communist attack.

Now, on Elliott's second mission three days later, the situation at Plei Me was still critical. NVA mortars and rockets had zeroed in on the camp's dirt airstrip, preventing resupply or reinforcement by helicopter. With ground reinforcements bogged down by a North Vietnamese ambush thirty kilometers east, resupply consisted of parachute drops by CV-2 Caribou aircraft. Elliott grew impatient as he circled over Plei Me for ninety minutes awaiting the nightly Caribou run. And, with his fuel tanks nearly empty, Elliott discovered the Caribou mission had been scrubbed. The captain radioed the C-123 floreship of his intention to drop his load of two 750-pound napalm and six cluster bomb unit canisters—standard ordnance for night missions—on enemy positions and head back to base at Bien Hoa.

Even with the sky lit by flares, Elliott "could only see the outline of the compound—nothing else" as he eased his

heavy plane into a strafing run, fir 20MM cannon bursts from his four w mounted cannons. As the thirty-six-year old pilot pulled the Skyraider out of low-level run and away from the target he thought, "God, it's awfully bright." Glancing to his left, Elliott saw his engine left wing erupt in flames, caused either a well-directed antiaircraft burst or, perhaps, by leaking hydraulic fluid ignited from the muzzle blast of his own guns.

"I'm on fire," the captain told his wingman, who was still a mile behind Elliott starting his own run. Realizing his chances of limping to the nearest base thirty miles away at Pleiku, were nil, Elliott radioed, "... will attempt to maneuver over the compound and bail out." As the flames rapidly burned off the wing surface panels, searing through the control cables. Wrestling in vain with controls, the veteran pilot realized "it was nothing left of the ailerons." As the heavy airplane slowly began rolling onto its back, Elliott slid back the canopy and sent his last transmission to nearby C-123: "Mayday, mayday ... fire and abandoning aircraft."

Popping open the seat harness, Elliott felt the wind blast tear off his flight helmet as he dropped like a stone from the stricken aircraft. Clearing the plane's Elliott opened his chute at 800 feet, conscious only of his extremely low altitude and the bright glow of a newly dropped flare.

Elliott's parachute snagged on a tree, leaving him dangling thirty feet above the jungle floor. "I swung over, caught a branch and climbed to the ground," he said. In his haste to avoid capture, he abandoned the survival gear strapped to his parachute harness, taking only a .38 f with five rounds, a battery-operated strobe light, and a two-way radio. Elliott's maps and M16 rifle—with all his ammunition—had gone down with the Skyraider. His most prized possession by far, however, was his survival radio. Elliott realized that he had been lucky on this

Normally, A-1 pilots in Elliott's squadron were not guaranteed two-way radios. Because of an acute shortage, radios were usually issued only homing radios.

The downed flier contacted his wingman, who protectively stayed overhead. Perilously short of fuel himself, he headed off in the direction of Plei Me. Thus alerted, Elliott intended to walk into the relative safety of the compound. After hiking through dark jungles seeking the beleaguered camp, the pilot suddenly found himself in the center of "the biggest and fiercest gunfight I'd ever heard." Amid zinging bullets and crumping mortars, he scrambled for refuge inside the top of a thick tree blown down by mortars. There he burrowed in for the night.

The next day, U.S. Army Captain William Rainey circled Plei Me at 10,000 feet in a single-engine O-1 Bird-Dog. A FAC with the 219th Aviation Company in Pleiku, Rainey's job was to direct close air strikes over the camp and provide observation of enemy troop movements at a safe distance away from anti-aircraft guns. Rainey also flew general utility missions and performed ground radio relays for outlying Special Forces camps like Plei Me. In fact, Rainey had the distinction of flying the last aircraft off Plei Me's dirt airstrip only hours before the North Vietnamese attack. That evening, the small O-1's powerful radios were routinely monitoring frequency 121—the air emergency channel.

"Birdog, Birdog ... this is Elliott," crackled the radio. Although engaged in his FAC duties, Rainey heard the desperate message. "You could tell he was talking at a whisper," Rainey recalled. He heard the transmission twice before realizing that the message was directed at his aircraft. Rainey answered Elliott, quickly fixed his position, and rocked his wings in recognition. "We're going to get you out," Rainey assured the downed flier.

Over the next twelve hours, the FAC

helped direct the air force pilot across the scarred landscape, from crater to crater, skirting the fierce firefights waged around Plei Me. At times the Green Berets inside Plei Me compound witnessed Elliott scampering near the jungle's fringe to reach a pickup zone southwest of the camp perimeter. An attempt by the Green Berets to link up with the pilot failed because of heavy North Vietnamese gunfire.

Shortly after dark Elliott heard the distinctive sound of a U.S. Army Huey helicopter combing the area. Emerging from the jungle and standing on an exposed trail, Elliott held up the bright strobe light. The chopper circled once in the darkness, then turned on its spotlight. Elliott could see a rope dangling from the Huey's door. Just as rescue appeared imminent, an enemy machine gun erupted, its tracers stabbing toward the hovering chopper. Both man and machine "got the hell out of there," recalled Elliott, who dove back into the jungle.

Lying still in the bush, with one arm flung over his face, Elliott heard an investigating North Vietnamese patrol along the trail. A crisscrossing search beam passed perilously close—within twenty feet—to the camouflaged pilot. The patrol reversed direction and swung the beam again close by, then receded into the jungle. Elliott spent a second night nestled at the base of a giant tree.

The familiar sound of a twin-engine C-47 greeted Elliott at dawn. Scanning the sky, the captain spotted an AC-47 Spooky gunship, its gunports open, about to fire on the area. Elliott "tore around that tree like a squirrel," putting it between himself and the gunship. But the AC-47 fired only a few rounds and departed. Elliott later discovered that engine trouble had aborted its mission.

By afternoon the flier had raised another O-1, whose pilot insisted on marking Elliott's position with smoke grenades. "You really don't need to do that," said Elliott, who feared that the smoke would only attract the NVA. But the O-1 pilot

missed his mark and soon departed. Elliott hunkered down to await the chopper that he had been told was "en route," only to be informed shortly afterward that his rescue chopper had been "diverted to a higher priority." By now Elliott's situation was no longer unique; other U.S. pilots had been downed near Plei Me as more U.S. aircraft had been committed to the camp's relief.

Discouraged for the moment at not being "a higher priority," Elliott washed up in a creek and felt better. As he continued to walk through the jungle, his heart nearly stopped as a 150-pound wild boar suddenly charged out of a bamboo thicket. Running in the other direction, Elliott found a patch of tall elephant grass and passed the time eavesdropping on his squadron mates' radio chatter as the Skyraiders flew past to drop napalm on nearby North Vietnamese emplacements.

Elliott's turn for rescue at last arrived. A twin-rotored U.S. Air Force HH-43 Husky rescue helicopter lumbered over the clearing escorted by two Huey gunships firing their rockets. Nearly blown over by the terrific prop wash, scratched up and punchy from his thirty-six-hour ordeal, Captain Elliott climbed onto the Husky's wheel and was hauled aboard the chopper for the short trip to Pleiku.

After his recovery, Elliott was whisked away to 1st Special Forces Group headquarters in Nha Trang for detailed debriefing. There he was asked by a curious intelligence officer whether he "was scared at any time" while surrounded by a full regiment of North Vietnamese regulars in pitched battle.

"Only for about thirty-six hours," Elliott replied wearily.

Kevin Generous, a defense policy analyst in Washington, D.C., has researched and written extensively on America's early involvement in the Vietnam War, including the battle of the Ia Drang Valley in 1965.

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deceased were recovered by the marine search E-34.

(3) Mission 7-38-640, 23 October 1965. Alert helicopter crew was scrambled by Base Operations personnel at 1340L to air evacuate one seriously injured litter patient from a marine C-130 on the Air Force ramp to the Marine hospital.

(4) Mission 7-38-641, 23 October 1965. The alert helicopter crew was scrambled by the hospital commander at 1420L to air evacuate a USAF airman from the Air Force ramp to the Marine hospital.

(5) Mission 7-38-642, 23 October 1965. Recovered eight wounded marines from jungle by using hoist through 200 foot trees. Two aircraft hits were taken while over the area.

(6) Mission 7-38-648, 26 October 1965. Two helicopter crews were scrambled from quarters by Base Operations at 2150L for two marine F-43's observed to crash on Monkey Mountain. The UH-1 pilot managed to hover within 50 yards of the crash site. Clouds spilling over the mountain top obscured the crash site and prevented closer inspection by any of the helicopter crews. One HH-43F landed half way up the mountain and conferred with the ground party commander. The pilots had evidently flown into the mountain top which was hidden in the clouds. The four deceased were recovered by ground party at 0700L 27 October 1965.

(7) Mission 7-38-651, 26 October 1965. Two HH-43F crews were scrambled by the Command Post at 0230L to air evacuate two seriously wounded marines from the Air Force ramp to the Marine hospital.

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Mission Number				Rescue Aircraft			Persons Saved				Totals		
Det	ARC	Sq	Msn	Date	HU-16	HH-43	HH-3	USAF	USN	USA	Fgn Mil	Indiv Msn	Accumulative
		38	968	24 Sep	2			2				2	53/1
6		38	820	24 Sep		1		1				1	54/1
6		38	898	5 Oct		0/7				/7		/7	54/8
6		38	929	9 Oct		0/3				/3		/3	54/11
		38	1027	13 Oct			1	1				1	55/11
		38	1055	22 Oct		1		1				1	56/11
7		38	642	23 Oct		0/2			/2			/2	56/13
		38	1073	28 Oct		2			2			2	58/13
		38	1084	1 Nov	1			1				1	59/13
		38	1088	1 Nov			1		1			1	60/13
6		38	1047	6 Nov		/1					/1	/1	60/14
		38	1110	6 Nov			2		2			2	62/14
		38	1111	7 Nov	1				1			1	63/14
		38	1114	8 Nov		0/20				/20		/20	63/34
		38	1138	17 Nov	1				1			1	64/34
		38	1141	18 Nov		1		1				1	65/34
		38	1150	20 Nov		0/2				/2		/2	65/36
7		38	671	21 Nov		2		2				2	67/36
		38	1167	26 Nov		6				6		6	73/36
		38	1174	28 Nov	1				1			1	74/36

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MISSIONSRESCUERSLOCATIONSSURVIVORSNameAircraftNameServiceAircraft

38-959-22 Sep	Capt Richardson	HU-16B	1700N - 10715E	Capt Tuong	VNAF	A1H
38-968-24 Sep	Maj Hollfelder	HU-16B	1708N - 10758E	Capt Graves	USAF	F4C
				Lt Nolan		
6-38-820-24 Sep	Capt Layman	HH-43F	5 NM E. Bein Hoa	Maj Barbena	USAF	F-100
6-38-898-5 Oct	Capt Murden	HH-43F	8 NM E. Bien Hoa	2 Soldiers	USA	
	Capt Nadler			5 Soldiers	USA	
6-38-929-9 Oct	Capt Cook	HH-43F	10 NM W. Bien Hoa	2 Soldiers	USA	
	Capt Potter			1 Soldier	USA	
38-1027-13 Oct	Capt Jennings	HH-3	2132N - 10317E	Maj Randall	USAF	F-105
38-1055-22 Oct	Capt Porter	HH-43F	37 NM SSW Pleiku	Maj Elliot	USAF	A1E
7-38-642-23 Oct	Capt Cunningham	HH-43F	12 NM W. DaNang	2 Marines	USMC	
38-1073-28 Oct	Capt Burdeaux	HH-43F	1635N - 10624E	LCDR Lindsey	USN	F-4B
	Capt McMillan	HH-43F	1635N - 10624E	LT Cooper	USN	F-4B
38-1084-1 Nov	Capt Westenbarger	HU-16B	2051N - 10729E	Capt Huggins	USAF	RF-101
38-1088-1 Nov		HH-3	1803N - 10540E	LCDR Wheat	USN	A4C
38-1110-6 Nov		HH-3	2029N - 10527E	2 Navy	USN	SH3
6-38-1047-6 Nov	Capt Murden	HH-43F	1104N - 10703E	1 Australian	Aust	
38-1111-7 Nov	Lt Kirby	HU-16B	1953N - 10614E	LCDR Wask	USN	A4C
38-1114-8 Nov*	Capt Henningson	HH-43B	1108N - 10657E	20 Soldiers	USA	
	Capt Nadler					
38-1138-17 Nov	Capt Richardson	HU-16B	1913N - 10748E	CDR Chew	USN	F8E
38-1141-18 Nov	Capt Reiderick	HH-43B	1814N - 10532E	Capt Mahaffey	USAF	F-105
38-1150-20 Nov	Capt Keesler	HH-43B	1113N - 10643E	2 Soldiers	USA	
7-38-671-21 Nov	Capt Graham	HH-43F	1 NM S. DaNang	Lt Rucker	USAF	C-123
				A1C Kelly		

* Recovered on 9 November

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