

TO THE PILOT DOWN IN NORTH VIETNAM, THE 12 MEN
IN THE SANDIES AND JOLLY GREENS WERE . . .

THE MAGNIFICENT DOZEN

This is the story of Captain Robert Cooley, F-105 pilot, whose aircraft was crippled during an airstrike over North Vietnam, forcing him to eject. It's an exciting first-hand account of his evasion and rescue, but our real reason for presenting it here is education for other crews who may find themselves in the same predicament.—ED.

AFTER I got out of the airplane I tumbled violently, but the chute opened as advertised. I didn't have my zero delay lanyard hooked up. The ejection seemed to be normal in all respects. I kept my helmet—I had the visor down, the mask tight and the chin strap tightly fastened. A lot of G! I believe I ejected at a quite high airspeed. All my personal equipment stayed with me just fine. As I was coming down I lifted my visor and looked up and checked my chute. There was one hole, I'd say two feet by two feet at the top of the canopy; I was amazed that the thing had even hung together. Then I took my radio out as you know, with the beeper going and checked it and tried to talk, but I couldn't, so I just stowed the radio back again.

I saw I was coming down in a small village. I have had previous jump training—I did it in college as a sport—so I was able, quite handily, to slip the chute to the top of a ridge. I am very proud of that, actually; I hit just about where I wanted to and came down into about 100-125 foot trees. The landing was very gentle, very easy. Before I hit in the trees I got in a good position, put the mask on and the visor down, had the gloves on by this time, got my legs together and made a tree landing, just like the book says. I don't believe this hurt me a bit. It was the softest parachute landing fall I've ever made; I didn't even touch the ground. I was hung up about 75 feet and I could look down and see the ground. I was on the side of a very steep slope, I'd say about 45 degrees.

I took off my helmet at this time and tried to catch it in the crook of a tree but it fell off, hit the ground and rolled away. This was the only thing I was sorry I had lost, but as it turned out I didn't need it anyway. I carry my tree escape device right in front of me, right where your belt buckle is. To my mind

this is the only place to carry it. I know some of them are carried in the back cushion of the parachute. I don't know how in the hell you'd ever get them out, for I was really strung up there. I got out my tree penetrator and clipped it onto the chute after jumping a couple of times to make sure the chute was snagged firm. I ran it up through my loop by the chest strap and then unhooked from the chute and with finger pressure just boop, boop, boop right on down to the ground. There was no problem at all. I'm sorry I couldn't get the penetrator back. I tugged at it but it was caught up in the trees.

I got my MD-1 kit; there is a radio in there which I took out. I decided to head for the top of the hill, as I could hear quite a bit of rifle fire in the valley. I headed up the hill for about 100 to 150 yards. This took me almost 15 minutes as there was very heavy underbrush, a lot of vines, snagging me. I had hurt myself but at the time I really wasn't thinking much about that.

I carry two radios on my person and one in my kit giving me a total

of three. Incidentally, before I left the parachute down by the tree, I jerked the aerial out of it and bashed the beeper real good, after checking to make sure that my one radio worked. Then I headed up the hill. Incidentally those are the only pieces of personal equipment I left behind—the chute, the tree penetrator, my helmet and the life raft which was inflated and hanging in the tree. After I got to the top of the hill, I drank some personal water I carry, spread out my survival gear and sat down and tried to collect myself. I didn't think I was hurt very badly but I was bleeding in a couple of places from scratches and bruises. Then I heard a reciprocating engine and I knew this would be the Sandies (A-1s).

I pulled out by radio and said, "This is Fosdick 3 calling Sandie; how do you read?" He came right back with, "Five by, how are you buddy?" I said, "Fine." He said, "Can you see or hear me?" I said, "I can hear you. Keep coming. It sounds like you are south, turn north." He said, "O.K. Tell me when you can see me."

Then I did see him through the top of the trees, and I said, "You are over me right now." He said, "Rog, I've got your hill," and then, "I'm going to see if I can come right over the top of you."

I could see him going by one hole and then I'd pick him up through another hole in the canopy and I just vectored him in. I told him when he went right over the top of me. I asked him if he wanted a flare. He said, "Negative flare, don't fire anything 'til we tell you." Later on I found out why he said that.

I had my gear laid out, all three radios; they all three seemed to be working properly. I checked them all. The way I was doing this was with each transmission with the Sandie I

was picking up one radio as I put down the other, just to see that it was working. Then as the Sandie came around and called up, he said, "Can you hear any rifle fire?" I told him, yes, but I couldn't see anybody.

There were four Sandie type aircraft in all. He told me, "We are going to start strafing around you now." I asked, "Do you see anybody?" He said, "Yeah." And I said, "Uh-o. When is the chopper going to get here?" and he said, "About 40 minutes." I recall I told him at that time, "Don't bother, man, they'll be here by then." He said, "Don't worry, buddy, we'll stick with you." He was quite reassuring.

Then around me for the next 30-35 minutes was the most magnificent air show I've ever seen. The Sandies were delivering rockets, all types of ordnance, strafing, bombing all around the area. At one time the Sandie called up and said, "Fosdick 3, I'm going to lay a load of rockets in on the ledge right below, but I know right where you are so don't sweat it." It really hit the ledge below real hard. All the birds left and the dust and everything. I asked him if they were that close and he told me there were a couple but "don't sweat them."

This strafing and rocketing and what they were doing—the four of them were going around my hill, just like a merry-go-round. Much of the time they were delivering their ordnance below my position. They were quite low and they were really sticking with me; it was quite reassuring.

A year later, it seemed to me, the chopper finally said he was five out and the Sandie called and said, "O.K. I need your position exactly; fire a penguin flare." I said, "Rog," and I did, up through the canopy. It functioned perfectly. He said, "Rog, we have you exactly." Now I see





why he didn't say to mark my position before, because then the shooting really started. Bullets began hitting the tops of the trees that I was under. As I recall there wasn't a slug that came within a hundred feet of me at any time, but I could hear the bullets tearing through the tops of the trees. I had never heard bullets in trees before but I knew that is what they were.

Then the chopper came in. The Sandie was very explicit all the time, telling me what to do, "Take out two orange flares, orange day smoke for the chopper, and light them when the chopper tells you to." When the chopper told me to light up my orange day smoke, I did, but it took a few seconds for it to get up through the tree canopy. Finally the chopper guy said, "Rog, we have it; we are moving in."

Looking directly up I could see a little bit of sky and the chopper moving over. He said, "We have you in sight." At this time I threw down that flare and lighted my other one to give them a fresh position. Looking down through the trees they saw me. This is what I thought was above and beyond the call because by now there was all kind of shooting.

By this time two F-105s had also shown up and they were strafing with the Gatling gun, along with the four Sandies who were delivering ordnance all around the place, along with another chopper who stayed high while the low Jolly Green came in to get me. There was all kind of shooting and all kind of noise and this fellow came over my position and just stopped.

He stayed still for two or three minutes while his hoist master worked the tree penetrator down through the trees. He'd take it down a minute and then stop it and the chopper would move over a couple

of feet, then he'd move it down a couple of more feet, then they'd move over. It would hang up a little on a limb and he'd jerk it and then it would come down. He missed me with the tree penetrator—he got it six inches from me. I thought that was amazing. I could have had two broken legs and still got hold of it.

I had been through survival school and knew just what they looked like. I had been hoisted on one before and knew how it felt, so I unzipped it, put the cord around me, got in the seat and gave him the up signal that means you are ready to go. Believe me, we went. He started heading for Channel 31 right then. As I got up to the top of the trees we were moving off. They just towed me up and put me on the floor of the chopper. They had their weapons out and we started to clear the area.

As we came up through the trees I saw the spot I had been in. There was shooting all around the place. They were picking up automatic fire off the ridge by this time and getting all kinds of rifle and small automatic weapons fire from down in the valley. We came out and there was just no problem. The people in the chopper took beautiful care of me. They gave me a "prescription" bottle of stuff for my recent harrowing experience, a cigarette, wrapped me up in a blanket and laid me down on a stretcher. I can just say they were magnificent. Incidentally, there were four pilots in the Sandies plus four people in each chopper, a total of 12 people, which I have submitted for decorations through our wing. I thought it was an amazing show. These guys are just something else again. Anybody who will drive an airplane in over a position and hold it still for two or three minutes — why they weren't shot down I just can't understand! ★