

'Crown' Guides Rescue Efforts As Plane Is Downed in North

SAIGON (UPI)—The Air Force is using a squadron of HC-130H transport planes to command its air rescue operations over north Vietnam.

Maj. Harry J. Geller is a commander of one of the super-modified troop transports that circles the north daily.

Codenamed a "Crown," Geller's 4-engine ship is designed to cruise for long periods of time on two engines. The HC-130H can take off from airfields in the Republic of Vietnam and fly north at speeds up to 370 m.p.h. Once the big turbojet is in position, two of the engines are shut down and the "Crown" cruises at about 150 m.p.h.

The HC-130H also carries an aerial recovery device for snatching downed airmen from behind enemy lines.

During a recent operation over north Vietnam, Geller's co-pilot, James B. Studdley received a call from a flight leader who had lost one of his wingmen.

"This is Tempest lead," was the call. "Tempest three has been shot down, I have (see) two good 'chutes."

Studdley was given the crashed airplane's position and Geller called in propeller-driven Skyraiders to circle the downed pilots. The 7-man crew of the "Crown" began to coordinate the rescue operation.

The navigator, Capt. E. Russell Nunnally Jr., plotted the pilot's positions and the communist anti-aircraft positions near the rescue area.

Radio-airman Lt. John E. Antioz called in "Jolly Green Giant" helicopters for the rescue.

Tempest leader called again, "One pilot has an injured back. The other has a broken leg."

Studdley called in Air Force KC-135 tankers to refuel the jet fighters soaring over the rescue operation.

TSgt. Holdabrand Marsh guided the "Crown" with the automatic pilot.

The Skyraiders called in to Geller's "Crown," "We are in the area. We have four Sandies (Skyraiders) and Jollies (helicopters). I have you in sight."

Geller maintained radio-silence as the rescue drama unfolded beneath them. The air rescue professionals were risking death to save two American lives.

"Break right Jolly, you have ground fire from nine o'clock!"

The helicopter began talking evasive action. "Breaking right, we're hit . . . no great damage. Hose them down."

The Skyraiders begin strafing the north Vietnamese ground troops. Three times the helicopter was hit by ground fire. A paramedic was wounded by the communist fire. The choppers' rescue hoist cable was damaged.

Jolly leader cannot make the pickup and heads for home.

"Crown" calls for more jet fighters and aerial tankers to refuel the jets. Additional Skyraiders replace the two Sandies who are running low on fuel and ammunition.

The second helicopter calls to Geller's command post. "Jolly two going in again."

"Roger Jolly two," answered the Skyraider flight leader.

It is beginning to get dark over north Vietnam. Marsh is still guiding the "Crown" in its orbit. On the ground, another search mission is under way—north Vietnamese soldiers are sweeping through the jungle looking for the injured American airmen.

"This is Jolly two, We have one pilot on the hoist."

The rescue helicopter fights the darkness and communist ground fire, but it is time to go home. If the injured American pilot survives the night they may be able to get him at dawn when another "Crown" comes along with its complement of Sandies and Jollies.