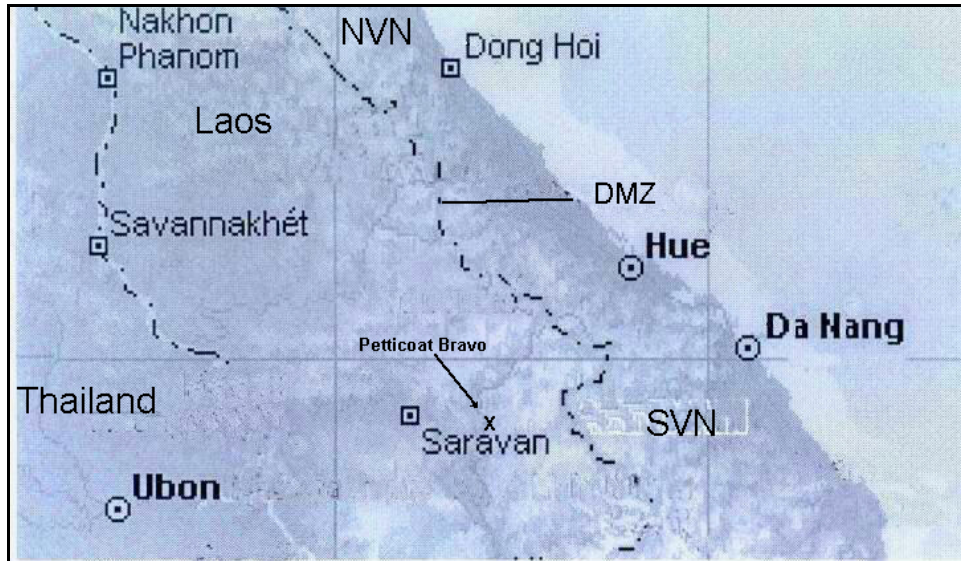


Petticoat

At 12:26 p.m. on 13 April, the airborne alert HC-130, Crown 2, was flying to its assigned afternoon orbit position. Its crew received a radio call from Hillsboro that Covey 578, an O-2A Skymaster, had picked up two beepers over Laos and that an RF-4C with two people on board was overdue and its target was the area from which the beepers were emanating. The F-4's crew was pilot Maj Walter Stischer and weapons systems officer Capt. Donald Verhees. Their callsign was Petticoat. The airborne mission commander (AMC) on Crown was Capt. Lyndon Stretton. Crown 2's crew also heard the beepers and the radio operator used his ADF to get a heading to the beeper. Captain Stretton ordered his aircraft to proceed to the area of the beeper. Covey 578 reported that he was in radio contact with one survivor who was located about forty miles east of Saravan, Laos. He was in a valley 400 meters east of a road that was heavily used by enemy forces. The MSL elevation of the valley was 3800 feet and the bases of the clouds were at 7,000 feet. A few minutes later, Crown 2 was also speaking with Capt. Verhees, Petticoat Bravo. Ominously, there was no voice contact with the F-4's other crewman, Petticoat Alpha.¹

Captain Verhees describe his situation. *“Major Walter Stischer and I took off from Udorn on a photo reconnaissance mission. Our target was a road next to Chavan Air Field in southern Laos. There was no ground fire on our first two passes over the target area. To ensure we had good imagery we went in for a third pass. We were below 2000 feet and faster than 450 knots when we were hit without any warning. I heard a loud thump, the aircraft jerked hard, and the cockpit quickly filled with so much smoke that I had difficulty seeing the instruments. Walt yelled “eject, eject!” I used the lower ejection handle and there was no delay in the system at all. Even though my chin strap was fastened, I lost my helmet, sunglasses, knee board, and wrist watch during ejection. I could not distinguish between the ejection forces, the wind blast or the opening shock. The time from being hit to being under a parachute canopy was about five seconds. After I yanked the handle, it was fast, violent, and automated. After the chute opened, it took me a few seconds for my senses to catch up with me. I saw Walt's chute below me. Enemy troops on the ground began shooting at me and this refocused me on my problems. I deployed my seat pack survival kit and brought my feet and knees together, knees slightly bent and toes pointed at the ground for landing. I intended to do a good parachute landing fall (PLF) hit the ground unexpectedly and sort of just collapsed. My landing area consisted of seven foot high elephant grass and extremely dense underbrush. I quickly got out of the parachute harness and gathered up the chute. I was about to hide it when I thought I heard someone coming. I crawled away about ten yards on my hands and knees and the noise stopped. I guess the noise was just the wind and my imagination. I took a drink of water and then radioed out a mayday. I continued alternating between beeper and voice transmissions for about 40 minutes. In between radio transmissions, I continued to crawl further away from where I had landed. I came to a particularly thick clump of bamboo and underbrush and decided it would be a good place to hide in. I had now been on the ground for about an hour when I got radio contact with Crown 2. He*

told me to sit tight and that help was on the way. During this period, I heard someone yelling a long way from me and then heard the propeller sounds an approaching aircraft. I quickly made contact with a Covey FAC who was flying an O-2. I vectored the O-2 directly over me and he told me the SAR forces were on the way.”²



file = Volume 2 / Chapter 2 / 13Apr68 Map

Crown 2 radioed the RCC located on Monkey Mountain (callsign Queen). Queen was on a mountain top near DaNang Air Base. Crown told Queen to scramble DaNang's Jolly's and Spads. The Jolly's were two HH-3E's and the Spads were two A-1's. At 12:55 p.m. Jolly Greens 21 and 28 and Spads 11 and 12 were airborne and enroute. Gunfighter 02 (USAF) and Winfield 201 (USN) were two flights of F-4's that were airborne on other strike missions. Without anyone requesting their help, they self diverted to protect the downed airmen until the A-1's could arrive on scene. At 13:12 both beepers stopped their wailing on guard. Petticoat Bravo came up on voice to let everyone know he was still around. Due to heavy concentrations of enemy troops in the area, all aircraft were staying high overhead and out of the range of most of the small arms. Spads 11 and 12 arrived in the area at 13:32. Captain Randy Smedly was flying Spad 11 became on scene commander. He easily made radio contact with Petticoat Bravo. Captain Verhees describes what happened next. *"When the Spads came in, they asked me to hit them with my signal mirror. At survival school I was taught to remove the mirror from the vest and hang it around my neck. That way it would be handy if I needed it fast. There was a solid overcast almost the entire time I was on the ground. The only time the sun peaked out was the exact time Spad 11 requested I signal him. It was a good thing that I had the mirror ready. After I flashed them, they had my exact position. One Spad then made a low level pass and picked up moderate ground fire. I radioed him and pinpointed its origin as best as I could. The A-1's made several strafing passes using 2.75-inch rockets, 20mm cannon, and 7.62 miniguns.”³*

Spad 11 radioed Crown and let the AMC know that he had made visual contact with one survivor and the Spads were looking for the second. While searching, the Spads took ground fire from the ridges and they noted extensive troop movement in the SAR area. Spad 35 flight arrived at 13:53. All of the Spads began to deliver ordnance on all of the positions that were firing on them. At 13:50, the Jollys arrived high overhead and entered a holding pattern pending a radio call to come in for the pickup. Jolly 21 was the low bird. It was crewed by Capt. Harvie Stringer (pilot), Capt. Ronald Spray (copilot), Sgt Alvin Malone (FE) and Sgt Walter White (PJ). Spad 11 suggested that the Jolly make an immediate rescue attempt, before all these enemy troops got organized to oppose the operation. Captain Stringer briefed his crew on the situation. They would be going into a known area of enemy troops before the Spads sanitized the threat. It was a calculated risk but his crew wanted to try a pickup anyway. They dumped fuel to reduce the helicopters weight enough to hover. Jolly Green 21 told his high bird to remain in orbit at 8000 feet and then informed Spad 11, he was on his way in for a pickup. Spad 11 intercepted the Jolly during its descent and led the helicopter over to the survivor.⁴

Jolly 21 took light ground fire during its approach to Petticoat Bravo. Captain Verhees parachute was visible and the Jolly came into a hover over it. Sergeant White was manning the left gun which is mounted in the H-3's left forward window. He spotted the survivor up slope about 25 yards away. The helicopter repositioned itself and Sgt. Malone lowered the penetrator to Capt. Verhees. The survivor described his pickup. *"While the Spads were sanitizing the area, I made my first radio contact with the Jolly Greens. One Jolly came in from the ridge behind me, passed me, and about 100 yards away did a 180° turn, got below the ridge lines and came towards my position. It stopped and hovered over my parachute. I was on their left side and I radioed "I'm over here." Someone on the helicopter saw me waving, and the chopper moved to a hover over me. Just before the Jolly did the 180, I thought I heard someone radio me to pop a smoke flare. But with the noise of the chopper, and the A-1's shooting up the area, I couldn't be sure. The penetrator came down and landed about 15 feet away. I got on and rode it up to the chopper. The medic checked me over and the FE gave me his seat between the pilot and copilot, where I sat for the ride home."*⁵

Jolly Green 21 egressed the area and climbed back up to the holding pattern. The crew questioned Capt. Verhees about Maj. Stischer's status. Verhees said that he had seen Alpha descending under a good parachute and that he landed to the south of his landing spot. He had heard Stischer's beeper about an hour after hitting the ground. But, he never heard his pilot come up voice. The Spads used this information to try and find Alpha. Jolly 21 was at bingo fuel and told Crown that he needed to RTB. Crown wanted the Jolly to remain in orbit in case the Spads found Alpha. So, Crown descended to 8000 feet to air refuel Jolly 21. During the air refueling rendezvous, Crown began to take heavy ground fire. The area was too hot for air refueling and the Jolly flight was ordered to return to DaNang. The Spads continued searching for Maj. Stischer. Eventually they were ordered to RTB and Crown maintained a listening watch for the missing pilot who

had never come up on voice.⁶ Major Stischer had been captured by the NVA twenty minutes after he landed. He told his captors that he had been flying a single seat aircraft. It took the NVA four months to move him up the Ho Chi Minh Trail and to a POW compound in Hanoi. Major Stischer spent almost five years as a POW. He was released by the DRV on 28 March 1973 and returned with honor as part of Project Homecoming.

“Once the chopper landed at DaNang, the flight surgeon insisted I spent a night in the hospital for observation. One of my first visitors was the A-1 pilots who had worked my rescue. They showed me a handful of .50 caliber slugs that had just been dug out of their aircraft. A little later, some of the F-4 fighter pilots snuck me out to party with them. The air police returned me back to the hospital after 1 a.m. The nurses were not amused. My total time on the ground was a little over two hours. The next day I was flown to Tan Son Nhut AB, Saigon. I had only a couple of blocks to walk to the base hospital where I needed to drop off some paperwork. There I was hobbling along in a dirty flight suit, G-suit slung over my shoulder, and X-rays under my arm while I was stopped by an Air Policeman. He looked me up and down, finally figured out I was an officer, and said in an unfriendly tone: “Sir, where is your hat?” I said one word; Laos. He then proceeded to give me a ticket for being out of uniform.”⁷ It was a humorous end to an unforgettable experience.

Captain Verhees later wrote a letter in which he said; *“It was a frightening experience, but with the survival training we get and a touch of luck, anyone can make it. The rescuemen saved my life. I will never forget you. I’ll buy Jolly crews drinks any time, any place.”⁸*

¹ 39 ARRS Mission Report # 1-3-32, 13 April 1968. Written by Captain Lyndon J. Stretton. In USAF Collection, AFHRA catalog # K318.221-39

² Post Mission Debriefing Notes, April 1968. Written by Captain Donald L. Verhees. From the personal collection of Donald L. Verhees and Letter from Donald L. Verhees to Robert L. LaPointe, 3 April 2000

³ 39 ARRS Mission Report # 1-3-32 and 7th Air Force Staff Summary Sheet, 13 April 1968, Subject – Aircraft Loss, 13 April 1968. In USAF Collection , AFHRA

⁴ 39 ARRS Mission Report and 37th ARRS Mission Report, 13 April 1968. Written by Captain Harvie L. Stringer. In USAF Collection, AFHRA catalog # K318.221-37

⁵ Post Mission Debriefing Notes, April 1968. Written by Captain Donald L. Verhees.

⁶ 37th ARRS Mission Report

⁷ Letter from Donald L. Verhees to Robert L. LaPointe, 3 April 2000

⁸ Ibid.