

Jolly 23 RIP

9 June 1968 started off normally enough, but before this day would end, a lot of good men would die. HC-130 Crown 1 was at the Tango orbit point over Laos passing gas to the airborne alert HH-3 Jolly Green Giants based at NKP. The aerial refueling was interrupted at 10:26 a.m. by a radio call from Cricket. This call came from a C-130 that was performing airborne command and control of air strikes going in on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Cricket informed Crown that a USMC A-4, call sign Hellborne 215, had been shot down by ground fire at 220° for 37 miles off of the Hue Phu Bai TACAN. This placed the downed pilot on the Laos, South Vietnam border almost directly due west of DaNang Air Base. The SAR area was in the infamous A Shau Valley, a known enemy base area and strong point.



The A-4 Skyhawk was a small single seat light attack jet flown by both land and carrier based USN and USMC aviation units. The downed A-4 had been flown by 1st Lt. Walter Schmidt who was assigned to VMA-121 MAG-12 based out of Chu Lai AB. His mission was close air support for US troops. At 10:20, after making a bombing attack on enemy forces, his aircraft was hit by ground fire. The lieutenants ejection was observed by several other A-4's in his flight and they watched his parachute open, descend to the ground, and get hung up in trees. They immediately established radio contact with him and told him that air rescue had been notified and was on the way. Lt. Schmidt radioed back that he had a broken leg and arm and was unable to move from where he had landed.



File = A-4 Skyhawk USMC fm: USMC Museum Photo

Because he was directly under his parachute, the downed pilot's position was easily seen by overhead aircraft. He had unfortunately landed only a few yards away from a road. This meant that if the enemy knew where he was they could easily move to his position. A steep hill overlooked the site and a deep ravine was just below him. The entire area was hostile and small arms plus antiaircraft artillery continually fired at aircraft that were protecting the downed airman. Crown 1 was aware that a fast SAR offered the best chance of recovery of Lt. Schmidt. The AMC on Crown was Maj. Karuana. The closest rescue aircraft were on ground alert at DaNang. The AMC ordered them to scramble.

Lt. Schmidt's wingman switched their radios to "guard" frequency to coordinate their teammates rescue. Guard frequency was 243.0 and it was installed in all of the handheld survival radios and beacons carried by aircrews in their survival gear. The Skyhawks over the SAR area radioed requests for SAR, transmitted information to the survivor, and talked amongst themselves about how they could best protect their teammate until rescue could arrive. These transmissions were overheard by other aircraft flying combat missions that day. Several of them spontaneously diverted to support the SAR. They included several FAC's using the call signs of Covey and Trail. The FAC's were in contact with Crown and agreed to coordinate close air support to protect the survivor until the Sandy's arrive. Covey 265 began to direct fighter strikes against antiaircraft artillery and any ground forces that were moving in the direction of the survivor

At DaNang Air Base, rescuemen were at their squadron operations buildings that were located adjacent to the flight line and within easy running distance to where their aircraft were parked. Before sunrise, they had received a combined intelligence / weather briefing and were given maps and code sheets. Then the crews picked up their survival gear that included flight helmets, gas masks, body armor, parachutes, water jug and survival vests. The last stop before heading out to their aircraft for the day was the armory; where they picked up and loaded their pistols and put them into holsters. Then the armorer gave each helicopter crewman a GUA/5 rifle and ammo for it in 20 or 30 round magazines. All of this gear was lugged out to their assigned aircraft and positioned for fast use. Maintenance troops had already inspected the aircraft to ensure that it was properly fueled, that aircraft weapons were installed, and that their bird was ready to fly. These support personnel took their work very seriously and had worked long hours the night before. They were keenly aware that mistakes on their part could cost lives; so they checked and then double checked everything that was humanly possible. When the aircrew arrived at the aircraft, the crew preflighted and configured it to allow them to get airborne in minimum time. Finally, everyone headed back to their respective work areas where they waited.

Being on ground SAR alert resulted in mixed emotions among the aircrews. The guys who had been in country for a few months and flown some combat SAR's generally relaxed. The new guys waited more nervously. They knew they were well trained but had concerns about how they would perform in combat. Those readers who have never flown in combat would probably think the biggest fear would be of being killed. While that

concern was certainly in the back of ones mind, the biggest fear of most air rescue men has was that of them letting down their fellow airmen by not doing their job when the “shit hit the fan.” At 10:25 a.m. the scramble klaxon sounded and whatever concerns each man had was replaced by adrenalin as they raced to their aircraft. They quickly donned flight and survival gear, started engines and notified the tower that they needed to takeoff. The airfield control tower immediately gave the rescue aircraft priority handling and gave them permission to taxi and take off. It was always a race between the HH-3 Jolly Green helicopter crews and the A-1 Skyraider pilots to see who could get off first. The time from scramble to takeoff rarely exceeded more than a few minutes.

Jolly 22 was low bird and Jolly 23 was their high bird. The low birds crew was ...
the high bird was crewed by ...