

The Search for Jolly Green 23

Narratives

Trail 33 (FAC):

I remember it [Hellborne 215 parachute] being on the north side of the east west section of road that ran into Laos and it was hung up in a tree. I never actually saw the A-4 pilot but understood he was in the bushes next to the chute and was injured and could not move. I also heard the A-4 pilot answer the E&E questions, all four of them were presented back to back, and thought it was dumb to do it that way because we no longer had a way to verify who he was. After the fighters had put down suppression ordinance Jolly Green 23 said he was going in for an attempted pick up. JG23 went into a hover over the A-4 pilot and turned to face the west. The PJ was on the wire being lowered when JG23 reported he was taking fire. I saw fire coming out of the left side near the engine and told JG23 that he had a fire on the left side. He started pulling out and I advised him that there was a clearing 1000 meters North if he had to set down. He said he was going for the clearing. The fire appeared to extinguish and I advised JG23 of that. He said he was going to set it down as he reached the clearing. He was in a descent but still above the height of the trees along the edge of the clearing when the main rotor stopped turning. The JG hit the ground and burst into flames that consumed anything that looked like an A/C.

Lt. Col Robert C. Dubois, USAF (Ret.)
Written February 1, 2002

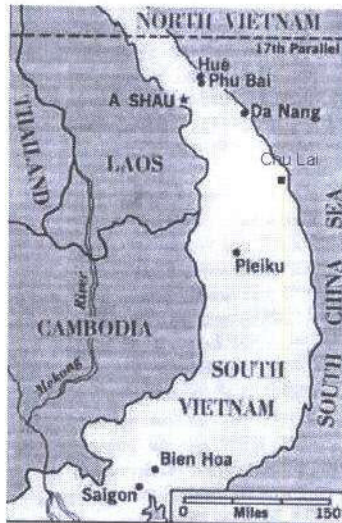
SAR Task Force Logs

The following links are to copies of the actual declassified logs maintained by the HC-130 airborne SAR control aircraft, callsign *Crown*, on June 9, 1968. Because they were written in near-real time, the details contained in them differ from the after-action reports written when the participants had time to collect their thoughts.

Log from *Crown 01* Log from *Crown 02*

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 ...

There was something different about the morning of June 9, 1968. As Doug McGill walked toward the Jolly Green 23 helicopter at Da Nang Air Base, he saw his best friend Sgt. Jim Locker handing over his personal effects to members of the ground crew. That had never happened before.

Jim Locker, a graduate of the Sidney High School class of 1965, had been in Vietnam as a USAF Pararescueman for almost eleven months. Only six weeks remained of his twelve-month tour. He and McGill had just returned the day before from a ten-day 'rest and recreation' leave that had carried them to some of the most exotic spots in Asia. It was time off well earned.

Locker had arrived at Da Nang in July 1967 after completing over a year of pararescue technician training that took him to Florida, Georgia, Texas and Washington. His best friend during this intensive training was Don Johnson, who also served as a Pararescueman in Vietnam. They honed their skills as parachute jumpers, scuba swimmers, medical technicians and jungle survivalists.

The job of a pararescue jumper, or 'PJ,' was one of the most dangerous in the Air Force. Rescue teams composed of a pilot, copilot, flight engineer and a PJ manned the Jolly Green HH3E helicopters. It was their mission to rescue pilots shot down by the enemy. Sgt. Locker and other PJs manned an M-60 machine gun, but more importantly, operated a 250-foot cable that was lowered to the pilot on the ground. A ride on the cable through the jungle canopy in search of a wounded flyer was a harrowing and common experience. Doug McGill recalled the ride down and back up "took forever, especially while trying to dodge small arms fire."

Locker's parents, Robert and Dorothy, remember he was always inspired to help others. "After our son graduated from high school in 1965, he went on a missionary trip to Mexico with Reverend Tyler of the Church of the Brethren," Mrs. Locker recalled. "He knew he would be drafted, so he enlisted in the Air Force, where he could get special training."

His desire to serve others and a drive to be the best was evident to those around him. McGill recalled, "Jim was the most professional guy I ever met. He was all mission. We had a good time afterward, but he was the best under fire." McGill reminisced recently about their missions together. "Jim and I worked on many medi-vac flights together, tending the wounded. He treated the enemy the same as he did our guys." Don Johnson, who now resides in Hawaii, echoed the same thoughts. "Jimmy was a gentle soul, and one who would do anything to help someone else."

Doug approached Jim Locker as he was handing over his personal effects to the ground crew on the morning of June 9, 1968. "We talked, and I will never forget his last comment to me. He said, 'This is what it's all about...this is what we do.' He was so calm about it all."

The service record of Sgt. Locker reveals the extraordinary lengths to which he took calmness and bravery. The Air Force awarded him the Distinguished Flying Cross for a mission on Christmas Day in 1967 when he

helped save, then treated, two downed pilots. He won the Silver Star for gallantry on March 14, 1968, for attempting to rescue a pilot on three separate occasions until his chopper, riddled with fire, was unable to continue.

A May 4th incident, where he rescued two Special Forces soldiers as his aircraft was again heavily damaged, netted him another Silver Star. Sgt. Locker also received a total of eight Air Medals for distinguished service in his eleven months in Vietnam. Several of these were for individual missions. He was presented two Purple Hearts for wounds sustained in action and several medals from the Republic of South Vietnam, including the Cross of Gallantry.

His superiors noticed the extraordinary courage of Sgt. Locker. The officer in charge of his unit, Capt. Edward Hutchinson, wrote to his parents on April 14, 1968. The unsolicited letter commends their son's knowledge, professionalism and courage. Capt. Hutchinson ended his letter with a bit of cultural commentary.

“With all the hippies, flower children, and protesters,
a young man like Jim restores my faith in his generation.”

The PJs never discussed their commendations. Friends Doug McGill and Don Johnson only recently became aware of the extent of Jim Locker's medals. Doug said, “We never talked about it. Jim flew well over 100 missions, and we just did our job, survived, prayed, and woke up to another day,” he recalled.

Sgt. Locker and Sgt. McGill were at the NCO Club the night of June 8 when someone approached Locker, reminding him he had a mission the next morning. The men left immediately.

The mission briefing the morning of June 9 revealed that a Marine Corps pilot, 1st Lt Walter Schmidt, had been shot down and was missing in action. Voice contact was established, and the pilot reported he had a broken arm and leg. The site was next to the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, and enemy troops had circled the area.

A sister helicopter, the Jolly Green 22, tried to get to the crash site, but ground fire drove the bird away repeatedly. When it turned back because of low fuel, Jolly Green 23, carrying Sgt. Locker, moved in. Intense hostile fire drove the aircraft back, but it returned with assistance. Escorting gunships tried to suppress the enemy ground fire as Jolly Green 23 hovered above the Marine pilot on the ground.

Bullets riddled the fuselage of the HH3E. Sgt. Locker manned the left gunner's position of the copter, spraying M-60 machine gun fire and waiting for the signal to descend into the hail of bullets and rescue the pilot. He never got the chance.

Jolly Green 23, laced with rounds of fire, lost power and was trying to land when it was hit by a rocket propelled grenade, exploded, and crashed into the hillside below. The resulting fireball told everyone these heroes would not walk away from this scene. All four members of the crew perished.

Doug McGill knew within a half hour after the mission began that something was wrong. "We heard they crashed. Everyone in our unit was crushed. Jim was such a great guy."

Don Johnson was on another mission 150 miles away when he received word of the crash. "I asked permission to fly directly to the Jolly Green 23 crash site, but the command refused. I promised myself right then that I would never rest until I brought Jimmy home to his parents," Master Sgt. Johnson recalled.

The passage of time has not dulled the sense of loss for McGill. "He was my best friend. We had just finished R&R the day before." One image is as sharp in McGill's mind as it was on that hot June morning in 1968. "I still will never forget Jim calmly handing out his personal effects. He was going about his business, and then he was gone."

His parents received a third Silver Star posthumously for his heroism in the incident that cost him his life. Sgt. Jim Locker became the only USAF pararescueman in the Vietnam Conflict to earn three Silver Stars in one tour in country. It is believed the awards he earned in eleven months of service in Vietnam were more than any other military person accumulated in the history of Shelby County.

Jim Locker died doing what he like to do best, and that was helping people. His personal creed was that of the pararescuer. It states as follows:

It is my duty as a Pararescueman to
save a life and to aid the injured.
I will perform my assigned duties
quickly and efficiently,
placing these duties before
personal desires and comforts.

These things I do,
"That Others May Live."

The others who did live and returned to the states vowed never to give up the search for their comrades. Chief among them were Jim's good friends, Master Sgts. Doug McGill and Don Johnson. They continued to gather information and contact witnesses over the intervening three decades, hoping that some day an opportunity would arise to locate the crash site and return the remains of the men to their families. The location of the site in Laos dimmed the prospects for recovery.

The men never gave up. Hope was rekindled on October 12, 1991, when a villager in the area of the crash turned in partial remains and the dog tag of Lt. Rittichier, Jolly Green 23's pilot. He was the first Coast Guardsman killed in the war, and the only one never accounted for.

As our government negotiated for the right to conduct a search for the Jolly Green 23 and crew, McGill kept up his own search. He located a witness to the crash in 1998 who remembered the exact location. Wartime maps were found of the area. Aerial photos were taken by an A1E Skyraider of the same area. These photos were compared with modern day satellite photos, de-enhanced to remove the vegetation and then compared to the earlier photos. Computers were used to re-enact the flight of Jolly Green 23. They thought the location had been pinpointed, but searches there in 1998-99 turned up nothing.

Johnson kept contacting the joint task force investigating crash sites, reminding them about Jolly Green 23. His persistence paid off. A task force group was flying over the area in November 2002 when one of the investigators suggested they land near a small village. The pilot replied that they had stopped there, but the investigator persisted. The village chief denied knowing about any nearby crash site, but when the investigator asked about *helicopter* crash sites, the chief nodded his head and took them to the site of the Jolly Green 23, only a half-mile away. It was November 9, 2002.

The remains of the crewmembers were repatriated to U.S. soil on February 14, 2003. Don Johnson was there when the C5A touched down at Hickam Field in Hawaii. "It was an incredibly moving ceremony, especially for me personally." Many former POWs were in the audience, as the date coincided with the 30th anniversary of the release of American prisoners from the Hanoi Hilton.

The family of Jim Locker hopes his long journey home will be over soon. By his side when that time comes will be his parents, and good friends Doug McGill and Don Johnson. They will accompany him home to his parents, fulfilling promises both men made thirty-five years ago.

Jim Locker would not have wanted it any other way.

Robert LaPointe

From: Doug McGill [pjdj@worldnet.att.net]
Sent: Friday, October 03, 2003 6:10 PM
To: Jim Morris; DuGuay Michelle D. Maj; rlapointe@gci.net
Subject: RE: Jim Locker

Michelle,

The article was written by Rich Wallace. Rich is a member of the Shelby County Historical Society, an author and practicing attorney, who lives in Sidney, Ohio. His e-mail address is : "richnsus" <richnsus@bright.net> .

Respectfully,

Douglas J. McGill Jr., USAF Pararescue, Retired, (66-87)
 37th ARRS, DaNang,RSV, (67-68)

At 08:39 AM 10/03/2003 -0600, you wrote:
 >>>>

Michelle ~

No, I don't know. Maybe Doug McGill or Bob LaPointe knows?

~ Jim Morris, <mailto:me@JimMorris.net>me@JimMorris.net

 >From: "DuGuay Michelle D. Maj" >To: 'Jim Morris' >Subject: RE: Jim Locker >Date: Fri, 3 Oct 2003 10:28:31 -0400 > >Jim, I am using this a Legacy article. We dedicated the Fall 01 Ed to Jim >Locker. Do you know who wrote this? I need to give credit. > > >VR/ Major Michelle DuGuay > >-----
 Original Message----- >From: Jim Morris [mailto:morris8169@msn.com] >Sent: Sunday, September 21, 2003 11:42 AM >To: Doug McGill; Maj. Michelle DuGuay >Subject: Fw: Jim Locker > > > >

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10/5/2003