

It was dark and Reeves would try to slip the aircraft in while landing hoping to force the damaged gear into the locked position. This slip or “crab” landing might generate enough shock to move the gear into the locked position. Also, Reeves would try to use the tail hook to catch the emergency barricade wire to prevent the aircraft from sliding off to one or the other side of the runway. The crab landing and catching the barricade had to be executed at the same time to force the unlocked gear down. Reeves declared:

I executed the landing perfectly, the gear was pushed into a full down position and the tail hook stopped him right on the spot. I considered it the best landing I have ever made. After checking the aircraft, we found over 200 bullet holes, the underside of the right wing was blackened from the explosion and there were only a few shrapnel holes there, but one of the shells had hit the uplock [up-lock] and broken [broke] it, causing the gear to drop down.²⁸⁶

Duty at DaNang was different from that at the home base at Pleiku. Crew chiefs were allowed much more freedom while off station. There were so few maintainers there that they worked together when possible. The teamwork and camaraderie may have been built out of necessity, but everyone worked to help the other. Weapons load team members helped launch and recover Skyraiders during scrambles. They often stood as fire guards and helped move the aircraft after flights. Crew chiefs helped the weapons load team reload the aircraft. Both worked together at the end of runway when aircraft received a “last chance” inspection and had all weapons safety pins removed. The team work and camaraderie was evident as everyone worked to make the SAR rescue mission successful. No one was left out.²⁸⁷

Hellborn 20 became a major SAR effort and began during the evening of July 25, 1968. Hellborn 20 was a United States Marine Grumman A-6 Intruder. The aircraft carried a two man

²⁸⁶ Reeves interview, 55.

²⁸⁷ Author’s recollection.

crew, Major Curtis Lawson, pilot, and Captain Paul G. Brown, bombardier /navigator. The Intruder was shot down in North Vietnam, about thirty-two miles north of the DMZ. It had been attacking North Vietnamese truck traffic and was heavily damaged by multiple antiaircraft hits.²⁸⁸

The DaNang Skyraider detachment scrambled all three aircraft. The Spads joined and escorted two Jolly Green helicopters north. The Spads and Jolly Greens held off about five to ten miles west of Hellborn 20's position. Two Sandy's (any NKP Skyraider in a SAR effort) worked over the rescue site and when would call in the Spads and SAR helicopters. About this time, one of the two Sandy aircraft took several hits and suspended the rescue. The Spads and Jolly Greens were told to "go home and have lunch."²⁸⁹

The Spads, helicopters, and Sandy Skyraiders returned to DaNang. Sandy lead, Major Hale's aircraft, had significant damage so he climbed into his wingman's A-1E and flew back to NKP for another Skyraider. After lunch the Spads returned to the rescue site. During the day, North American F-100 Misty fast FACS directed approximately two strikes every five minutes against enemy gun emplacements. Arriving into the rescue area, the Spads and Jolly Greens were advised to orbit because two Sandys were again working the site. When the Sandys expended their ordnance, the Spads replaced them and took over the rescue effort.²⁹⁰

The downed Marine had landed near an east-west running river. In spite of over 120 air strikes that day the North Vietnamese were still shooting at everything in the air. The Spad team

²⁸⁸ Dineen interview. (Major Dineen was part of the SAR effort on Hellborn 20. He was also involved in reconstruction of the rescue effort at an Air Rescue Society briefing on the SAR effort. Numerous letters were provided by Major Dineen including those from Curtis Lawson, Alan (Ed) Hale, Misty FACS Ron Furtak, Bud Bacon, Dave Jenny, and Dick Rutan.)

²⁸⁹ Dineen interview.

²⁹⁰ Dineen interview.

expended all their ordnance and was relieved by two Sandy aircraft. Within ten minutes of the Spads' departure, the Sandys called in the two Jolly Green helicopters and recovered the downed pilot. When the Spad pilots met the SAR helicopter, the Marine pilot looked like a wrinkled prune—he had spent almost 24 hours in the water. Major Dineen added, “But he was a very happy prune!” During the Hellborn 20 SAR effort, 38 F-4s, 11 F-105s, five A-6s, two A-4s, and seven A-7s were involved, for a total of 63 support aircraft. Additionally, 4 Misty FACS were used and an estimated 14 primary SAR aircraft to make a grand total of 81 aircraft. The effort lasted 10 hours and a total of 118 tons of ordnance. Regrettably, Marine Captain Paul G. Brown was captured and held as a POW. He was released on March 14, 1973.²⁹¹

Major Dineen recalled another SAR mission near A Shau Valley in August 1968. Downed aviators were on the ground in the bottom of a rocky valley. Although he could not recall the downed pilot's call sign, while attending a SAR Society meeting, he met an Army helicopter pilot who recalled the mission. The Army pilot explained while approaching the rescue site, he observed North Vietnamese antiaircraft gunners lined up along one side of the valley's ridge line. The gunners had left their 37-millimeter guns and watched the Skyraiders fly below their position down in the valley. Luckily, positioning of the emplacements did not allow the gunners to depress the gun barrels down enough to take the SAR team under direct antiaircraft fire. Also, had the Skyraiders flown up and out of the valley, they would have been easy targets for the North Vietnamese gun crews. Major Dineen stated, “I never was aware of the North Vietnamese antiaircraft gun positions above and had decided to stay in the valley rather than climb up and out.”²⁹²

²⁹¹ Dineen interview and PH633SOW, Volume I, July – September 1968, 22.

²⁹² Dineen interview.