

During one of the early assignments at DaNang, around August 1968, maintainers suggested the Skyraider be armed with three SUU-11/A mini-gun pods instead of one normally carried on the left wing pylon. The weapons load team was behind the suggestion, as pilots often stated they could use the pods' capabilities to suppress enemy fire. The plan was to mount three mini-gun pods on one small triple ejector rack. The three pods fit without problems, but the whole assembly, when installed on the wing pylon, did not clear the outboard landing gear door. When asked if the doors could be removed, the answer was a definite "No!" It never mattered to the maintainers that the Air Force had not tested or approved of the proposed field modification. They worked as part of the team and tried to provide an answer to a team member's request.²⁹³

Another SAR effort occurred off Tiger Island in the middle of October 1968. The Skyraiders scrambled, headed north, and were advised that a rescue helicopter was shot down. It took the Skyraiders about 45 minutes to arrive at the scene. A small Navy plane orbited the area and was glad to hand off to the Skyraiders since that was their job. Besides the Navy aircraft had received heavy fire from the island's guns and did not have anything with which to fight back.²⁹⁴ The Skyraiders were told that beside the helicopter crew (pilot, co-pilot flight engineer, and PJ), there were also two pilots from a McDonnell F-4C Phantom who were being picked up when the helicopter had been hit by enemy fire. Reeves recalled "I learned later that the pilots fell back into the water and the helicopter landed on them."²⁹⁵ Now, there were six downed airmen close to shore. It would be another 50 minutes before two other SAR helicopters arrived.²⁹⁶

²⁹³ Author's recollection.

²⁹⁴ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 8.

²⁹⁵ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, Letter of Appreciation from Donald R. D'Amico, Lt. Col, USAF, F-4 pilot rescued, Number 4.

²⁹⁶ Reeves, interview, 55.

The Skyraiders flew over the floating helicopter. During the flyover, two life rafts were observed. They had separated, and did not move closer to the island, but were within machine gun range and the new rescue helicopter would be vulnerable when they picked up the crews. The Skyraiders made a pass at the gun positions to see what response they could get. Reeves recalled that he could see several areas where guns were blinking, an indication of gunfire, but none used tracers. After several passes, the Skyraiders pulled out of gun range, but remained where they could quickly respond if the North Vietnamese started shooting at the rafts. During this orbit, Reeves observed a mortar round destroy the floating helicopter. He knew from past experience that the gunners were accurate and this would be a challenging rescue.²⁹⁷

The Skyraiders' arsenal included white phosphorous smoke rockets so they could lay down a smoke screen, but one thing made it difficult. The wind was blowing 20 to 30 miles per hour and any smoke would be quickly dissipated. Reeves requested through the Airborne Command and Control (ACC) aircraft additional fighters to help suppress the antiaircraft gun positions. The ACC aircraft, a specially modified Lockheed C-130 Hercules, had already lined up 26 other strike aircraft, 13 pairs, with all kinds of ordnance, to help during the rescue. Reeves first directed some to work on the big guns and the rest to stand by until the Spads marked machine gun and mortar positions so they could be eliminated. The Skyraiders fired white phosphorous smoke rockets where they wanted the fighters to place their bombs, but the wind was blowing so hard the smoke almost immediately disappeared. The attacking aircraft could not "hit my smoke" as it blew away too quickly.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁷ Reeves interview, 55.

²⁹⁸ Reeves interview, 55.

When the rockets did not work, Reeves changed the plan. He requested the fighters to watch him as he descended to about 100 feet over the guns and where he turned away; they place their bombs on that turn point. However, Reeves had to repeat the low passes ten more times. The North Vietnamese gunners still did not use tracers. There were too many aircraft striking the gun sites and tracers helped pinpoint their location. Reeves and his wingman, Dave Henson, were the only ones the enemy opened fire on during their low altitude passes.²⁹⁹

The helicopters were approaching the area so Reeves and Henson selected CBU-22 to establish a smoke screen. The CBU-22 dispensed smoke bomblets and each Skyraider carried six sets of the weapons.³⁰⁰ Both pilots set their armament panels to discharge individual smoke bomblets one tube at a time until the six tubes were empty. Delivery had to be accurate or the smoke cloud would not form correctly and the wind could disperse the screen. The time the smoke screen would exist was estimated to be approximately 20–30 seconds. The helicopters reported they were heading in to pick up the downed airmen under protection of the smoke screen. Fighters attacked the antiaircraft gun sites and helped ensure the helicopter could pick up the men in the water. Turning back after laying the smoke screen, Reeves saw the smoke break apart from the wind. As he watched his wingman turn off the target, the rescue helicopter notified everyone that it had picked up all the downed airmen and was returning to DaNang.

Reeves declared, “It was as good a mission as could be preformed.”³⁰¹ A few of the other aircraft had suffered some battle damage, but all were able to return to their own bases without problems. The pilot of the F-4, Don D’Amico, had been hurt when the helicopter fell on him,

²⁹⁹ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 8.

³⁰⁰ Reeves interview, 56.

³⁰¹ H633SOW, Volume II, October – December 1968, 9.