

Stormy 02 Bravo Rescue Mission – 18 January 1968

By Leland H. Sorensen

I was a pararescueman (PJ) assigned TDY to Udorn and had not been there a full four days when I was involved with my first real rescue mission on 18 January 1969. My permanent station was Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base (NKP), where the previous month I had been involved (as a secondary crew only) with a rescue mission on 25 December 1968 wherein Pararescueman Charles Douglas King had been lost. Charlie had slept in the bunk beneath mine at NKP. Other than that, the mission on 18 January was my first.

Having been trained back in the United States on the HH-3E with its two M-60 machine guns, I was relatively new to the HH-53 and its three mini-guns. Therefore, it was decided that I would be PJ #1, and the other, more experienced PJ on the helicopter (Leon Fullwood), would be PJ #2. He would be positioned on the ramp mini-gun. I would be stationed on the left window mini-gun and go down the hoist to retrieve the wounded survivor.

As we flew just above treetop level to move into the location of the downed survivor, we could hear and “feel” ground-fire. The flight engineer yelled over the intercom that we were taking hits. The pilot asked where we were hit. I turned from my position at the window mini-gun to look around the helicopter interior. I could not see any damage. The flight engineer stated that he could not see any hits as we continued on into where the survivor was located.

As we neared the clearing where the survivor had landed, the flight engineer, who stood in the open doorway, started to lower the jungle-penetrator seat. When our pilot announced that we were over the survivor, I turned around toward the door to get onto the hoist. It was then that I observed that the jungle-penetrator seat was already headed for the ground. Therefore, I returned to my station at the window gun. The seat reached the ground, and the flight engineer said that the survivor was not getting onto it. The pilot asked about our sending down the PJ. I told him that I could go down.

As I stood in the door of the helicopter, I could see the explosions from the bombs being dropped to secure our perimeter. When the jungle seat was back up to the helicopter door, I got on it and was lowered to the ground. The survivor’s major injuries were a broken right arm and a broken left leg. He was still in his parachute harness, lying backwards on his seat kit. I used my knife to cut the straps and parachute lines to free him from his now inflated parachute, which blew off toward the tree line as I cut the last line caught on his foot. I placed an inflatable splint

on his broken right arm, placed two of the fold-down arms of the jungle-penetrator seat up next to his seat kit, sat him up, and slid him onto the jungle seat. I placed a safety strap around his ribcage. I sat on the third arm of the jungle seat and signaled the flight engineer to hoist us up to the helicopter. I decided that his broken left leg could hang as he sat on the seat. This actually worked quite well until we were at the door of the helicopter.

At the door, the flight engineer pulled me backward into the helicopter door. This created a slight dilemma for my patient, since he was facing the helicopter in this position. After giving it some brief consideration, I decided that all I could do was rotate him around with the jungle-penetrator seat between us and lay him on the floor of the helicopter. This, of course, caused him no little discomfort to his broken leg. We decided to just leave him there on the floor for the flight to NKP. I gave him a shot of morphine, and we tried to make him comfortable.

After completing my 12-month tour in Thailand on 28 Nov 1969, I was sent to the Philippine Islands and stationed at Clark Air Base. It was there that I was awarded the Silver Star for my actions on 18 January 1969.

It was not until April 2002 that I was informed of the survivor's name—James Fegan. On 30 May 2002, we met (for a second time) at Dayton, Ohio, at a Combat Search and Rescue Society debriefing of the *Stormy 02 Bravo* mission. Today he is a medical doctor. He came to the debriefing with a video of combat footage, which I had never seen—taken that day by the photographer onboard our helicopter. Jim went down at about 1400 hours on 17 January 1969 near Tchepone, Laos. Due to the many enemy guns in the area (guarding the Ho Chi Minh Trail), it was not possible to rescue him until the next morning. His F-4 had taken hits, and a wing exploded. He remembered reaching for some maps to determine their location, and then waking up to find himself lying on the ground in a parachute. He received his injuries (bones broken in 11 places) when he was ejected at about 500 mph. Following his rescue, he spent many months in rehabilitation. Today he walks with a slight limp. His front-seater, Victor Arlon Smith, was never found and probably went into the ground still in his ejection seat.

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Second Revision of this story by Leland Sorenson

18 January 1969

By Leland H Sorensen

Written 20 April 2002

I was a pararescueman assigned TDY to Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base (stayed at Udorn Hotel). My permanent station was Nakhon Phanom RTAFB. I had left the United States at the end of November 1968, had gone to NKP, then to Clark Air Base in the Philippines for Jungle Survival School (7Dec68 to 18Dec68), back to NKP, and had then been assigned TDY to Udorn RTAFB (14Jan69 to 22Feb69). I had been involved (as a secondary crew) with the mission of 25 December 1968 wherein Charles D. King had been lost. Other than that, the mission on 18 Jan 69 was my first.

Having been trained back in the United States on the HH-3E, I was relatively new to the HH-53. It was, therefore, decided that I would be PJ#1 and the other, more experienced PJ on the crew would be PJ#2. He would have been more familiar with the mini-gun. The crew of Jolly Green 68 consisted of Kenneth Earnest (AC), Arthur Smith (CP), Howard Lord (FE), Leland Sorensen (PJ#1), Leon Fullwood (PJ#2), and Alfred Magill (Photog).

As we flew just above tree top level to move into the location of the downed survivor, we could hear and "feel" ground-fire. The flight engineer excitedly announced that we were taking hits. The pilot asked where we were hit. I turned from my station at the window mini-gun to look around the helicopter interior. I could not see any damage. To this day, I am not aware that our helicopter took any battle damage.

As we neared the clearing where the downed survivor was located, the flight engineer, who stood in the open doorway, started to lower the jungle-penetrator seat. When our pilot announced that we were over the survivor, I turned around toward the door to get on the hoist. It was then that I observed that the seat was halfway down to the ground. I, therefore, returned to my station at the window gun. The seat reached the ground and the flight engineer said that the survivor was not getting on the seat. The pilot asked about our sending down the PJ. I thought that was the plan all along.

When the jungle seat was back up to the helicopter door, I got on it and was lowered to the ground. The survivor had a broken arm and a broken leg. He was still in his parachute harness, leaning backwards on his seat kit. I used my knife to cut the straps and free him from his parachute, which blew off toward the jungle, having inflated in the rotor-wash. I placed an inflatable splint on his broken right arm, placed two of the fold-down arms of the jungle penetrator seat up next to his seat kit, sat him up, and slid him onto the penetrator. I placed a safety strap around his ribcage; I sat on the third arm of the penetrator seat and signaled the flight engineer to hoist us up to the helicopter.

At the door, the flight engineer pulled me backward into the helicopter door. This created a slight dilemma for my patient. He was facing the helicopter in this position. After giving it some brief consideration, I decided that all I could do was rotate him around and lay him on the floor of the helicopter. This, of course, caused him no little discomfort to his broken leg. We decided to just leave him there on the floor for the flight to NKP. I gave him some morphine and tried to make him comfortable.

Citation to Accompany the Award of
The Silver Star
To
Leland H. Sorensen

Airman First Class Leland H Sorensen distinguished himself by gallantry in connection with military operations against an opposing armed force as a Pararescue/Recovery Specialist on an HH-53B rescue helicopter in Southeast Asia on 18 January 1969. On that date, Airman Sorensen was a crewmember on a helicopter, which rescued a seriously injured pilot who had been shot down in a heavily fortified hostile area. Because of the nature of the pilot's injuries, medical attention was required before he could be moved. With complete disregard for his own personal safety, Airman Sorensen unhesitatingly exposed himself to heavy ground fire and descended the helicopter hoist to the injured man. For more than twenty minutes, he treated the injuries of the survivor, until he could finally be safely lifted into the helicopter. By his gallantry and devotion to duty, Airman Sorensen has reflected great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

It was not until April 2002 that I received information that the survivor's name was James Fegan. Today he is a medical doctor. He went down at about 1400 hours on 17 Jan 1969. He received his injuries (bones broken in 11 places) when he was ejected at about 500 mph. The front seater did not get out.

The Rescue of Bat 21 by Darrel Whitcomb on page 199 (paperback edition) states:

Post-1968, as it became clear that the United States was going to pull out of the war, SAR began to take on a life of its own, absorbing more technology and more firepower. Many of the rescues became, in fact, small individual battles. But these battles grew steadily in size, expenditure of resources, and intensity.

One such illustrative engagement took place on 17 January 1969. Stormy 02, an F-4, was shot down near Tchepone, in central Laos. Only the backseater, Stormy 02 Bravo, ejected. Over a period of several days, SAR and supporting forces battled enemy gunners before the survivor was rescued. In the process, several other aircraft were downed. One A-1 pilot was killed; the others were rescued. But the scope of the SAR was massive and dwarfed anything that had occurred up to this date: 70 A-1's were involved in the effort; 16 helicopters were utilized for the pickup attempts; 16 FAC aircraft directly participated, while many others supported the operations in some other way; 5 HC-130's were constantly on orbit to direct operations or refuel the helicopters. In all, 59 flights of fighters were put in to suppress ground fire and enemy activity. A total of 284 aircraft was involved.

Vietnam Air Losses United States Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps Fixed-Wing Aircraft Losses in Southeast Asia 1961-1973 by Chris Hobson (p172) has the following entries for 17 and 18 January 1969.

17 January 1969

F-4D 66-8773 390 TFS, 366 TFW, USAF, Da Nang
Capt Victor Arlon Smith (KIA)
1Lt J R Fegan (survived)

A Stormy FAC was lost when a flight of Phantoms was dispatched on an armed reconnaissance mission over southern Laos. The flight spotted an anti-aircraft gun position in a valley near Ban Vangthon and rolled in to bomb it. The aircraft was met by a light barrage of 37mm ground fire and Capt Smith's aircraft was hit, setting the wing on fire. The WSO ejected first, as was normal for the Phantom, but it is not known if Capt Smith ejected from the aircraft before it crashed. In a large-scale rescue effort 1Lt Fegan was eventually rescued by a USAF HH-53 but Capt Smith, who had served in the US Marine Corps before joining the USAF, was never found. The rescue of 1Lt Fegan was probably the most intensive rescue effort of the war so far involving 284 aircraft sorties over several days.

A-1H 52-134632 602 SOS, 56 SOW, USAF, Nakhon Phanom
Lt Col Lurried J Morris (survived)

About 90 minutes after Capt Smith's Phantom was shot down, a flight of Skyraiders was orbiting near the crash site providing RESCAP coverage for the SAR helicopters. One of the Skyraiders was hit by AAA at 5,500 feet and limped away a few miles to the south before Lt Col Morris ejected safely. He was picked up by a 40th ARRS rescue helicopter the following day although not before another helicopter had been shot down. Jolly Green 67 was an HH-53 (66-14430 of the 40th ARRS from Nakhon Phanom) that was taking part in the SAR mission for the Stormy FAC crew and Lt Col Morris. The helicopter was recovering Lt Col Morris when it was hit by intense ground fire, lost its hydraulic system and made a crash landing nine miles southeast of Tchepone, Laos. Pararescueman Sgt Thomas Pope was hit in the leg and was saved from falling out of the helicopter by his fellow PJ, Don Johnson. Minutes later Jolly Green 70 landed in the face of heavy ground fire and picked up everyone from Jolly Green 67 as well as Lt Col Morris. A little while later strike aircraft were ordered to destroy Jolly Green 67 to prevent the NVA from capturing it intact. Lt Col Morris was the CO of the 602nd SOS.

18 January 1969

A-1H 52-134588 602 SOS, 56 SOW, USAF, Nakhon Phanom
Capt Robert Franklin Coady

As the SAR effort to rescue Lt Col Morris and the Phantom crew continued, the 602nd lost another aircraft and its pilot. On the morning of the 18th four Skyraiders arrived on the scene a few miles south of Ban Kate. The flight attacked enemy troops in the area in the face of intense 37mm anti-aircraft fire. Capt Coady was seen in a shallow dive over the target when his aircraft was hit by AAA and crashed into a wooded hillside. He was not seen to eject from the aircraft. Robert Coady was declared dead in 1978. In July 1992 the crash site of this aircraft was investigated by a joint US/Laotian team that found a number of personal items in the wreckage but no remains.

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Thirty-three year reunion

These four men were all part of the Stormy 02 mission on Jan. 17 and 18, 1969. Pictured (l to r) are Tom Pope, DC Johnson, James Fegan and Leland Sorensen. Pope and Johnson were pararescuemen (PJs) on a different helicopter that became involved in the mission when another pilot went down in the rescue efforts to save James Fegan. Sorensen was the PJ that went down and brought Fegan to safety.



Loading patient James Fegan



Leland Sorensen on 01-18-69



Sorensen receives Silver Star

Pararescue Creed

“It is my duty, as a member of the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service, to save life and to aid the injured. I will be prepared at all times to perform my assigned duties quickly and efficiently, placing these duties before personal desires and comforts. These things I do – that others may live.” ARRS Code

An Independence Day salute to American military personnel

Heroes come in all shapes and sizes. Many times a person who has performed a heroic deed feels that they have not done anything extraordinary, anything that someone else wouldn't have done under similar circumstances. But that doesn't change the fact that something exceptional has taken place, something that we can all learn from and admire.

Interwoven into Aberdeen's history are the stories of many of its citizens who have performed acts of heroism. In honor of Independence Day, this article has been written to honor the many heroic men and women from Aberdeen who have served, or are currently serving, their country in the armed forces.

The account related here occurred to Leland Sorensen in January 1969 as he served as a pararescueman in the Vietnam War. It is the story of one man's efforts to save the life of a fellow soldier, but it reflects the acts of so many others who have served this country honorably and in many instances given their lives to defend her!

Leland Sorensen left the United States to serve his country in the Vietnam War as a PJ, or pararescueman, at the end of November in 1968. His permanent station was at the Nakhon Phanom (NKP) Royal Thai Air Force Base located along Thailand's eastern border with Laos.

A PJ is a military emergency medical technician (EMT) that is called upon to help with rescue operations. The large green helicopters that the PJs used during the Vietnam War earned them the nickname of “Jolly Green Giants.”

During rescue missions, additional aircraft would accompany the Jolly Green Giants to help direct rescue efforts, suppress hostile enemy fire from the ground and perform midair refueling of the helicopters. If a plane was shot down, survivors knew that the “Green Giants” and their support team would do everything in their power to rescue them.

Rescue efforts on January 17 and 18, 1969 involved a total of 284 aircraft. In a war that didn't always make sense, rescuing your fellow countrymen was something that did make sense.

On January 17, 1969 at 1400 hours, Stormy 02, an F-4 aircraft, was shot down near Tchepone, in central Laos. Tchepone was the most heavily bombed area on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. James Fegan, who was sitting in the back seat of the aircraft, was the only pilot that got out of the plane before it crashed. Although alive, he had been knocked unconscious after being ejected from the airplane at 500 miles per hour. The mission became known as the Stormy 02 mission.

When Fegan regained consciousness, he found that he had been seriously injured. His left leg was bent awkwardly beneath his ejection seat. Although he could move the fingers on his left hand, he found that his left shoulder had been injured and that he could not move his right arm. Later examination would show that Fegan had broken bones in eleven places, eight of them in his right arm.

After considerable effort, the injured pilot was able to use the fingers on his left hand to “walk” his hand up his chest in order to radio for help. Rescue efforts that day, however, proved to be unsuccessful and Fegan, who could hear the voices of enemy soldiers close by, was forced to wait until first light the next day for rescue efforts to resume.

The next day, January 18, PJ Leland Sorensen and his fellow crewmen set out on a mission to rescue the downed pilot. Because Sorensen was relatively new to the operations of the different stations on the HH-53 helicopter the crew was flying, it was decided that the other PJ on board would man the mini-gun to help provide cover while Sorensen was lowered into the jungle to rescue the injured Fegan.

Sorensen explains what the situation was like when they arrived at Fegan’s position. “As we flew just above treetop level to move into the location of the downed survivor, we could hear and ‘feel’ ground-fire. As we neared the clearing where the downed survivor was located, the flight engineer, who stood in the open doorway, started to lower the jungle-penetrator seat.”

The jungle-penetrator was a special rescue tool that had three arms or seats on it. The seats were specially designed to fold up so that the penetrator could be lowered from a hoist on the helicopter through the thick foliage and trees of the Laotian jungle.

When the seat reached the ground, the flight engineer reported that the survivor was not getting onto the seat. It was then determined that Sorensen would be sent down to assist the injured pilot.

Sorensen recalls, “When the jungle seat was back up to the helicopter door, I got on it and was lowered to the ground. The survivor had a broken arm and a broken leg. He was still in his parachute harness, leaning backwards on his seat [survival] kit. I used my knife to cut the straps and free him from his parachute, which blew off toward the jungle, having inflated in the rotor-wash [created by the hovering helicopter].”

“I placed an inflatable splint on his broken arm, placed two of the fold-down arms of the jungle penetrator seat up next to his seat kit, sat him up, and slid him onto the penetrator. I placed a safety strap around his ribcage. I sat on the third arm of the penetrator seat and instructed the flight engineer to hoist us up to the helicopter.”

When the two men reached the door, the flight engineer pulled Sorensen backward into the helicopter first. As Sorensen explains, “This created a slight dilemma for my patient.”

“He was facing the helicopter in [a rather awkward] position. After giving it some brief consideration, I decided that all I could do was rotate him around and lay him on the floor of the helicopter. This, of course, caused him no little discomfort to his broken leg. We decided to just leave him there on the floor for the flight to NKP. I gave him some morphine and tried to make him comfortable.”

For his actions on that day in 1969, Leland H Sorensen was given the Silver Star. The citation that accompanied the award reads:

“Airman First Class Leland H Sorensen distinguished himself by gallantry in connection with military operations against an opposing armed force as a Pararescue/Recover Specialist on an HH-53B rescue helicopter in Southeast Asia on January 18, 1969. On that date, Airman Sorensen was a crewmember on a helicopter, which rescued a seriously injured pilot who had been shot down in a heavily fortified hostile area. Because of the nature of the pilot’s injuries, medical attention was required before he could be moved. With complete disregard for his own personal safety, Airman Sorensen unhesitatingly exposed himself to heavy ground fire and descended the helicopter hoist to the injured man. For more than twenty minutes, he treated the injuries of the survivor, until he could finally be safely lifted into the helicopter. By his gallantry and devotion to duty, Airman Sorensen has reflected great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.”

It was not until thirty-three years later, when Sorensen was invited to a military debriefing on the Stormy 02 mission, that he learned the name of the rescued man, James Fegan. Even though they spent twenty minutes on the ground together under enemy fire, they never knew each other's names. Sorensen also learned that Fegan had spent eight months in a military hospital for rehabilitation following his rescue. It was the events of January 17 and 18, along with the rehabilitation, that effected Fegan's decision to become a medical doctor in rehabilitation.

The main purpose of the military debriefings are to discuss what worked and didn't work in fighting the Vietnam War so that those working in the military now can benefit from their experiences then. There are parallels between the Vietnam War and the war now going on in Afghanistan.

Sorensen and Fegan were reunited when they both attended the debriefing that was held near Dayton, Ohio on June 1 of this year. There aren't words for the feelings that came to Sorensen and Fegan when they had the chance to meet again. It was a very emotional experience.

One pararescueman in attendance on June 1 described his feelings this way. "The bond between those who served together will always be there." Anyone who has served together in the military, regardless of when or where, will probably feel the same way.

Sorensen really doesn't consider himself to be a hero for his efforts on that day. Rather, he feels he was just doing his duty. But as America celebrates Independence Day, a salute goes out to him and to all others like him who have so dutifully served their country and preserved its rights, privileges, and freedoms. Thank you for your humble heroism.