

SEARCH AND RESCUE

57-mm antiaircraft gunners shot down and killed the on-scene commander, Sandy Low lead. The whole effort to rescue the F-4 pilot seemed in jeopardy. Any attempt to use the Jolly Greens would have been suicidal. The only hope of success seemed to be with the use of riot control munitions. A-1s, loaded with CBU-19, took off from Pleiku Air Base, Vietnam, and reached the A Shau Valley half an hour later. Braving the constant hail of antiaircraft fire, the Skyraiders made the required mile-long run at 300 feet and 220 knots to hit all their targets — enemy antiaircraft gun positions. While the gunners choked, coughed, cried, and retched uncontrollably, a Jolly Green, with its crew wearing gas masks swooped in and saved the pilot.⁶³

Though classic recovery tactics such as those described earlier remained basically the same, each mission required innovation and the application of varying amounts of aerial firepower. Rescue efforts generally took precedence over normal strike missions and aircraft were often diverted from their assigned targets to support the A-1s and rescue choppers. On one mission in December 1969, 336 sorties were flown over a three-day period to help rescue forces recover a navigator evading capture near Ban Phanop, Laos, just outside Tchepone. In addition to the A-1 and Jolly Green sorties, the Air Force used fifty F-105, forty-three F-4, four F-100, plus assorted O-1 and O-2 sorties. The Navy contributed a number of A-6 and A-7 sorties.⁶⁴

Any friendly airplane in the sky might be diverted to drop bombs in support of a search and rescue mission. Col. William M. Harris, IV, commander of the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron in 1971 and 1972, noted, "During my tour rescue efforts have called upon every conceivable military resource as well as . . . Air America, special ground teams, clandestine operations, frogmen, aircraft carriers, tanks, and so on. There is no limitation on tactics or concepts to be employed to effect a rescue."⁶⁵

In the summer of 1969 the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service's strength in Southeast Asia peaked with a high of seventy-one rescue aircraft operating in four squadrons under the 3d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group. The 37th and 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadrons, at Da Nang and Udorn respectively, were responsible for aircrew recoveries over North and South Vietnam as well as Laos. The 38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron had its headquarters at Tan Son Nhut. With detachments at fourteen bases throughout South Vietnam and Thailand, they were responsible for local base rescue with aircrew recovery as a secondary mission. Finally, the 39th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron operated eleven HC-130Ps from its base at Tuy Hoa.⁶⁶

Force levels remained steady into 1970 when withdrawals began as politicians sought a negotiated end to the conflict. There were technological improvements to be made, as the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service strived to achieve a truly workable night recovery system. Nevertheless, in