

22Feb69 F-4 SAR Laos

by Christopher Robbins, Asia Books Bangkok Thailand, 2000, p.

Christopher Robbins, The Ravens – Pilots of the Secret War in Laos, (Bangkok: Asia Books, 2000), p. 179-182

The Raven watched the first fighter enter its run and saw the bombs drop, but just as the Phantom was beginning to pull off it started to come apart. It was incomprehensible. There had been no ground fire, or even reports of anti-aircraft guns capable of taking a jet out of the sky at 3,500 feet, but the plane had turned into a ball of smoke.

Inside the cockpit of the F-4, Mike Heenan, the co-pilot, had got on the stick the moment he sensed something was wrong. He heard the pilot grunt, as if he were also fighting to get the aircraft under control. They were diving fast, but an aerodynamic nose rise made it seem as if the plane might be recovering. Not until they were very low did it become apparent that the F4 was going to dive straight into the ground.

At the same moment that Heenan went for the handles to eject, he heard the pilot cry, "Get out, Mike—get out!" In the split second between hearing his colleague call to him and being blown out of the plane, Heenan accepted his death. "I know I was going to die. It was a very warm feeling—it surprised me how comfortable it was—how easy it was to accept."

Heenan blacked out on ejection, and when he came around he was hanging from his parachute, which had caught in a tree. He had smashed through its branches and slammed into the trunk and was bleeding profusely. A small, sharp branch stuck through one of his hands like a dagger, and his helmet had been ripped off, laying bare a part of his skull, but he felt no pain. He hung helplessly from the tree, badly confused and in shock, while around him everything seemed deathly quiet. "I could not believe I was alive!"

A moment of panic followed. He fired his flares and began to shout for help into the hand-held survival radio. Papa Fox identified over the air as Raven 44, came up on the radio and told the downed pilot to keep calm—and to get to the ground. Heenan unbuckled himself from the parachute and allowed himself to fall, hitting the ground hard at an awkward angle and spraining his ankle so badly he thought he had broken it. He felt swallowed by the silence. The chute was draped over the tree like a tent, a beacon that stood out in a plain mostly made up of bushes and dotted with only a few tall the chute, but looked back to see that he was leaving a clear trail not only of crushed grass, but of blood as well. He began to worry excessively that the smell of blood would attract tigers. He felt terrible thirsty and searched for his water bottle, but it had fallen from the pocket of his flight suit on ejection. Most of all he was scared.

Papa Fox came back on the radio. According to all the training manuals, a pilot was supposed to keep his composure, reserve his flares, and observe correct radio procedures. Papa Fox knew the reality was different, and remembered that the first thing he had done when shot down was to run wildly into the forest.

He explained patiently that a fully fledged search and rescue (SAR) operation was going to take time to mount, but they would have him out soon enough. He urged Heenan to move in a northeasterly direction to a better pick up spot. "I had no clue which way northeast was," Heenan said. "I had a compass in the top left-hand pocket of my survival vest, but I had forgotten it was there. Rather than call me a dumb shit, Raven 44 flew over to show me the direction." He

scrambled three hundred yards to the northeast and backed into a bush, painstakingly covering himself with foliage.

There were Jolly Greens - HH-3E super rescue helicopters - on alert only twenty-two miles from where the Phantom had disintegrated, which meant Heenan could have been picked up within ten minutes of the crash. But cumbersome Air Force procedures dictated that the choppers could not take off until A-1 Skyraiders had been scrambled from Nakhon Phanom, in Thailand, and successfully suppressed all ground fire in the area. When the A-1s did arrive, one almost flew straight into Papa Fox, missing him by less than a hundred feet.

It had been quiet for the first forty-five minutes that Heenan was on the ground. There were no enemy in the near vicinity and he heard no ground fire, but by the time the A-1s arrived the North Vietnamese had spotted the chute in the tree. A few scattered shots began to be fired, slowly building to a crescendo of automatic-weapons fire. From his position on the ground the most visible thing to Heenan was Raven 44, endlessly crisscrossing the sky above him, checking to see if it was safe for the Jolly Green to land.

Although Heenan could not see the enemy, he heard them yelling to one another - something which scared him much more than the shooting. He was armed with a .38 Combat Masterpiece revolver, but with only one hand in use he was forced to alternate between holding the weapon and the radio. Backed into the bush, he remained frozen, afraid to move lest the rustling leaves attracted attention. The sound of enemy voices came from behind him. "The worst fear of all was that I could not see death approaching me."

The enemy were closing in, firing at the airplanes above them as they moved. The Jolly Green came in low to attempt a pickup. Heenan realized he had been blacking out intermittently through loss of blood when, without hearing the chopper's approach, he saw it was right beside him. A crew member was sitting with the rear ramp down, firing both miniguns. "He was putting out a sheet of flame six feet long. It was really beautiful."

But the Jolly Green had not seen him, and when the chopper began to take heavy ground fire it moved off. The Skyraiders made a pass and laid down smoke to give the Jolly Green cover for a second rescue attempt, but the drop had been misjudged and the smoke was put directly on top of Heenan, screening him from sight. The rescue mission was rapidly degenerating into a shambles.

Heenan had now been on the ground for almost two hours, and continuous bleeding meant he was beginning to black out for longer and longer periods of time. Unable to see anything through the smoke, and with enemy fire coming closer by the moment as they tightened the circle around him, he began to wonder if the recovery had been abandoned. He called Papa Fox: "How long do you think it's going to be?" "Be good," Papa Fox told him. "We're coming to get you, don't you worry about it."

In fact, Papa Fox was running out of patience himself with the way things were being run. According to the regulations he was obliged to give up control of the SAR the moment the lead Skyraider arrived on station, but the operation had degenerated into a frenzied muddle. If something was not done, Heenan would be dead within half an hour. Relying on force of personality over rank or regulations, Papa Fox resumed command of the rescue.

He called the Jolly Green on the radio. "Get on my ass, I'll take you down there—let's get the son of a bitch." Cranking down the flaps of the 0-1 and flying as slowly as possible without stalling, he led the chopper through the smoke to where Heenan was hidden. The Jolly Green hovered over the bush, while a crew member was lowered on a hoist.

Heenan scrambled toward him, and together they were

winched up into the helicopter. The moment Heenan was on the hoist he felt his rescuer give him a powerful hug and was deeply affected. At that moment a strong human embrace was exactly what he needed, although in reality the airman was merely clasping him tight while he aimed an M-16 at the enemy who had come running from the cover of nearby bushes. The airman fired two full magazines of ammo before the men were pulled into the chopper.

Later the Jolly Green crew visited Heenan in the hospital at Udorn, and he thanked them for saving his life. Papa Fox arrived and Heenan thanked him for his extraordinary patience. He knew that Raven 44 had put himself "at grave personal risk" coming in low to lead the Jolly Green through the weeds to pick him up. He knew that if Raven 44 had not been unorthodox and taken over the mission, he would never have been picked up.

Note: AC & PJ lowered to ground awarded Silver Star