

RETURN TO LAOS

By Leland Sorensen

Published in American Legion Magazine March 21, 2018

SAR occurred on 17 March 1969



Mar 21, 2018

It has been said that a veteran – active duty, retired, National Guard or reserves – is someone who, at one point in his or her life, wrote a blank check made payable to the United States of America for an amount up to and including his or her own life.

In 1967, I signed my name to that blank check. I committed to a four-year enlistment in the Air Force and volunteered to become a pararescueman – a PJ, for short. After training for more than a year, I was sent to Southeast Asia and assigned to an aerospace rescue and recovery squadron at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand – also known as NKP – which is separated from Vietnam by the country of Laos. Why would a PJ be assigned to a peaceful base two countries away from Vietnam? Because contrary to what the U.S. government was admitting, we were fighting a war in Laos as well, not only bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail there but supporting friendlies in the Laotian civil war. I'm never quite sure how to answer the question, "Were you in the Vietnam War?"

In March 1969, at 21, I was involved in a rescue attempt to recover a downed F-105 pilot who had been on an air strike of a ZPU anti-aircraft artillery gun site in northern Laos. The pilot's jet had been hit by ground fire, filling his cockpit with smoke and forcing him to eject. As he descended in his parachute, he was observed by other aircraft to be tearing up classified documents before disappearing into the trees. The rescue operation continued for more than three hours. He never once came up on his emergency radio.

Less than three months earlier, another pararescueman had been lowered from a hovering helicopter into the jungle to recover a pilot who also never came up on his emergency radio. As that PJ and his pilot were about to be brought up on the hoist cable, the enemy opened fire on them and the helicopter.

That PJ radioed, "I'm hit. Pull up!" As the helicopter began to fly off, the cable snapped. The PJ and pilot were never recovered. Charles Douglas King was the PJ lost on that Christmas Day in 1968, one of the more than 82,000 Americans still missing in action from past U.S. military operations and one of about 300 who went MIA in Laos. He had slept in the bunk bed beneath mine.

Three months later, my mission bore an eerie resemblance: pilot down, no emergency radio call.

Our rescue helicopters flew in pairs – designated as "low bird" and "high bird." After our low bird made two unsuccessful attempts to recover our pilot, the high bird was sent in. I was the PJ on that high bird. The low bird had aborted its first attempt when the PJ accidentally discharged his M-16 as he was descending on the hoist cable. After they returned to the hover, the second attempt was aborted when a fray in the cable was discovered, again as the PJ was being lowered to the ground. Now, nearly three hours after our F-105 pilot had ejected, I would be going to the ground.

King's Christmas Day rescue attempt was very much on my mind that March afternoon.

After we came to a hover, I was lowered to the ground down-slope from the pilot's parachute. Upon reaching the grassy slope, I hugged the ground and checked the tree lines to my left and right for any activity. Seeing nothing, I cautiously started up the hillside to where the parachute was located in the tree line. As I neared the spot, I began to see blood in the grass and on the ground. As I got closer, more blood. I was just a few feet away before I noticed the pilot wrapped up in the parachute – his torn flight suit exposing a compound fracture to his femur. He had fallen through the canopy of the trees further uphill and had rolled violently downward, wrapping up in his parachute before he was stopped by an outcropping in the tree line. He had survived the ground fire and ejection only to die in the landing.

I radioed that the pilot was dead. If something happened before we were able to egress the area, at least his status would be known. Someone came back over the radio and exclaimed, "Then get him, and get the hell out of there!"

I remember thinking, “I don’t know what you are so excited about – I’m the one on the ground.”

I thought about what I had just heard over the radio and evaluated the situation. I decided that it might be advisable to not spend any more time in the area. It would have taken considerable time to free and remove the body from the parachute and equipment, and we had now been in the area for more than three hours. It was after 5 p.m. We did not perform night time rescues, and we still needed to fly back to Thailand. I returned to the jungle penetrator seat at the end of the hoist cable. As I was being raised to the helicopter, I thought, “If this is a trap, now is when I find out.” Fortunately, nothing happened. Only recently have I learned that some of the rescue aircraft that day had heard ground fire and seen an “approximate battalion” of the enemy in a nearby village.

We all assumed that a ground team would soon go in to recover the body.

In December 2013, I found out this had never happened. That’s when I received an email from the government asking for help in locating the aircrew of Jolly Green 09 or Jolly Green 16 from March 17, 1969. I emailed back that I was the PJ who went to the ground that day. When asked if I could identify the area where the rescue attempt took place, I reported that I did not get a good view of the area from the back of the HH-3E helicopter, but I did get a good view of the hillside. Eventually, arrangements were made for me to join a JPAC (Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command) team in Hawaii and accompany it to Laos.

After processing through Hawaii, I flew to Laos with the team on a C-17. I spent my first week helping to excavate a hillside where another F-105 had crashed into a cloud-concealed hilltop in 1969. Eventually we were joined by the investigative team (IT), and for three days I was assigned to it.

The first day with the IT, we flew around in a helicopter so I could look at the positions reported in the 1969 search-and-rescue logs. During the three-hour period of the attempted rescue, there were several “new positions” reported by various aircraft. These migrated to the northwest from the initial position by more than eight miles.

When asked which site I would like to check first, I said I assumed that the last position would be most accurate. However, as we flew that area, it was quickly obvious to me that we were not looking at the right terrain. We then flew to the next-to-the-last new position. Again, it was the wrong terrain. Eventually, we made it to the first two reported positions, and the terrain looked like it could be correct.

However, the method of reporting those positions would only put us in a general area covering several square miles. Our pilot flew around the valleys and rolling hills, allowing me to scan the area. As I looked at the terrain below, I became painfully aware that I was not going to be able to point out the hillside where I had stood 45 years earlier.

The farming practice in that part of Laos includes burning off some of the jungle. The ashes provide fertilizer to grow rice for a few years. After that, another patch of jungle is burned off, and the previous patch is allowed to grow over again. As we flew the area, all I saw were the various stages of this farming practice. How many times in 45 years had my hillside been burned?

In my journal I wrote, "This day was discouraging. I'm realizing that this mission will quite likely be impossible. I don't know why the grid coordinates aren't accurate. How hard can it be to come up with the correct numbers? Maybe this mission was for me to have closure on the events of 17 Mar 1969 ... I have seen the farming practices, which quite likely have destroyed the hillside I came here to identify. The military could not even figure out where the scene was. That is probably why they never sent in ground forces to recover the body (as everyone thought they would). I did what I thought was right on that day in 1969, and I have come all the way from Idaho to help identify the area. I have done everything that I can. It is not my problem anymore."

On the second day, we hiked up a karst to inspect a site where parachute material had been found in 1994. We found nothing there and flew back to base camp.

Each day, it was necessary to contact the appropriate Lao officials and village chiefs in order to examine an area. Each helicopter flight required at least one Lao official to be onboard. This left no more than four seats for Americans on each sortie. The helicopters could not be started before 7:30 in the morning and had to shut down by 4:30 in the afternoon.

On my third and final day with the IT, we investigated a reported sighting from 30 years ago where a villager was out hunting with his father and came across some parachute material. After a customary visit with the village chiefs, we were flown to a trailhead for a two-hour hike to search for the location of this sighting.

As we entered an area of the jungle, we were told that we could either take the short way up the creek bed or a longer way up a jungle trail and keep our feet dry. We chose to keep our feet dry. We came to a point at the end of the march where we left the trail and headed down the side of the mountain through jungle growth to a stream bed. Most of us waited there while a search was conducted.

Finally, the search – which included the use of a metal detector – ended without finding anything. We needed to return to the helicopter landing zone. We could either follow the creek bed down the hill or hike back up to the ridgeline trail. This time, we decided to stay in the creek. As we made our way, the group began to get strung out. Those in the rear called to those in the lead to wait for them to catch up. I was in the middle, and as I reached those in front, they were starting to climb out of the creek bed and going up the steep slope.

I finally asked one of the Americans what we were looking for now. I was told that the guide had made a mistake in taking us to the first site; we were now going to the correct site.

Apparently, he had recognized from 30 years earlier a large tree next to the stream. About 60 feet up, we found a half-exposed nylon pad from a parachute. About 25 feet from the pad was some parachute material, pieces of harness and buckles, a locker key and a sock. Lying on the ground was a weathered, laminated military ID card. One of the team members was trying to read the name on the card out loud. "David T ... is that Dillon? ... the III?"

Upon hearing "David" and "the III," I said that the guy I had been looking for was David Thomas Dinan III. I looked at the card, and in disbelief saw the signature of David T. Dinan III. In my final 30 minutes with the investigative team, we had found what I had come all the way to Laos to locate.

I wrote in my journal that day: "The ID card was just a symbol marking the hillside where I was 45 years ago and where a fellow airman lost his life. It has been his final resting place for the past 45 years, and now it is an opportunity to repatriate his remains and bring another hero home. It was a very hallowed event in which I was able to participate, and I thank God for that."

Again from my journal: "I heard stories told of lives lost. Like the soldier who was taken out of the camp by a tiger. He will never come home."

And there was a Jolly Green helicopter flying with another. A MiG fired a rocket from behind. The rocket went into the helicopter through the open ramp. It put a hole through the back of the pilot's seat, bringing down the aircraft. No one survived. The MiG came around again for the other helicopter, but he was out of rockets. He waved at the helicopter crew as he flew by them.

I helped excavate the crash site of an F-105 pilot who was pulling up after a bombing run and flew into a mountain that was concealed by clouds.

David Dinan died upon landing in his parachute after successfully ejecting from his damaged plane.

I once helped pick up an injured pilot who was in the back seat of an F-4 by the flip of a coin. The front-seater went to the ground still in his ejection seat.

On Sept. 4, 1969, I watched a round go through the ramp of my helicopter. If it had been fired just a fraction of a second sooner, it could have hit me.

Life and death, so often, depended on which side of a very thin line you stood.

v v v

A memorial at Pearl Harbor references a poem that first lady Eleanor Roosevelt kept in her wallet during World War II.

Dear Lord,

Lest I continue my complacent way, help me to remember somehow out there a man died for me today. As long as there be war, I then must ask and answer Am I worth dying for?

On Sept. 13, 2014, Dinan's military ID card was presented to his brother, Charlie Dinan, and JPAC announced that the ejection site would be excavated in late 2015.

Because of the politics of searching for remains in Laos, it was not until June 2016 that the DPAA (Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, formerly JPAC) was able to move a recovery team in to dig for Dinan's remains. They would be granted only a couple of weeks.

On June 12, I received a phone call from a DoD contact. The team had found osseous material (i.e., bone), but he did not know how much.

On June 27, I received an email from Charlie Dinan that stated:

More than two years after finding the material evidence and David's identification card, the DPAA recovery team revisited the site and started an excavation. During the first four days, they recovered additional suspected material evidence and on days five and six recovered suspected osseous material. Unfortunately, inclement weather forced the team to temporarily shut down the site. In the meantime, the suspected osseous material is being forwarded to the lab for verification. We were not advised of the amount of the material that was recovered but were told that it was recovered over the last two days of the dig. We were also told that the excavation was started at the stream bed and would proceed up the hill until they cease to find material.

"We do not know when the excavation will be reopened. We were told that DPAA has met with Laotian officials sometime in August in an attempt to expand the recovery process, but John and I were not encouraged by the information being given to us. If negotiations are not successful, the earliest reopening of the site will be sometime in 2018."

On Aug. 21, 2017, I received an email from my DoD contact that Charlie and his brother, John Dinan, had been contacted by the Air Force Casualty Office. The remains recovered at the ejection site in Laos last summer were identified as David Dinan. Air Force morticians were to brief the brothers later in the week.

On Aug. 25, David Dinan's former roommate called to say that the brothers had decided that the remains (a few bones and teeth) were enough confirmation for them, and that a ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery could likely be conducted in April 2018.

On Oct. 30, I received a call from the roommate. The ceremony date at Arlington National Cemetery was set for April 25, 2018, at 11 a.m.

My wife and I plan to be there, sincerely hoping that the citizens of this nation will never forget the sacrifices made by so many who served in defense of our nation's freedom, so many of whom have not come home – not yet, anyway.

Air Force veteran Leland Sorensen is a member of American Legion Post 59 in Aberdeen, Idaho, who received the Silver Star, four Distinguished Flying Crosses and six Air Medals for his actions as a PJ during the Vietnam War. After service, he received a degree in microbiology from Brigham Young University and went on to have a 35-year career working as a scientific aide at the University of Idaho Research and Extension Center in Aberdeen. He is an EMT and has been a member of the Aberdeen Volunteer Fire Department since 1975.