

11May69 F-4 SAR Laos

Rescue in Laos

by pdoggbiker

Let me introduce Capt. Gary L. Bain USMC (Ret) who is the author of this guest article. He joined the United States Marine Corps. Attended boot camp at Parris Island Marine Corps Recruit Depot in Beaufort, South Carolina. 1959; Attended flight school at NAS Pensacola, Florida, Meridian, Mississippi, and Kingsville, Texas. Received the coveted Naval Aviator "Wings of Gold" in April, 1967. Flew 213 combat missions in Vietnam piloting the famous McDonnell-Douglas F-4 Phantom. Retired from the Corps in 1979.

Published here with the permission of his brother, Darrell Bain, author of "Medics Wild" and fifty other books - here's a link to his author page:

http://www.amazon.com/Darrell-Bain/e/B000APW4IQ/ref=ntt_dp_epwbk_0

<><><>

Bill and I were back in the air again in a couple of days and we continued flying as a team until I went on R&R (rest and relaxation) a few months later in May of 1969. My R&R destination was Hong Kong and I took a shuttle flight from Chu-Lai to DaNang to await further routing. I had to spend two days in DaNang waiting for my flight so I decided to look up my Jolly Green rescuers as they were based out of DaNang. It just so happened they were in a festive mood so for two days we consumed massive amounts of booze, told war stories, and I reveled in the camaraderie of my heroes. I got to know one of the pilots real good. His name was "Pete". Little did I know the importance of our meeting, for we were to meet again in a few short days, but in much different circumstances.



.....

.....

Arriving back in Chu-Lai a week later I once again set about winning the war. By this time I had well over two hundred missions under my belt and Bill and I had flown almost a hundred of those together as a team. Our personal call sign was "Boomslang" and when we checked in with the FAC(forward air controller) he knew the job was going to get done! We had both been recently transferred to VMFA-115, but were still flying out of Chu-Lai. He was scheduled to go on R&R to meet his wife in Hawaii in a couple of days so when I found out he was scheduled to fly with me twice the next day I insisted he cancel the flights. He wouldn't hear of it but after a lot of discussion, we compromised. He would fly the first mission in the morning and cancel the evening mission. This was, most unfortunately, a truly bad decision on both our parts. Bill, or "Rhino", as we fondly called him, would not return from the mission.



We launched early in the morning on May 11th as a flight of two, call sign Manual 42, our destination, Laos, another Steel Tiger mission. The target was in the area of Tchepone, a heavily defended part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail . I was carrying a load of Zuni's, or 5" rockets, for anti-aircraft fire suppression. As we reached the target area the FAC, Call sign Nail 16, designated the enemy position and I rolled in "Hot" (ordnance armed and ready to fire).



The delivery method I was using was a 500 knot, 60 degree dive angle run. Bill was calling me fast all the way down, as he read off the altitude, airspeed, and dive angle. Just as the pipper in the gunsight arrived at the target I let loose the full compliment of rockets. Just as I had been trained to do and had done hundreds of times before, I repeated the mantra, pickle, pause, pull. Just as I was getting a heavy load of G's on the airplane in the pull-up phase and starting the jinking turn (a high speed turn to avoid anti-aircraft fire) a tremendous explosion rocked the big Phantom. The aircraft rolled over to the inverted position and was heading for the ground, all controls lost. At 500 plus knots, impact was imminent and I told Bill to eject three times, very quickly I might add!! Hearing no response I braced myself and reached for the alternate ejection handle nestled between my legs. With a sharp tug the ejection sequence started and the next few seconds of my life became a blur as my stationary body met with the ferocity of a wind twice that of a force 5 tornado. This was about as traumatic as anything you could imagine.



I'll try to slow it down for you. The canopy came off first, then the rockets fired that propelled me and the seat out of the aircraft at an instantaneous 18 G's (one G being the force of gravity). As I left the cockpit the horrendous wind blast ripped off my helmet and oxygen mask, it inflated my MK3C life vest, my left arm got thrown behind my back and snapped it in half between the shoulder and elbow, my pistol that I wore on my right hip was ripped off, and the pockets on my G-suit were torn off. Then from bad to worse, the seat, which is supposed to separate from the pilot as the parachute deploys, malfunctioned and the restraint lanyards tangled on my left leg and broke it and the seat stayed with me all the way down. The parachute deployed and I remember hanging there, and I remember this just as vividly as if it were yesterday, I heard a loud whooshing noise and said to myself, "they are shooting at me already". Then a string of bombs went off underneath me. My wingman had seen the fire from my aircraft impacting the ground, thought it was the target and dropped his bombs. I descended through all the debris

and after just a few seconds in the parachute hit the ground like a ton of bricks.

The most amazing part of this is that I never felt any pain. I didn't even know my arm was broken until I tried using it and just the stump would move, not the rest of my arm. I remember every detail of the ejection and events leading up to my rescue. To this day, I don't know how my thinking process remained intact, but it did, and my ability to communicate with the rescuers is what saved me. As OIC (Officer-in-charge) of the Safety and Survival shop in my squadron I always made it a point to carry two survival radios which if I remember correctly were the newer PRC-90's. It was a good thing I did because the first one I tried wouldn't work! I immediately got in contact with the FAC, call sign Nail 16 (OV-10), on my emergency radio to let them know I had survived. No one ever saw a second chute and most opinions concur that I must have taken a 37mm AAA shell in the area of the rear cockpit. I had landed very close to a huge North Vietnamese bunker complex and within 50 meters of some buildings. The word was, they didn't take prisoners in that area!! For the next three hours, I would call on everything I had ever learned about survival to make it through the ordeal. But in fact, what contributed mostly to my rescue, was Nail 16 insisting that I stay with the parachute, drink water, stay calm and that I was going to get out of there!!



The FAC transmitted a mayday call and the Jolly Greens were alerted. They were launched from a base North of DaNang, Quang Tri. The Jolly Green choppers are escorted by the famous A-1 Skyraider, a big recip with over ten wing stations that carry an assortment of ordnance including cannons, bombs, rockets, gas and other goodies. The Hobo and Sandy A-1's were alerted and the Hobos commenced loading CBU-19's. My wingman, Jim Redmond, was out of ordnance but made dummy passes to keep the bad guys heads down. Playboy 13 arrived on station and Nail 16 had him make some low passes and then fired his rockets into the area. In the meantime I had gotten myself oriented, established a clock code for the FAC to reference the drops to and had made a sling for my arm out of parachute cord. I always carried a snub-

nosed 38 inside my flight vest and I took it out and laid it on my chest. I seriously doubt that it would have done much good but it sure made me feel better. I could hear hollering , whistling and shooting but never did see any enemy personnel.



Then the A-1's arrived on station. At this point Spad 11 assumed OSC (on scene commander) of the rescue but not before Nail 16 asked me for my son's nickname, a question about personal authenticator codes. This was a system devised to prevent the bad guys from luring in our aircraft on a phony rescue. All pilots had to fill out cards with answers to questions like, what is your favorite drink, your favorite football team, etc. and then the cards went to a central location for use by the rescuing entities to verify it was actually the pilot talking. When Nail 16 asked my

son's nickname, I answered correctly, but am reluctant to say that nickname was , "Pooter"!!

The Jollies 03 and 07 out of Quang Tri had to divert because of fuel problems. Jolly Green 15 and 28, from the 37th ARRS out of DaNang were then alerted and they promptly headed my way escorted by the DaNang A-1's, the Spads. While flying cover for the choppers during the extraction Spad 01 took a 37 MM hit in the tail and had to RTB (Return to Base).



What a sight those A-1's were!! They would fly so low I could see them smile when they went by. Every time I heard a noise I would call out the clock code and the Skyraider would devastate the area with deadly accuracy. On one run they made they didn't notify me prior to the drop and it happened to be one of those bombs that opens

and drops a bunch of small bomblets, a CBU. I must have jumped ten feet high when those things started going off, thinking of course, I was taking fire. I thought my number was up for certain. Some of them had to be within 20-30' because debris from the explosions rained down on me like a hail storm. I very politely asked them to notify me before they dropped any more unannounced ordnance. I think they must have gotten a chuckle out of that but I did get a big "Roger that" from them.



At other times the situation would become very quiet and I created things to do to stay busy and alert as I was feeling very faint. I even noticed that my beloved Seiko watch was still intact however it seemed to have lost about four hours on the ejection!! I also started gathering every different kind of leaf that was in reach of me and storing them in my survival vest to keep as mementos of my vacation in Laos. Also, I had started pulling the parachute and the ejection seat close in towards me so I could analyze why the seat

lanyards had tangled on my leg. I reconsidered though and asked the Rescue Commander if I should pull the chute in or leave it out as a marker for visual contact with me. I was advised to leave it in place for easier eye contact with my position. Sweat was pouring from every pore in my body and I was thirsty, real thirsty. I pulled the seat pan close to me and removed the contents of the survival pack looking for water. I found the water in a gray can, but alas, no pull tabs back then!! So I took out my bright orange survival knife and decided to punch a hole in the top of the can so I could drink. Opening the knife one handed presented a problem though and I tried everything, snagging it on my flight suit, with my teeth, and was about to give up when I realized, hey, this is a switch blade. With a quick flick of the button the knife was open. I then propped the can up between my legs and with a quick stab, smartly planted the blade squarely in my leg instead of the can. I actually laughed at myself, oh no, I wasn't shook up!! .

After listening to the audio tapes I have a fairly clear picture now of how the A-1's work an area. It is a well coordinated attack, a daisy chain of death and destruction. There were 12 of the A-1's working the area and escorting the Jolly chopper. I can assure you I am more than glad that Nail 16 and the OSC encouraged me to stay with my chute. It seems throughout the rescue that chute was what everybody referenced to locate me. I would hate to be on the receiving end of the ordnance that was laid down because I had a front row seat of the damage it could inflict. Those A-1's were a thing of beauty!



The weather was deteriorating and the Jolly Green 15 chopper was starting to get low on fuel so the RCC (Rescue Crew Commander) of Jolly Green 15, Capt. Joseph Hall, knew that it was then or never. Capt. Hall also knew he had to depend on the OSC (On Scene Commander) Spad 11 to make the ultimate decision for him to come on in. Jolly Green 15 had been holding in a designated area waiting for the OSC to give the all clear and that enemy fire had been suppressed. Spad 11 called him in and it was at this time that I told the OSC that I was the Marine that spent two days with the Jolly's last week. He laughed as he asked the Jolly's if they had heard that. The Jolly said no and asked what I said, then he laughingly relayed the information to them. I was glad that in my hysteria I had found something they could laugh about!! The Hobo A-1's then gassed the area, I popped a smoke flare and with machine guns blazing the Jolly

Green HH3E chopper came in and hovered over my position.



What an incredible sight, forever etched in my memory, the chopper swooping in, the PJ (para-jumper) coming down the hoist with a gas mask on and the co-pilot, Capt. Martin Richert, laying down suppressing fire from the co-pilot's window with an automatic rifle and the flight mechanic hosing the area down with machine gun fire.

They took small arms fire throughout the approach and hover. Capt. Richert said that during the final approach he could hear the slap of small arms fire above the noise of the rotor and knew that we were taking fire. Two rounds went through the cockpit and nose area while I was being picked up which is something I didn't know until much later. As the chopper stabilized over me I hobbled over to the hoist and the PJ strapped me on and away we went. As we departed the area the crew pulled me inside and promptly started attending my needs. They administered morphine, put an air cast on my arm and checked all my vital signs. From that point on my memory becomes a little fuzzy, probably from the morphine, but it seems one of them traded me a cigarette lighter for my pistol. That was simply a diplomatic way of taking a weapon from someone that they didn't know what state of mind they were in. I still have that lighter and will always treasure it. Dennis Palmer told me much later that he carried my pistol on every mission but when it was time for him to rotate home it was taken from him. About halfway back to DaNang the pilot got up out of his seat and came back to where I was. I looked up and there, standing before me, was "Pete", which is Capt. Joseph Hall's nickname!!.



EPILOGUE

Move forward to August 2001. I was conducting research for a book I am writing about my Marine Corps Aviation career. I had contacted a few of my fellow Vietnam fighter pilots through the internet and in the summer of 2001 decided to start looking for the crews that had rescued me. The Jolly Greens had sent me certificates on each of the two rescues, complete with name and rank of the crew. I had kept these over the years and now with the internet I might be able to find these heroes. It just so happened that the day I located and called Martin Richert, the co-pilot of the Laos rescue, that it was his birthday. He was obviously shaken and we talked about half the night. I then found and talked to Captain "Pete" Hall, the pilot and in January , 2002 located and spoke with James Thibodeau. I cannot describe the emotions in going back in time and

talking with these brave men. I could not find the other crew members but am listing their names at the end of this in case someone knows them they can tell them how to contact me. It just so happened that Marty and his wife, Suzanne, would be traveling through Oklahoma City in September, 2001 so they decided to pay a visit. I had never seen Marty because after the rescue the helicopter dropped me off at the DaNang hospital and they then returned to their operating area and I was medevaced. It was a wonderful reunion and we had Fox 25 local news come out and they put the reunion on the evening news. We of course watched the news that evening then enjoyed some mighty fine food consisting of jumbo shrimp, filet mignon, and topped off with champagne and late night "War Stories". Ahhh-- the good 'ol days! It is my fervent hope that in the future I will have an opportunity to meet with all of the crew. Oh, and one final note, I didn't know until Marty told me, that I was shot down on Mother's Day!! He said that is among the reasons he remembers this rescue.



I want to say here that there are a lot of unsung heroes that played a major part in the war. The FAC's were an integral part of the tactics used and we wouldn't have ever gotten anything done without them. In this case Nail 16 did a remarkable job in the co-ordination and deployment of available aircraft. John Johnston was his name and he advised me and encouraged me that help was on the way. His voice reassured me that I was going to be rescued, and I was. He undoubtedly risked his life to save me. His actions in the air were heroic to say the least in the low passes he made and in directing fire power close to my position on the ground. To all the FAC's I worked with, my hat is off to you and I salute you, and especially John Johnston for his steadfastness and professionalism in the face of danger.

The Jolly Greens and their A-1 escorts are among some of the unsung heroes of the Vietnam War. The Jolly Green and A-1 motto, "That others may live" is well embedded in my mind and every day I wake up I say thanks to these great warriors that gave so much of themselves. And how these A-1 pilots could so constantly expose themselves to withering anti-aircraft fire just totally overwhelms me. Albeit late in the game, I take great pride in being able to present this work as a testament to the heroics of our gallant comrades in arms, and especially to the crewmembers that plucked me out of the ocean and the jaws of death in the jungles of Laos. The Jolly Greens and A-1's rescued over 500 pilots during the Vietnam war and took risks that ordinary men wouldn't even dream of. Their courage and spirit under fire is one of the ingredients that makes the United States military force the most formidable on the planet. I salute the Jolly Greens, their A-1 escorts, and thank you, both former and present members, for your service to our country. God bless the United States!

To know about this author and to read more of his work, please visit Gary at this website: <http://www.videoexplorers.com/>