

Spad Two, down in Laos

Gerald Helmich must have been a quiet guy, because when I sent an email to a dozen members of the UNH Class of 1954, nobody remembered him. Jerry came from Manchester, majored in mechanical engineering, joined Air Force ROTC, belonged to Sigma Beta fraternity, and played two years of football, intramural baseball . . . and bridge! He was a good-looking guy. (You'd be surprised how few of us fell into that category.) He wore a crew cut, jug ears, and a warm, wide smile.

Commissioned as a second lieutenant in June 1954, he became a pilot and flight instructor. In June 1956, he was married in the Pease Air Force Base chapel in Newington, New Hampshire, to Gertrude Hamel. They had three children, euphonically named James, Jill, and Jerilyn.

Then came the Vietnam War and an urgent need for men to fly the venerable Douglas Skyraider. This magnificent plane was a relic of World War II, meant to fly off carriers as a replacement for the dive bombers that, from 1942 to 1944, had torn great holes in the Japanese fleet. It didn't see service in that war, but the Skyraider did serve in Korea, and it was introduced early into Vietnam because--being propeller-driven--it didn't violate the Geneva Accords that had divided the country between a communist north and a pro-western south. Pilots called it the Spad or Able Dog. It could carry a huge amount of ordnance for an incredible distance, and it could stay aloft all day. This made it the perfect plane for search-and-rescue missions, while the jets ran the gauntlet of MiGs and SAMs over North Vietnam.

So it was that in early 1969, as a 37-year-old major, Jerry Helmich entered A-1 training at Hurlbert Field in Florida as a member of Training Class 69-08. A photo of him on the [Skyraider Association website](#) shows him as a heavyset man, years older than the captains and first lieutenants who made up most of the class.

"Finished A-1 training in May '69," recalled one of them, Captain Charles Holder, "and headed, as a group, to Clark AB in the Philippines for jungle survival training. Following an 'enjoyable interlude' at Clark, the class split up and proceeded to our final base assignments in SE Asia. Jerry went to South Vietnam ... and I headed for Nakhon Phanom (NKP), Thailand."

Jerry was stationed outside Pleiku, in the Vietnamese Central Highlands, as a member of the 6th Special Operations Squadron, 633rd Special Operations Wing, whose Skyraiders were often deployed for search-and-rescue missions. Charlie Holder explained that generally took a couple of months for the "new guy" to become comfortable with the airplane and familiar with the terrain; then, toward the end of his tour, a pilot tended to get cautious. "Throwing in travel time and ... Jungle Survival School," Holder said, "that leaves about eight-nine months out of the year when you ... were probably THE BEST DAMN PILOT IN THE WHOLE DAMN AIR FORCE.... Jerry and I were both in that mid-timeframe; we were damn good, and knew it. That's why we were both selected for and checked out as Sandy (or Rescue Mission) pilots."

Jerry was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross on September 16, the Air Medal on October 2, and another DFC on October 10. While the Air Medal is generally awarded for a specific number of missions flown, the DFC is for "extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight."

Owl Seven goes down

On November 11, 1969, a U.S. Army helicopter with the call sign Owl Seven was reported down in Laos. The crew of two managed to get out safely, and they spent the night in a densely forested area about fifteen miles from the North Vietnamese border. The nearest town was Ban Senphan, which the Defense Mapping Agency chart shows at about 17°30' north latitude, 105°42' west longitude. According to the search-and-rescue reports, there were several villages in the area, but the forest was thick enough to provide good cover. Ban Senphan is on a river, with level ground to the south and high mountains to the north. (Some of the pilots recall that the villages were abandoned, as a result of heavy American bombing along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.)

Early next morning--Wednesday, November 12--a Jolly Green Giant search-and-rescue helicopter was dispatched to the site, and by 0455 hours it had plucked one of Owl Seven's crew out of the rain forest. The helo, which had the call sign Jolly Green Nine, had to break off the rescue effort when it was attacked by "an enemy helicopter"--presumably North Vietnamese. Two U.S. Air Force Phantom jets, Packard One and Packard Two, attacked the North Vietnamese aircraft through a hail of ack-ack from 37-mm anti-aircraft guns. Packard One was shot down.

Now there were three Americans on the ground. In addition to Jolly Green Nine and Packard Two, there was at least one other American aircraft in the area. This was the FAC or Forward Air Controller, an unarmed liaison plane with the call sign King Seven. Apparently four Skyraiders arrived on the scene about this time--a "Sandy" flight from Nakhon Phanom in Thailand. The FAC put them to work suppressing the ack-ack. As they'd trained to do at Hurlbert Field, the Skyraiders formed a "daisy wheel" of four aircraft, flying a racetrack pattern 500-800 feet above the ground, so that one pilot was always in position to roll in against any North Vietnamese gunner who showed his position by firing at them or the Jolly Green.

Spad One and Two to Ban Senphan

At 0726 hours, at least two Skyraiders were scrambled from Pleiku Air Base to Ban Senphan. Major Jerry Helmich was in command of the second aircraft with the call sign Spad Two, meaning that he was flying as wingman to the flight leader, Major Willard Dillon. They would add their firepower to the search-and-rescue effort, which by now consisted of at least six other Skyraiders. Four were from Nakhon Phanom, Thailand--including Captain Charlie Holder, who evidently was flying that day with the call sign Sandy Three. As he recalled, his flight had just replaced the Skyraiders that had been dispatched from NKP earlier in the morning. The other two Skyraiders, he thought, had come from Pleiku, in which case they would have carried the call signs Spad Three and Spad Four.

Vietnam 1969: Jerry Helmich goes missing

Packard Two must have already flown back to base--a turbojet, the Phantom fighter could spend only a brief time over the target. Jolly Green Nine had likewise departed, so as to take the rescued (and possibly injured) Owl Seven crewman to an American base in South Vietnam. It returned to Ban Senphan at about the same time as Spads from Pleiku arrived on the scene.

As the Jolly Green Giant swept in to rescue the second Owl Seven crewman, it came under heavy fire from North Vietnamese 37 mm guns. The pilot asked the Skyraiders to drop CBU-22 cluster bombs onto the ack-ack site, and also to lay a white phosphorous smoke screen between the Jolly Green and the North Vietnamese gunners. "With the addition of the [Pleiku] A-1s," Charlie Holder recalled, "we were trying to set up an eight-ship Daisy Wheel over the survivors, in a valley, under 'contested' conditions. Confusion reigned for a few moments ... but the following is truly burned into my memory: as we tried to mesh these two formations, I had a single-seat A-1 cut into 'my' pattern very close in front of me." This was Spad Two--Major Jerry Helmich. "I had to pull up and to the right to avoid hitting him," Holder went on, "and basically surrendered my place in the Daisy Wheel for a few moments. I pulled back down and fell into trail with that bird, perhaps 400-500 feet back."

According to the rescue report, Jerry's Skyraider was the second to roll in on the ack-ack guns--always more dangerous than the initial attack, since the gunners have had a chance to adjust their aim. Sandy Three from Nakhon Phanom--almost certainly Charlie Holder--later reported that he had watched Jerry begin his dive, the nose of his Skyraider dropping and the plane rolling to the right, evidently already hit. (In his memoir written 30 years later, Holder recalled that Spad Two was hit while still in the Daisy Wheel, but the reports from the scene are probably more accurate.) Another Skyraider pilot glimpsed Spad Two in a 45-degree dive with a bank angle of 135 degrees--that is to say, almost on its back. He noted the time as 1010 hours.

At almost the same moment, the Jolly Green succeeded in its rescue attempt, pulling the second Owl Seven crewman from the rain forest.

Jerry's Skyraider exploded when it hit the ground. One of the Sandy pilots--also taking part in ack-ack suppression--fired a pod of rockets into a clump of trees near the spot where Spad Two had crashed; its pilot reported that he flew through "the same smoke layer" when he pulled off from the attack. Spad One also flew over the crash site, seeing no sign of life.

The following Monday, Jerry Helmich would have been thirty-eight years old.

"No further information at this time"

Spad One and two of the Nakhon Phanom pilots stayed on the site for several hours, and King Seven--the FAC--remained there for the rest of the day, hoping to spot either Jerry Helmich or the crew of the downed Phantom jet, Captains Jon Bodahl and Harry Smith. The search was continued by electronic means until 1430 hours next day, when it was

HELMICH, GERALD ROBERT

Name: Gerald Robert Helmich
Rank/Branch: Colonel/ US Air Force
Unit: 6th Special Operations Squadron

Pleiku Airbase, South Vietnam
Date of Birth: 17 November 1931
Home of Record: Manchester, NH
Date of Loss: 12 November 1969
Country of Loss: Laos
Loss Coordinates: 172800N 1054000E (WE747328)

[Click coordinates to view maps](#)

Status in 1973: Missing in Action
Category: 2
Aircraft/Vehicle/Ground: A1H "Skyraider"
Other Personnel in Incident: (none missing)



REMARKS:

SYNOPSIS: With its fantastic capability to carry a wide range of ordnance (8,000 pounds of external armament), great flight range (out to 3,000 miles), and the ability to absorb punishment, the single-seat Douglas A1 Skyraider became one of the premier performers in the close air support and attack mission role (nickname: Spad) and RESCAP mission role (nickname: Sandy). The Skyraider served the Air Force, Navy and Marines faithfully throughout the war in Southeast Asia.

On 12 November 1969, then Major Gerald R. Helmich was the pilot of an A1H, call sign "Spad 02," that was scrambled to assist in the overall search and recovery (SAR) mission for the crew of "Owl 07," a 2-man Army helicopter downed the day before; then later the same morning, for the crew of an F4E aircraft shot down during the first rescue effort. Spad flight departed Pleiku Airbase at 0726 hours as the # 2 aircraft in a flight of two. Their planned flight path was from Pleiku to rendezvous with other aircraft participating in the SAR operation, then return to Pleiku. Those aircraft included the Forward Air Controller (FAC), the rescue helicopter, and at least 6 other A1Hs.

The location of loss was approximately 60 miles due west of the major communist port city of Dong Hoi, North Vietnam; 1 mile south of Ban Senphan and 15 miles southwest of the Lao/North Vietnamese border, Khammouan Province, Laos. Another description of the loss location placed it 6 kilometers south-southwest of Ban Phanop, 600 meters southeast of Ban Senphan and 300 meters east of Route 23. The Nam Mo River ran parallel to and approximately 1 mile south of Route 23. To the west of the loss location, a tributary of the Nam Mo River branched off and meandered to the south-southeast through the jungle covered valley.

The highest terrain feature within 5 miles of the loss location was 2,300 feet with 6,000-foot mountains to the north, then the mountain range wrapped around to both the east and west. The area in which the downed helicopter crew was hiding was relatively level and densely forested surrounded by villages. In the early morning hours during the first rescue attempt, low stratus clouds collected around the mountaintops. In the valley it was clear with only a slight haze existing in the immediate target area. Visibility was 8 to 10 miles.

At 0455 hours, as the SAR helicopter, call sign "Jolly Green 09," was recovering the first crewman of Owl 07, a flight of 2 F4Es, call signs "Packard 01 and 02," were attacking an enemy helicopter that was attempting to

interfere with the recovery operation. Capt. Jon K. Bodahl, pilot, and Capt. Harry W. Smith, weapons systems officer, comprised the aircrew of Packard 01. As they maneuvered to obtain an acceptable angle of attack while dodging intense enemy 37mm anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) fire, Packard 01 was struck by AAA fire and seen to crash 2 meters south of a ford along the Nam Mo River.

SAR efforts for the second helicopter crewman were temporarily suspended while an initial search was conducted for Capt. Bodahl and Capt. Smith. At the same time other aircraft under the control of the FAC, call sign "King 07," assaulted communist AAA sites, automatic and heavy weapons positions, and troop concentrations hidden in the dense jungle. US aircraft used bombs, rockets, CBU-22s (cluster bomb units) and strafing runs in an effort to contain the communists' ability to further interfere with overall US operations. These efforts were successful enough that another rescue attempt to recover the second crewman from Owl 07 was attempted. During this time weather conditions improved to a clear sky with 10 plus miles visibility.

After transporting the helicopter crewman rescued during the early morning operation to a US base in South Vietnam, Jolly Green 09 returned to the ongoing SAR operation. As the Jolly Green's crew prepared to enter the recovery area for the second helicopter crewman, it's pilot directed Major Helmich and his flight leader to place CBU-22 and WP smoke, between them and the intense enemy small arms and heavy weapons fire. Jolly Green 09 moved in and successfully recovered the downed crewman at the same time Major Helmich made his attack pass.

Witnesses observed Spad 02 in various phases of flight from a bomb run to impact, but no one witness observed the entire sequence of events. According to these statements, Spad 02 was observed by another A1H pilot, call sign "Sandy 13," as he began his run. As Gerald Helmich continued to press forward, his aircraft started a right roll with its nose dropping. At 1010 hours, other Americans caught sight of Major Helmich's aircraft in a 45-degree dive and 135 degree angle of bank nearly inverted when it impacted the ground and exploded. The crash took place in an area that had been subjected to intense ground fire from small arms, automatic weapons fire and from AAA. One of the Sandy pilots reported in his witness statement that he "put a pod of rockets into a clump of trees (near the wreckage of Gerald Helmich's aircraft) to suppress enemy ground fire, then pulled off into the same smoke layer." Spad 01 made a low pass over the wreckage of his wingman, but the flight leader detected no sign of life.

In the confusion of battle, no parachute was seen departing the damaged Skyraider and no emergency beeper was heard. In spite of the witness statements, the Air Force believed there was a possibility that he could have survived only to be captured immediately. Spad 01 and two other A1H aircraft, Sandy 11 and 12, stayed in the area for 1 to 3 hours attempting to locate the pilot. Major Helmich's A1H was downed approximately 1 mile southeast of Capt. Bodahl and Capt. Smith's F4E Phantom.

King 07, the on site FAC, continuing to search for Gerald Helmich, Jon Bodahl and Harry Smith for the rest of the day. An electronic search also continued until 1430 hours the next day and was suspended due to a lack of an objective. At that time formal search operations were terminated, Gerald Helmich was listed Missing in Action.

Gerald Helmich is among nearly 600 Americans who disappeared in Laos. Many of these men were known to be alive on the ground. The Laotians admitted holding "tens of tens" of American Prisoners of War, but these men were never negotiated for either by direct negotiation between our countries or through the Paris Peace Accords which ended the War in Vietnam since Laos was not a party to that agreement.

Since the end of the Vietnam War well over 21,000 reports of American prisoners, missing and otherwise unaccounted for have been received by our government. Many of these reports document LIVE American Prisoners of War remaining captive throughout Southeast Asia TODAY.

Pilots in Vietnam and Laos were call upon to fly in many dangerous circumstances, and they were prepared to be wounded, killed or captured. It probably never occurred to them that they could be abandoned by the country they so proudly served.

suspended and the three airmen were formally listed as Missing in Action.

According to Operation Smoking Gun, from whose report this description was put together: "Gerald Helmich is among nearly 600 Americans who disappeared in Laos. Many of these men were known to be alive on the ground. The Laotians admitted holding 'tens of tens' of American Prisoners of War, but these men were never negotiated for either by direct negotiation between our countries or through the Paris Peace Accords which ended the War in Vietnam since Laos was not a party to that agreement."

True enough, and tragic enough, but I find it impossible to believe that Jerry Helmich survived the crash of his Skyraider, auguring in at perhaps 250 knots, 45 degrees off the vertical, almost upside down, and exploding when it hit.

Because he was missing, not officially dead, Jerry Helmich was promoted to lieutenant colonel in 1973 and full colonel in 1978. However, in December 1978, a posthumous awards ceremony was held at Dobins Air Force Base in Georgia, at which time Jerry finally got a grave marker, a 21-gun salute, and the medals he had earned on what was almost certainly the last day of his life: another Air Medal, the Purple Heart for his presumed injuries, and the Silver Star for heroism.

On Memorial Day 1999, the city of Manchester erected a memorial plaque to Jerry Helmich near the Queen City Bridge, and his name will be added the city's Vietnam Memorial. And if you visit the beautiful "Wall" in Washington, or see the scale model that tours the country, you'll find his name on Panel 16W, Row 064.