



Ops Normal at Three Zero

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Less than 10 years ago, the United States was embroiled in a war in Southeast Asia and rescue forces were daily practicing the combat rescue skills that SMSgt Roy Taylor wrote about in his article on pararescue specialists (page 3). Major Hassell introduces us to another member of the ARRS team, the "King Bird." Flying the HC-130 Hercules, rescue crews set up airborne "lifeguard stations" over that foreign battlefield, using the call sign of King. This is an account of a search and rescue (SAR) coordinated by the crew of King 21 that saved two American airmen from certain death or capture. This is the way combat SAR was.

(Note: Earlier in the war, Rescue HC-130s answered to the call sign Crown, but were later dubbed King, as depicted in this account.)—Ed

0530: "Jack, Jack, King 21 on orbit at this time, ops normal." The morning sun is just coming up and the Laotian countryside east of Savannakhet is barely visible through the morning haze. Someone on the crew comments about the air evac mission the alert crew had the night before. A flight of F-105s is heard checking in with Invert, the area GCI site, en route to their target. It looks like the start of a "routine" day on orbit for the HC-130 crew.

0645: A single RF-4C out of Udorn RTAB breaks ground and takes up a northeast heading. Climbing through 8,000 feet, the

RF-4, call sign Bullwhip 26, contacts Invert for vectors to the KC-135 for a pre-mission air refueling. As Bullwhip 26 transmits, the copilot of King 21 hits the UHF/DF switch, the needle swings and then locks on to the transmission. "Looks like DF number one is working again," he mumbles.

0730: Once off the tanker, Bullwhip 26 checks in with Cricket, the TAC C-130 airborne battlefield command and control center (ABCCC), prior to reaching the target area. His mission will be low-level reconnaissance of the area east of the Plain de Jars (PDJ).

0750: Down on the deck, the RF-4 streaks along a ridge line, then banks left to check another area. Suddenly there's a blinding flash. The fire warning light for the number two engine illuminates and the aircraft begins to yaw violently to the right. Moments later, smoke fills the cockpit and the front-seater gives the command to eject.

0835: As the morning drags on, the HC-130 crew flies their standard orbit from Nakhon Phanom (NKP) to Savannakhet. The radio operator tells the AC that some HH-53s from NKP will need an air refueling at 1230 when King 22 takes the orbit. As the navigator begins to write down the refueling information, a call comes in from Hillsborough, another ABCCC aircraft, whose orbit is to the south. He states that he wants

King to contact Cricket.

0840: A quick frequency change and the copilot is talking to Cricket, "Understand from Hillsborough that you've got something for us."

All is silent on the HC-130 as the Cricket controller passes the information: "Bullwhip 26, an RF-4C, dropped off the tanker at 0725 local. Last talked to us at 0732 prior to starting his mission of low-level recce in the area east of the PDJ. He should have contacted us at 0830 prior to hitting the tanker for more gas. He's now ten minutes overdue; we can't establish radio contact. We think he might be down." Almost simultaneously, the crewmembers begin to set up for the SAR.

While the aircraft commander questions the ABCCC controller about the area the RF-4C was to work, the copilot informs the GCI site about the possibility of a search and rescue effort. The navigator begins to unfold a large-scale chart of the area and the radio operator establishes contact with Jack, the Rescue Coordination Center (RCC) at NKP and gives them the initial information. The next job is to establish a SAR objective. They know they needn't launch the Jollys without a confirmation of survivors. First objective is to locate two jet jocks down somewhere in 1,600 square miles of jungle and mountains 75 miles behind enemy lines.

0850: The HC-130 crew has had no luck in their initial communi-

cation search and no one has heard an ELT beeper. GCI hasn't had a target in that area for hours, and none of the bases in the area report the recovery of Bullwhip 26.

0853: "King, King, this is Nail 26 on guard. Do you read me?" crackles the UHF.

"Roger, Nail 26, contact King 21 on 282.8." The King 21 crew waits silently. Seconds pass, then finally Nail 26, a forward air controller out of NKP, calls again on the directed frequency. "Are you missing someone? I've got a beeper."

"Roger that 26. We're looking for an RF-4C, call sign Bullwhip 26, somewhere east of the PDJ." The Nail pilot acknowledges and advises he'll try and establish contact with the downed aircrew.

Instantly the navigator is advising the RCC, "Jack, King 21. We've got some beepers up here; pretty good chance of it being our boys. Suggest you launch the Jollys at this time."

0854: Simultaneously, our copilot is setting up for the SAR. GCI is notified to provide tanker support and a dedicated

frequency. ABCCC is asked for strike frequencies and to check the availability of ordnance to support the SAR forces.

0902: "Pilot, navigator. Jollys are airborne and heading north, and they're scrambling the alert HC-130 to refuel the choppers."

0903: Nail 26 reports back, "Okay King, I've got both guys down here. Area is rugged hills with jungle about 20 miles northeast of Xieng Khouang. Bad guys are three miles west of the survivors. If you send in the Jollys now, we can get 'em out—no sweat."

"Roger, King copies. I'm appointing you on-scene commander at this time. Estimate the Jollys will be there in 40 to 45 minutes."

"In 45 minutes these guys will be in a truck on the way to Hanoi. You gotta do better than that," responds the Nail pilot.

"Roger, stand by." the silence in the HC-130 cockpit is deafening. For an instant, the pilot and copilot catch each other's glance. Then, as if remembering something, the aircraft commander silently looks at his chart of the area. Seconds later,

realizing there are no other options available, he reaches over and switches number one UHF radio to guard.

"Pan, Pan, Pan, this is King 21 on guard. Any Air America helicopter in the vicinity of Xieng Khouang, contact King 21 on 282.8."

0905: For what seems like an eternity no one calls, then the radio comes to life.

"King 21, this is Papa-Quebec-Alfa. I'm south of Xieng Khouang. What's the problem?"

"King aircraft calling on guard. This is Tango-Lima-Sierra, flight of two Bell helos five southwest of Xieng Khouang. Can we be of assistance?"

The copilot of King 21 smiles from ear to ear. Someone shouts "All right!" while the nav rapidly plots the helicopters' positions.

"Papa-Quebec-Alfa and Tango-Lima-Sierra, this is King 21. We've got two guys down northeast of Xieng Khouang. A FAC, Nail 26, is overhead and says we can get 'em out if we act now. Can you be of assistance?"

"King, Papa-Quebec-Alfa has 45 minutes of fuel remaining. Let's get this show on the road."

"Tango-Lima-Sierra flight can give you one-plus-ten, King."

"Okay guys, contact Nail 26 on this frequency, Break—Nail



26, King 21. Did you copy that Air America helos Papa-Quebec-Alfa and Tango-Lima-Sierra, flight of two, are up frequency and ready to go to work?"

"Roger, King. Papa-Quebec-Alfa and Tango-Lima-Sierra, this is Nail 26. I'm approximately 35 northeast of Xieng Khouang at 4,000 feet. Press on up here and I'll pick you up. Break—King, this is Nail 26, get me some ordnance in case I need it."

"Pilot, navigator. Jollys report they're 60 south of Paksane. King 27 reported airborne at 0855."

Hearing the FAC's request, the HC-130 copilot contacts Cricket. "The FAC says he needs some ordnance. What can you provide?"

"King 21, Cricket. All I've got is a flight of two F-4s, call sign Barfly 15, working a target now. Nothing else for another 20 minutes."

"Roger, Cricket, 20 minutes is too long. Can you divert that flight of two? We'll use what they've got left."

0915: "King, King, this is Barfly 15. Cricket said to contact you for SAR support."

"Roger, Barfly. Proceed to the area Channel 89, 335 degree radial for 140 miles. Contact Nail 26 this frequency when in the area. State your ordnance and fuel remaining."

"Barfly has mark 82s and 20 mike-mike. Can give you 30 minutes before I'll have to hit the tank. ETA four minutes."

For the next four minutes, the FAC briefs the helicopters and the strike flight, then uses authentication procedures to make sure the downed crew are really who they claim to be and not enemy troops trying to ensnare the vulnerable choppers in a deadly trap. At 0920, the final stage of the SAR begins.

0920: "Bullwhip 26 Alfa and Bravo, this is Nail 26. Pop your smoke now. Break—Papa-Quebec-Alfa, you get the Bravo man there to your left. Tango-Lima-Sierra-lead, you come with me and get the Alfa man up ahead on the ridge. We'll use your wingman as a standby if we need him."

0925: While the F-4s slow down the movement of the enemy troops to the west, with the FAC directing the operation, both helicopter pilots complete their dangerous job of patiently hovering their vulnerable aircraft as the two crewmembers make the agonizing, seemingly endless ascent up the hoist.

0930: "King 21, this is Nail 26. Both of our boys are up safe and we're returning to Lima site 98."

0932: King 21 advises both Jollys to return to Nakhon Phanom and informs the RCC both survivors were recovered in good shape and will be taken to Lima site 98. When asked why the survivors weren't going to be brought back to Udorn that evening, the pilot of one of the civilian helicopters responds: "Tell the guys back at NKP and Udorn we'll deliver their friends tomorrow. Tonight we're going to have a party!"

With that message passed back to the Rescue Coordination Center, the crew of King 21 relaxes. A look around the cockpit shows smiles on everyone's face. No one says a word. None are needed. The navigator gets up to get a cup of coffee. As the engineer reclines his seat, he silently puffs on his pipe. The silence is broken only by the radio operator keying his mike button, "Jack, King 21, ops normal at 30,"

